

The Dominican Identity

Prayer, Study, Common Life, Preaching

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It was once noted that the four pillars of the Dominican way of life (prayer, study, common life, and preaching) were not unique to Dominicans, but would (and do) fit within the life of other religious orders.

However, what is special about Dominican life is how these four pillars are related to each other. Unfortunately, what is missing in most discussions of the pillars is a final end which unifies and determines how they work together.

This is not a new problem, and one that was beautifully resolved by the General Chapter of the Order in 1968 in a document entitled *Fundamental Constitutions*. In this document, the General Chapter sought to express the unique genius of the Dominican Order.

First, the Chapter defined the unique purpose of the Dominican Order in which the four pillars were related to each other and worked together for the same end.

That unique end is a charism: a divine grace given to St. Dominic and his band of preachers at the very inception of the

Order in 1216. This ultimate reason for the existence of the Dominican Order was beautifully expressed by Pope Honorius III when he said:

He who never ceases to make his church fruitful through new offspring wishes to make these modern times the equal of former days and to spread the Catholic faith. So he inspired you with a holy desire to embrace poverty, profess the regular life and commit yourselves to the proclamation of the word of God, preaching everywhere the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Everything in the Dominican way of life is directed to this final end, that it might assist the preaching for the salvation of souls.

Common Life

The first and foundational pillar is the community itself (i.e., Common Life). The community is not on its own the end of the Dominican way of life, but is directed in all its parts to make possible a preaching that will touch and turn human hearts back to God's love for them in Jesus Christ. The community of brethren supports and sustains the brother who is to preach, providing the resources (intellectual and material) that makes study possible. And in an even more basic way, the community itself preaches the Gospel through the showing of mutual love and support among each brother for each other's salvation.



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Study

The second and essential pillar is study. A friar's faith is enriched and empowered by the truth of the Catholic Faith so that he may preach that Gospel truth to everyone with a conviction of life, validating his words with the witness of his love for the sinner. For the Dominican, study is not an end in itself, but a means to enable one's self to preach with conviction and love. Study is for the preaching and the salvation of souls.



Prayer

The third and necessary pillar is both liturgical and personal prayer. What is different about the Dominican way of praying is that the Dominican is praying for one ultimate end: the salvation of every human being and for the grace to attain that end through the grace of divine preaching. Dominican prayer seeks the same end as expressed by St. Paul writing his first letter to Timothy:

This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim 2:3-4)

Preaching

The fourth and final pillar rules the other three, for it is focused on the charism God has given to the Dominican Order: to attain the salvation of souls through preaching.

While the Dominican preaches the truth of the Gospel, he encounters a person (or persons) in a direct way. Throughout these encounters, the objective remains the same as he shares with them, through speech, the reality of God's redeeming love for them, calling them to repentance and a continuing growth in grace.



What makes the four pillars uniquely Dominican is that they are united to each other in seeking the same end: the salvation of souls. The *Fundamental Constitutions* of the Order offer a beautifully concise explanation:

The Order of Friars Preachers, founded by St Dominic, 'is known to have been established, from the beginning, for preaching and the salvation of souls, specifically.' Our brothers, therefore, as the founder prescribed, 'should everywhere behave uprightly and religiously, as men intent on procuring their own and other people's salvation; they should behave as gospel men, following in the footsteps of the Saviour, speaking to God or of God, among themselves or with their neighbors.'