

**Preaching from a Wooden Bench:  
the mendicant, contemplative preaching  
of the first Dominicans in the Americas**

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**Mendicant Beggars**

When I was a student brother, studying theology, one of the friars from my province, Jorge Presmanes, and I used to take turns in the summers accompanying groups of young Hispanics for a few weeks of missionary experience in a rural parish in southern Mexico. One of the years that Jorge led the group, he returned and told me that each morning he had to walk down a winding trail to one of the simple village homes for his breakfast. On his way each morning, he passed by a very simple, humble hut where an old man lived. As he'd pass by, he'd see the old man seated on a little wooden stool, with his Bible on his lap, reading the scriptures. The first few mornings Jorge greeted the man from a distance, as he passed by: "Buenos días, Señor," to which the elderly man would respond from his stool, "Buenos días, Padre."

After a few days, Jorge decided to go and greet the old man a bit more formally, because until then he had only greeted him from a distance. "Buenos días, Señor, my name is Bro. Jorge," he said. "Buenos días, Padrecito," responded the elderly man, "my name is Ramón, a sus órdenes – at your service." Jorge shook his hand and said, "Don Ramón, I see that every morning, when I pass by here, you are faithfully reading the Bible; what text are you reading this morning?" Don Ramón looked up at Jorge, with his wise, old eyes, and replied: "Well, you see, Padrecito, the truth is, I don't know how to read." Jorge was a bit shocked, to say the least. The old man continued, "But you are right, Padre, many years ago someone gave me a Bible, and so every morning I sit here and open my Bible, and I ask God to give me a word to guide me through the day. And you know what, Padre? Every morning God gives me a word; to this day, the Lord has never failed me."

When I visit the monasteries of our nuns around the world (all 235 of them!) I frequently share this story when we gather to speak of the ancient monastic practice of *Lectio Divina*. I think that old Don Ramón, sitting there each morning with his Bible open on his lap, waiting for a Word from God, is the perfect image of what it means to incarnate in our times a spirituality of contemplative, mendicant waiting on God's Word. It seems to me that the day we can no longer commit ourselves to the rigorous task of being beggars of God's Word, then we ought to close up shop and stop preaching! Don Ramón, of course, wouldn't have had any idea what a fancy phrase like *Lectio Divina* meant, but the fact is, he was doing just that each and every morning. Is this radical *begging for a Word from God* not the necessary starting place for any true preaching? Isn't "Give us this day our daily bread" the deep cry that echoes in any true preacher's heart? It was Jesus, after all, who invited us to this radical practice of evangelical poverty? We heard it in last Sunday's gospel: "I give praise to you, Abba, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Abba, such has been your gracious will" (Mt 11:25-26). Sounds like the daily prayer of old Don Ramón.

In the *Lineamenta* document from the Synod on the Word of God, there is a simple, yet powerful phrase that captures beautifully the mendicant dimension of our vocation: “Above all, the Word of God must be encountered with the soul of the poor, both interiorly and exteriorly” (#25). How do we put this into practice? Meister Eckhart says that “To be poor in spirit, we must be poor of all our own knowledge: not knowing any *thing* ... so free of all things ... that we may be a proper abode where God can work.”<sup>1</sup> And then he adds the final knock-out: “Let go of yourself and let God act with you and in you. This work is God’s, this Word is God’s, this birth is God’s.”<sup>2</sup> Let go and let God. I’ll bet you Eckhart would make a great patron saint for the 12 Step programs!

It is in the deepest Ground of our being, says Eckhart, where we discover that we are *no-thing* – but a vast, receptive spaciousness. It is there that we stand naked, begging for the Word. Isn’t that what Dominic’s long contemplative journeys across Europe were about, carrying with him the Gospel of Matthew and the Letters of Paul? Dominic wasn’t jamming to his I-Tunes or chit-chatting on his cell phone as he walked across Europe 800 years ago! He was jammin’ to the Word of God bubbling up from the mendicant silence of his heart.

[If you’ll allow me, I’d like to make a brief commercial break here: Isn’t it time for us to be honest and admit that *some* (certainly not all) of our fascination with modern technology is choking our prayer lives to death? If we live wired to cell phones and earphones and Blue Teeth and Blueberries, how will we ever hear God speak to us? End of commercial!].

