

The Hispaniola Homily: 1511- 2011

Reclaiming the Tradition

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The powerful 16th century Gospel preaching of global solidarity and human rights which condemned the hegemony of colonialism and slavery on the island of Hispaniola, reverberates through Dominican history and across the landscape of Dominican mission. The small band of Dominican missionary-pastors who composed and preached the homily, continue to call their Dominican Family to re-claim its tradition, proclaim its truth, and extend its praxis of identifying, analyzing, ethically assessing, and engaging the challenges that shape Dominican mission and preaching today. The 500th anniversary of the Hispaniola homily, invites us to cast the light of its content and its praxis on our contemporary mission contexts and preach its truth again with a renewed commitment to the Dominican charism, life and mission.

How often do you preach or hear a homily that evokes critical and ethical reflection on a contemporary social, political, ecological, or ecclesial concern? How often do you preach or hear a homily that provides a way for you to examine what you think, believe, or act around a critical contemporary issue? As you ponder your response, consider that *this* is the fundamental character of the Hispaniola homily; the homily was constructed in a way that it cast the critical and ethical light of the Gospel on the social reality to which Dominican mission was directed in Hispaniola. The Hispaniola homily of 1511 provoked and aroused its preachers and hearers to re-consider the assumptions that heretofore guided their thinking, acting, and believing around the conquest of the so-called ‘new world.’ In casting the praxis of Jesus and the principles of his Gospel on this reality, the Dominican homily challenged the inhumanity of slavery with the claim that all persons, by virtue of their origins in the Creator, are entitled to be treated with respect, human dignity and with assurances that these basic entitlements would be universally honored and protected. In other words, with these rights come the universal obligations that they be upheld. No personal, political, economic, or religious motive could trump these basic, universal human entitlements. And ultimately, any person or nation that consciously acts contrary to them, is acting in violation of the universal principles, the laws that enshrine them as well as the Gospel.

In addition to establishing a tradition of praxis-preaching, the Hispaniola homily provides outlines of an emerging Catholic Social Teaching Tradition. Known today as “The Best Keep Secret” principally because this tradition is often muted in the preaching and teaching of the

church, the corpus of CST and its guiding principles were shaped from the very same praxis of the Hispaniola preaching. Like the homily, the principles evolved from casting Gospel values on the contemporary context, engaging in social analysis, and prompting responses and actions that contribute to the shaping of a more just, peaceful, and sustainable community of life.

Dominican preaching, in the tradition of the Hispaniola homily, calls Dominicans to hold the Word of God and the principles of Catholic Social Teaching alongside the text of the contemporary signs and issues of the times. What do these traditions illuminate, interrogate, critique in our present day reality? How does our present day reality, illuminate, interrogate, and challenge the Gospel, the church's tradition, and the preaching for meaningfulness, adequacy, prophecy, and truth?

Immigration and xenophobia, extreme income and wealth disparities, wars, racism, sexism, clericalism, hetero-sexism, exploitation of earth, death penalty, homelessness, inadequate healthcare, human trafficking, corporate malfeasance, and political polarization are some of the local and global realities shaping our nation and world today. Each one of these concerns has particular causes and each one of these is an egregious affront to the universal right to dignity, justice, and life that is the promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Hispaniola homily of 1511 provoked and aroused its preachers and hearers to re-consider the assumptions that heretofore guided their thinking, acting, and believing around the contemporary issues of their day. How, in the tradition of the Hispaniola homily, is contemporary Dominican preaching, *inside* as well as *outside* liturgical contexts, engaging the tradition enshrined in the Hispaniola homily? From time to time I hear Dominicans lament that this kind of preaching would never be sanctioned by their local bishop, Dominican superior, province, community, or ministry. While it is understandable that we Dominicans are often in the untenable position of balancing the call of our charism within the turbulent and threatening terrain of political, ecclesial, and communal movements, we should remember that the Dominicans of Hispaniola also knew similar tensions. The Hispaniola homily, according to historians, initially had little if any general impact on the larger Dominican community. Why? Historians suggest that many members of the Dominican community of Hispaniola were in the practice of accommodating and accepting the colonial model of oppression.ⁱ Furthermore, when the indictments of the congregants who heard the homily reached Spain, the Hispaniola friars were subjected to the reprimands of the King as well as their own religious superior.ⁱⁱ However, one wonderful outcome derived from the homily was that it inspired a colonist-priest to re-consider his ownership of property and slaves in the Caribbean and enlist in the Dominican Order. The prophetic preaching of Dominicans was deeply rooted in Bartolome de Las Casas and he, in turn, became one of the most ardent of preachers and advocates of justice and human rights in Church history.