Dominic trudged across Europe begging, in the silent desert of his soul, for a Word of life to give to those he met along the way. Preaching was his passion; begging for the Word, with the soul of the poor, was his path.

## **Five Hundred Years Ago**

Now I’d like to invite us to focus on another *wooden bench*, similar to old Don Ramón’s, but unique in its own way. To do that, though, we’ll have to leap forward a few hundred years, to the years 1510 and 1511 – three centuries after Dominic’s mendicant journeys across Europe, and almost exactly 500 years ago today – in fact, just a few years after Columbus stumbled upon an island in the Caribbean and called it a “New World.” (The truth is, of course, that this “new world” was as ancient and as beautiful and as developed as the rest of the world, but that’s another story).

The first four Dominican friars arrived on the island of Quisqueya (or La Hispaniola, today Dominican Republic and Haiti) in September 1510. We already know a lot of this history, so I won’t go into too much detail. What I’d like to do, though, is speak for a few minutes about the prior of that first community: a young twenty-eight year old Dominican named Pedro de Córdoba. Most of what we know about Pedro comes from the writings of Bartolomé de las Casas, who was already living on the island when the Dominicans arrived, having been ordained a diocesan priest just two years earlier. He describes Pedro de Córdoba with these words: “He was a great authority and a revered person ... Whoever saw

him or heard him speak knew that God dwelled within him, and that he was gifted with a capacity for holiness.”<sup>3</sup>

A few days after the first Dominican friars arrived on the island, hearing that the governor of the island, Diego Velásquez, was visiting the village of Concepción de la Vega (135 km. from the capital of Santo Domingo), Pedro de Córdoba set off to extend his greetings to the governor on behalf of the new Dominican community. Thanks to Las Casas, who was accompanying the governor at the time, we get a glimpse into the first days and months of the newly arrived preachers. He says of Pedro’s first journey across the island, “...With no other option but to go by foot, eating bread made of casave root, drinking the cool water from the abundant streams, and sleeping in the open countryside, [friar Pedro] made the long, cumbersome trip.”<sup>4</sup>

Pedro reached the village on a Saturday, and was immediately invited by Governor Velásquez to celebrate mass and preach the Word of God the next morning. So on Sunday morning the young, recently-arrived prior presided and preached to the Spaniards about the glories of heaven that God had prepared for those who have been chosen. Las Casas tells us that friar Pedro preached, “with great fervor and zeal, an uplifting and divine sermon.”<sup>5</sup>

One cannot help but read this story and marvel at the mystery of divine providence. Who would have ever thought that Bartolomé de las Casas, a twenty-five year, recently ordained Spanish diocesan priest, who owned land and Indian slaves, and Pedro de Córdoba, an equally young and very talented Dominican friar, trained in Salamanca and Ávila, would meet up one day in a tiny rugged village on an island in the Caribbean? These two total strangers had no idea that they, along with others, were about to help set into motion some of the most radical changes in the theology of Christian mission in the West. And what is even more providential is that just a few years after that initial encounter, Bartolomé de las Casas experienced what would be probably the most crucial spiritual transformation in his life. And to add to the drama, what ignited the transformative crisis was Las Casas’ being challenged and denied absolution by none other than Pedro de Córdoba, all because Las Casas owned Indian slaves! Was this first meeting in the little village of Concepción de la Vega in 1510 a mere coincidence? I hardly think so!

Shortly after the blunt denial of absolution by Pedro de Córdoba, and while he was preparing a homily for the Feast of Pentecost, 1514, Las Casas was shaken to the very core of his being. He had played the middle ground long enough; now God had him cornered – by the Word! The final straw came by way of a scripture text from the Book of Sirach:

Tainted are the gifts of the one who offers in sacrifice ill-gotten goods ... Like the person who slays a son in his father’s presence is the one who offers sacrifice from the possessions of the poor (Sir 34:18.20).

That day, seated on his own *wooden bench*, with the scriptures in his hands – perhaps something like Fra Angelico’s St. Dominic at the foot of the cross – Las Casas finally surrendered, and said ‘yes’ to his vocation to be a bearer of God’s prophetic Word. He knew clearly on that day that he was being called to free his Indian slaves, and to give back the land he had been given as an *encomendero*. It was a death that gave him new life. This is what Las Casas wrote many years later:

...The darkness lifted from my eyes, [and] I decided to preach this, but having Indians on my property ... I could not freely condemn the *encomienda* system as tyrannical unless I officially renounced my Indians to Governor Diego Colón. I knew the Indians were better off with me because I treated them with more compassion ... [and] I knew that they would be redistributed to a master who would oppress them to death, which is what happened. But even if I treated them as a father treats his children, I could not preach the subject of my sermons with a clear conscience. Someone would inevitably blame me with, "In the last analysis you, too, own Indians; why don't you renounce them since you accuse us of tyranny?" I decided then to renounce them entirely.<sup>6</sup>

With those words, Las Casas stepped out into his own "new world" and the discovery of a land that was as much interior as exterior. Six years later, he entered the novitiate and began his life as a Dominican friar.

There is an interesting story from his childhood, told by Las Casas himself, that sheds a curious light on what would become his later prophetic call. I heard the story from one of the great Las Casas scholars, Helen Rand Parish, who considers it the key moment in which the seed of Las Casas' prophetic vocation was sown. It was Holy Week, 1493, in Seville, Spain. Bartolomé, eight-years-old at the time, had accompanied his father to the Palm Sunday procession in order to see the Indians that Christopher Columbus, recently returned from his first voyage, had captured and brought to Spain. Says Helen, commenting on the young boy's wide-open eyes as these elegant Indians were paraded through the streets: "Las Casas did not see the Indians first as a European looking down on them with contempt, but as a child looking up at them with wonder, with admiration."<sup>7</sup> It was, indeed, the innocent *seeing* of a child's eyes that prepared the ground for his long life as a prophetic preacher. Bartolomé never tired of contemplating the face of Christ in the native peoples of the Americas, dedicating his every breath to preaching the truth regarding their economic exploitation and cultural genocide.

Many years after the innocent *seeing* of his youth, Las Casas writes of another *contemplative seeing* of the Indians. As he tells this story one cannot help but glimpse the tenderness of this great preacher and discover the place deep within his heart where his theology was born from love. The Lucayo Indians were a tribe that inhabited a string of islands north of what today is Cuba (probably what today are known as the Florida Keys). Las Casas estimates that more than a million Lucayos were captured and brought to work on the island of La Hispaniola, where most of them died from hard labor in the mines. Discovering that the market for pearls was profitable, "the Spaniards decided to use the swimming skills of the Lucayos to collect pearls ... Pearl fishing was so infernally dangerous," says Las Casas, "that in a short time finding a single Lucayo alive was almost a miracle." He tells of a virtuous merchant, named Pedro de Isla, who asked the authorities for permission to go to the Lucayo Islands and search for Indian survivors, in order to bring them back to *La Hispaniola* where they would be given freedom in a protected township. Pedro de la Isla was given the permission and set off on his mission. Following is the account of Las Casas himself:

After three years they found only eleven persons *whom I saw with my own eyes* because they disembarked at Puerto de Plata where I lived at the time. They were men, women and children; I do not remember how many there were of each, but I do remember an old man among them, probably over sixty years old, who like the others

was stark naked and looked as calm and gentle as a lamb. I stood there *staring at them*, especially at the old man, who was tall and venerable and had a long face, dignified and authoritative. To me he looked like our father Adam before the Fall, and thinking how many like him there were all over these islands, and how in so short a time and *almost under my eyes* they had been destroyed without offending in the least, nothing was left for us to do but to *lift our eyes to heaven* and tremble at divine judgment.<sup>8</sup>

“He looked like Adam before the Fall.” With this profound theological statement, Las Casas unveils the lie that questioned the humanity of the Indians, putting in its place a Word born of love, the fruit of his having seen in the Indian the face of God. Gustavo Gutiérrez, OP says that Las Casas “had the penetrating intuition to see in the Indian, in the *other* of the western world, the poor according to the gospel... Without a doubt,” says Gustavo, “this is the key to the spirituality and theology of Las Casas.”<sup>9</sup>

Let us go back now to Pedro de Córdoba’s first visit to the Governor in the village of Concepción de la Vega. During the sermon that he preached that Sunday morning, Las Casas tells us that Pedro asked the Spaniards to send the Indians to the church in the afternoon. Wanting to be kind to the new *padre*, they gladly conceded. Las Casas fills in the details:

They sent them all, men and women, big and small. Pedro de Córdoba, *sitting on a bench*, with a crucifix in his hands and with the help of some interpreters, preached from the beginning of creation of the world all the way up to the crucifixion of Jesus, the Son of God.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to our Dominican sister, Luisa Campos, a native of the Dominican Republic (*una dominica dominicana*), we can glimpse the profound, gospel significance of Pedro’s humble gesture. Luisa allows us to peer through the lens of her own contemplative heart into the heart of brother Pedro. “The gesture of sitting on a bench for his preaching to the Indians,” says Luisa, “already points to a way of inserting himself that was different from the normal customs of the time. By drawing near, by *coming down* from the pulpit, in order to draw close to the *other*, Pedro inaugurates a new relationship between the missionary and the indigenous peoples. Through his attitude of nearness, he discovers a mutual communication, allowing him to see in the eyes of the Indians an openness to the Word.”<sup>11</sup>

It seems like such a simple detail, but the truth is that it is full of enormous spiritual depth. *Seated on a bench*: we find already present in this simple gesture the fundamental theological and missionary insights of this first community of Dominicans in the Americas. Pedro’s nearness, his proximity to the people is nothing less than an icon of the incarnation, an image of the God who *comes down* and draws near to us in Jesus of Nazareth. What was going on in Pedro’s mind on that day, as he preached for the first time – with his entire body – to the native peoples of this “new world”? When he asked them to bring him a simple wooden bench to sit on, was he not also, consciously or unconsciously, conveying a message to the Spaniards? Or was it just the most natural gesture for a preacher who already seemed understood the heart of God?

This first preaching of Pedro de Córdoba, more than an overview of the history of salvation, was his simplicity, his brotherly way of communicating to the Indians the gift of the incarnation Jesus, the eternal Word of God. I doubt that they understood much of what he said that day, but I'll bet you they never forgot the young *padre* who treated them like friends, like brothers and sisters, like human beings. Maybe they didn't know much about the man called Jesus, of whom everyone spoke, but on that Sunday afternoon they saw the face of Jesus in their brother Pedro. Yes, on that Sunday morning the Word became flesh for them, *seated on a wooden bench*.

It is important that we feel the full strength of Pedro's symbolic gesture. When Antonio de Montesinos preached the communal homily a year later, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, asking the penetrating question, "Are these not human beings?" it was but a continuation of Pedro's wooden bench homily in Concepción de la Vega. It is important for us, 500 years later, to really feel the seismic repercussions that Pedro's simple gesture, and the ensuing sermon of 1511, have caused in the theology and ecclesiology of these past five centuries. And we must be careful not to relegate this collective memory to dusty libraries, or even to glittery Jubilee celebrations. We need to remember Pedro de Córdoba and Montesinos and Las Casas and Martín de Porres and Rosa de Lima and Gustavo Gutiérrez and Archbishop Romero and our martyred Maryknoll sisters of El Salvador and Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr and Dorothy Day and Dorothy Stang and Roy Bourgeois and Elizabeth Johnson, and ask all of them to show us, each in his or her unique way, what it means today to be faithful to our call as disciples of Jesus.

"Pedro de Córdoba, *sitting on a bench*, with a crucifix in his hands and with the help of some interpreters, preached..." Is this not our story? Was it not Jesus who set the example, when he *sat down* to speak with the woman at the well in Samaria? How else could he see into her tired eyes and know the deep thirst of her heart? Was it not Jesus who *bent down* to show his solidarity with the woman accused of adultery? Was it not Jesus who *bent down* to wash the feet of his disciples two thousand years ago, breaking with a long tradition of using religion to gain power? Jesus never *looked down* or *talked down* to anyone. We sit down so that we can see, because seeing – true seeing – teaches us to love. It is really not so terribly complicated.

Our first Dominicans, like Jesus, broke with the abuse of religious power, choosing instead to *come down* from the high places to seek a new way, a mendicant path of gospel poverty. One of the central narratives of our faith tells us that Jesus, the itinerant preacher with the soul of the poor, after *bending down* to wash the feet of his disciples, then *sat down* to eat the Paschal meal with them, sharing with them his dream of a new kind of community. "I no longer call you servants, but friends" (Jn 15:15). He spoke those words to the women and men who had followed him as disciples, and he did so while looking into their eyes, seated with them at a table of friendship and love. And I can assure you, sisters and brothers, he did *not* say those words in Latin!