Although most of us are familiar with the dynamics surrounding the communal effort to write the Hispaniola homily, and the selection of the preacher, Anton de Montessinos to proclaim it, the story of how the missionaries' experience intersected with the research and debates underway at the Dominican University of Salamanca, Spain, is not as well known. Francisco de Vitoria, O.P., a Salamanca professor specializing in what we could call today, "political theology," was intensely engaged with the most contested issues of the day: the powers of the pope, the right and wrong methods of spreading the Christian faith, and the rights of the 'newly discovered' people to possess their own land and govern themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

Vitoria's study of Spain's conquest led him to challenge Spain's actions toward communities of non-Christian, indigenous peoples who were posing no threat to the monarchy or to Christendom. Vitoria dismissed the popular claim that the Pope and the European monarchs had the right to give conquistadores the land that belonged to the indigenous peoples. In his arguments, the scholar-Dominican debunked the assumption that Spain had rights to the lands that Spain declared 'uninhabited' since the indigenous did in fact, live there. According to Vitoria, the Pope had no authority to promote Christianity at gunpoint or to bless the endeavor of conquest. Like Christ, the pope, has no temporal power over the indigenous or other "unbelievers."

In addition to his treatises dealing with the relationship between Church and State, Vitoria took the then radical view that the Pope must, except for grave reasons, follow Conciliar decisions.^{iv} This conclusion, and the theological reflections that informed it, should be reviewed and considered by Vitoria's 21st century Dominican family as we observe the ways the renewal of Vatican II is being questioned and overruled by many of our Church leaders today.

The legal and scholarly positions of Vitoria were derived from his understanding of 'natural law' and his conclusions that 'nature had established an irrevocable bond of relationships between all human beings.' According to this premise the whole world was in sense a commonwealth with characteristics of sovereignty as well as interdependence. The extension of the natural law arguments of Vitoria would eventually help shape the development of contemporary international law and the laws that govern acts of warfare.^v

In the garden of the United Nations on First Avenue of NYC there is a tribute to the Spanish Dominican professor of Salamanca whose work continues to be one of the most significant contributions to international law and human rights. Under a bronze bust of the Dominican Preacher are these words: "Francisco de Vitoria, Founder of International Law."

There is much for contemporary Dominicans to harvest from the rich deposit of tradition found in the story of the Hispaniola homily and the advocacy for justice that inspired it. For Dominicans today, this tradition directs us to consider how we are collaborating to preach the

Gospel's message amid new forms of violence, social injustices, and an increasingly polarized church. How are we submitting these issues to our best research, analysis, and theological reflection so that the grace of our charism can be released in this 21st century to do the transforming work it did so well in the 16th century?

For your Reflection

What about the Hispaniola homily most engages you?

What, in your mind, are the critical issues of our day to which the transforming grace of the Dominican charism is being directed?

What are the challenges and obstacles that contemporary Dominicans encounter as we strive to live the legacy of the Hispaniola homily?

Where and how have you experienced the power of Dominican collaboration in mission? What hope does our charism and our collaboration hold for our church and world?

ⁱ See Carlos Josaphat, O. P., 'Las Casas: Prophet of Full Rights for All', in *Justice Peace and Dominicans 1216-2001* ed. John Orme Mills, O.P., Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2001, p. 100.

ⁱⁱ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, pp. 32-33.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Roger Ruston "The Rights of Enemies and Strangers" in John Mills, op.cit, p.81.

^{iv} Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., *The Dominicans*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990, p. 131.

^v Ruston, op.cit. p. 82.

Addendum

The Hispaniola Homily

Prologue: The year was 1510 a small group of Dominican friars, headed by Pedro de Cordoba arrived in Hispaniola. The Dominicans were sent to Hispaniola to serve the pastoral needs of the Spanish conquistadores.

The Dominicans became aware of the cruel treatment of the indigenous people by their colonial overlords. The natives who did not submit to slavery were killed and their lands seized. Those who survived were forced to labor in the gold mines and on the plantations of the colonists. Many of the people of Hispaniola died under the whip others died from exhaustion and from the European diseases for which their bodies had no immunity.

“How can so many people perish so cruelly?” the Dominican missionaries began to ask.

Submitting their experience of the situation to communal and ethical reflection, they decided to confront the oppression they were witnessing with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Aware of the gravity and consequences of their decision, they communally composed a homily. It would be delivered by Antonio de Montessinos, a strong preacher. It was the fourth Sunday of Advent 1511. All the notables of the island, among them Admiral Diego Colon, son of Christopher Columbus, gathered in the Church.

The preacher began:

“You are all in mortal sin! You live in it and you die in it? Why? Because of the cruelty and tyranny you use on these innocent people. On what authority have you waged such detestable wars on them in the mild and peaceful lands? How is it that you hold them so crushed and exhausted giving them nothing to eat or any treatment for the diseases which you inflict on them yourselves? Are they not human beings? Have they not rational souls? Are you not obliged to love them as you love yourselves? Do you understand this? Know this for certain, given the state you are in, you cannot be saved.”

The furor that erupted that Advent Sunday propelled Admiral Colon to the door of the Dominican priory. He demanded that Montessinos retract what he said. He accused him of treason, a scandal monger and a sower of a new teaching.

The prior responded that the entire Dominican community had composed the preaching that day. Therefore the Admiral would have to arrest them all.

The next Sunday, in an atmosphere of great tension, Montessinos mounted the pulpit and repeated the same themes of the previous homily. However, in their on-going reflection on the cruelty and oppression they were witnessing, the Dominicans were moved to take another step toward inviting the Spanish to conversion. The Dominicans asserted that the Spanish would be denied the sacraments and absolution if they persisted in their cruel regard and treatment of the native people of Hispaniola.