We can only preach the gospel if we are willing to *sit down* and *bend down* and *kneel down* and *get down* off our high horses and contemplate the God made flesh in *the other*, our neighbor. That is what Bishop Diego and Dominic did when they got down from their horses

to meet with the papal legates in Montpellier in 1206, choosing from then on the life of mendicant, itinerant preaching. The early sources tell us that after that day Dominic used no other title than “brother Dominic.”

When I was a novice in South Carolina, our priory of St. Martin Porres was right across the street from a convent of Sinsinawa Dominican sisters – in the heart of an African American neighborhood. One of the Dominican sisters, Sr. Macarius, a quiet and somewhat elderly sister, spent her days sitting and teaching poor and illiterate African-Americans to read and write. She did this one-on-one ministry quietly and faithfully, and if I remember well, I think most of her students were young to middle-aged Black men. Sr. Macarius had no neon sign out front announcing her ministry, no fanfare. She just preached, one person at a time, sitting down. Her life was a quiet response to the question: “Are these not human beings?”

The Word of God is born when we reclaim our gospel mendicancy, our contemplative option for the poor, letting ourselves be led each day – as beggars – to see and hear and touch the Word as it shows itself in our neighbor and in the world around us. We can’t sit around in our comfortable, theological air traffic control towers and pretend to preach the gospel! We need to be shook-up again by what our dear sister, Ann Willits, speaking to the brothers of my province last year, calls “inconvenient truths.” Have we become too politically correct, too comfortable to hear those “inconvenient truths” anew?

## **Gospel Geography**

It seems to me that the problem is not whether one preaches in a pulpit or in a classroom or in a soup kitchen or as a member of the council of a congregation of sisters. No, I think the problem has to do with what I would call *gospel geography*. My Dutch Dominican brother and friend, Alberto Wulffelé, always underlines the fact that the biblical name of God – *YHWE* – is not just an ontological statement: “I am.” It also geographical; it means, “I am here,” or “I am there.” In other words, it is more than just a reference to the *being* of God; it has to do with the *place* of God, where God chooses to stand and sit and live ... and die. “*I am with you always*,” said Jesus. That’s geography – the faithfulness of a companion who walks with us on the journey. Pedro de Córdoba understood gospel geography. When he *sat down* to speak to the enslaved Indians, while the Spanish *conquistadores* looked on, he made a very deliberate choice that day, and one that would have made the Spaniards *very* uncomfortable.

Did Jesus not also frequently sit down to address his disciples and the crowds that came to listen to him? The Gospel of Matthew deliberately prefaces what was probably Jesus’ greatest preaching, his Sermon on the Mount, with these words: “When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had *sat down*, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them, saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:1-3). How important it is that this great teaching of Jesus on love, nonviolence, and God’s special preference for the poor begins with Jesus sitting on the ground. In the same gospel we again encounter Jesus placing himself on the same level as ordinary people: “On that day, Jesus went out of the house and *sat down* by the sea. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and *sat down*, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. And he spoke to them at length in parables... (Mt 13:1-3). Just what did Jesus want to say with this powerful gesture?

When they threw the woman accused of adultery before Jesus, he knew better than they did that the Law of Moses commanded that such women be stoned to death. But he took a risk; he shifted his geography. He dared to *bend down* and look at the world from her perspective, to walk in her footsteps, to place himself in her position of vulnerability. He wanted to look into her eyes, but he also wanted to look at the violent mob of religious zealots *with her eyes*, from her place in society. On that day, Jesus challenged the dominant religious geography, and with nothing but the human vulnerability of his own finger, he re-wrote the Law of Moses into the stones of the Temple.

My sisters and brothers, whether we sit on a wooden meditation bench, or on the wooden stool of old Don Ramón in Mexico, or on Pedro de Córdoba's simple, wooden preaching bench, the challenge for us is the same. I think that this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary invites us to recommit ourselves to the radical practices of mendicancy, contemplative silence, and living in close proximity to the poor and disenfranchised of our world, so that we can be witnesses of a rebirth of our charism of preaching.

### **Seeing, Hearing and touching Christ**

Last year, when Ann Willits spoke about our call to be preachers who do not run from the *inconvenient truths*, she asked, "Would we be here today as Dominican family if the preaching [of the first Dominicans in the Americas] had not been heard 500 years ago? Who hears the preaching today? What do we preach? How do we live? ... They lived in urgent times. But so do we! Look around, what do you see?"<sup>12</sup>

*What do we see? How do we live? What do we preach? Who hears the preaching?* Are not those the questions we need to be asking? Is our Church so busy worrying about whether Christ has saved *many* people or *all* the people that we no longer have time to see or say anything of real importance? Is our ecclesiastical comfort rendering us blind? To see with the eyes of God is the essence of the contemplative life. If we stop seeing, we will die spiritually.

Apollo astronaut, Edgar Mitchell, speak about seeing with the eyes of God: "Suddenly, from behind the rim of the moon, in long slow-motion movements of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light delicate blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black majesty. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth, [our] home."<sup>13</sup> *What do we see? How do we live? What do we preach?*

When Pedro sat down on his wooden bench that day in the little village of Concepción de la Vega, all he really wanted to do was to see and hear and touch the body of Christ. I doubt that he and his brothers were too worried about whether their chasuble was the right color or not. All they had was the present moment and their open eyes, their open ears and their open hearts. "Are these not human beings?" they asked? "Are we not obligated to love them?" Their preaching, like Dominic's, flowed from their contemplative seeing, hearing and touching. It flowed from love. God took care of the rest.

Our brother, Timothy Radcliffe, OP, in his Letter to the Order, entitled "Wellspring of Hope," speaks urgently of the need to live our gospel lives with open eyes. "Our study," he



says, "should be a discipline of truthfulness that opens the eyes ... Yet it is not enough just to see these places of human suffering, and to be tourists of the world's crucifixion. These are places in which theology is to be done ... We must dare to see what is before our eyes; we must believe that it is where God seems most distant and where human beings are tempted by despair that theology may be done. Yet surely, as Dominicans, we must assert a third requirement. Our words of hope will only have authority if they are rooted in a serious study of the Word of God and an analysis of our contemporary society. In 1511 Montesinos preached his famous sermon against the oppression of the Indians and asked the question, "*Are they not human beings?* ... Montesinos was inviting his contemporaries to open their eyes, and see the world differently ..."<sup>14</sup>

If you've traveled much in the last few years, you're aware that cameras are "in" once again. Big, bulky, fancy cameras are really "cool" again. Everybody has a camera, and if they don't, then they have a cell phone that doubles as a camera. Even the nuns in the monasteries are crazy about taking pictures now! But you know a camera can be used in different ways. It can be a tool that trains us to see with the eyes of an artist, the eyes of a contemplative. But it can also become a wall that distances and separates us from the real world, turning us into what Timothy calls "tourists of the world's crucifixion." There is a lot of that going on these days, too.

I think the Internet is a wonderful tool for social engagement, but it can also trap us into looking *at* the world while not being *in* the world. Does our seeing lead us *into* the heart of the world, *into* the hearts and souls of the poor, or do our eyes just get glazed over as the images appear and disappear on this never-ending parade of screens that have taken over the world? Back to Ann's questions: *What do we see? How do we live? What do we preach?*

A few years ago, at the Catholic University in Lima, Peru, a few blocks from the priory where I was living at the time, several student brothers and I participated in a week of events to celebrate the anniversary of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. On one of the days I attended an exhibit of black and white photos, portraying Peruvian children who had suffered during Peru's twenty years of war and internal violence. I was particularly struck by the photo of a young boy, about nine years old, named Gabriel. Beneath the picture was a quote from Gabriel himself. It read: "Sabem que existo, pero no me ven" (*They know that I exist, but they do not see me*). Even more than the picture, it was his words that echoed in the depths of my heart. They were so true. He – and so many like him – are invisible in our world. They appear on the flow charts of sociology textbooks and in official statistics about poverty in the developing world, but we do not see them. They are numbers, but are they human beings?

Catherine of Siena says in one of her prayers, "Rouse yourself! Look into the depth...of divine charity. For unless you see you cannot love. The more you see, the more you can love."<sup>15</sup> If we don't take the time – contemplative time – to sit down on a wooden bench and peer into the eyes of our neighbor and listen attentively to the cry of the poor, what Word will we ever be able to preach? How will we ever learn to love? There is a quote that appears in an early XIII<sup>th</sup> Century document found at the priory of St. Jacques in Paris which reads, "Among the things [one] ought to see are the needs of his or her neighbor ... And what you see in Christ and in the world and in your neighbor, write that in your heart."<sup>16</sup> We cannot preach a Word that has not first been written on our heart.

So, where do we stand? On which wooden bench do we sit? What Word do we hear in our mendicant silence? I would like to end with some words from our brother, Pierre Claverie, the martyred Dominican bishop of Algeria. Challenged by some of his colleagues, regarding his choice of gospel geography, Pierre spoke these words just five weeks before being assassinated. In them he describes the wooden bench upon which he had chosen to sit.

Since the beginning of the Algerian tragedy, people have often asked me: 'What do you do there? Why do you stay? Shake the dust from your sandals! Go back home! Home ... Where is our home? ... We are there because of this crucified Messiah ... We are there like someone at the bedside of a friend ... because it is Jesus who suffers there, in this violence that spares no one, crucified anew in the flesh of thousands of innocent people. Like Mary, his mother, and St John, we are there, at the foot of the cross where Jesus died, abandoned by his own, and scoffed at by the crowd ...'

And then, in another place, Pierre adds:

I believe that the Church dies in not being close enough to the cross of its Lord ... It deceives itself and the world when it positions itself as a power among all the rest, as a humanitarian organization, or as a flashy evangelical movement. In this condition it can glitter on the outside – but it cannot burn with fire of God's love, 'which is as strong as death', as the Song of Songs puts it. Is truly a question of love, of love above all and of love alone. It is a passion for which Jesus has given us a longing, and to which he has marked out the way. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.<sup>17</sup>

Yes, in the end it is on the wooden bench of the Cross that we learn that "there is no greater love..." and our preaching is born there.

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<sup>1</sup> Meister Eckhart, in Maurice O'C. Walshe: *Meister Eckhart, Sermons and Treatises*, 3 vol. (Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1979), sermon 87:273.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 3:33.

<sup>3</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas, *Estos ¿no son hombres?* Juan Manuel Pérez, OP (Santo Domingo: Fundación García-Arévalo, 1984), 93. See also *Obras de Fr. Bartolomé de las Casas*, vol. II B.A.E., Tomo 96, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Luisa Campos Villalón, OP, *Pedro de Córdoba: Precursor de Una Comunidad Defensora de la Vida* (Santo Domingo: Ediciones Los libros de Amigo, Mayo 2008), 52 (See Las Casas, *Historia*, vol II, lib. II, cap. LIV, 383).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Las Casas, Bartolomé de, OP, *History of the Indies*, trans. and ed. Andrée Collard (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), Book III, ch. 78, p.209.

<sup>7</sup> From an interview with Helen Rand Parish at her house in Berkeley, California in 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Las Casas, Bartolomé de, OP, *History of the Indies*, trans. and ed. Andrée Collard (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), Book II, ch. 45, pp.160-161. Las Casas goes on to say that Pedro de la Isla was rewarded by God, being accepted to the Franciscan Order, "where he lived a holy life."

<sup>9</sup> Gutiérrez, Gustavo, OP, *Dios o el Oro en las Indias*, (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, CEP, 1989), p.175.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Ann Willits, OP, "Celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dominican Order in the Americas," St. Martin de Porres Province Assembly, San Antonio, Texas, May 19, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Mitchell, Apollo astronaut: <http://homepages.wmich.edu/~korista/astronauts.html>

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, OP, "Wellspring of Hope," Letter to the Order, Rome: Santa Sabina, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> St. Catherine of Siena, in *Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity*, ed. Mary O'Driscoll, OP (New York: New City Press, 1993), n.19, p.83.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Murray, *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality* (London: Burns & Oates, 2006), p.13 (94).

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Claverie, OP, in Jean Jacques Pérennès, OP, *A Life Poured Out: Pierre Claverie of Algeria*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 244. The first paragraph of this quote comes from a homily preached at the Monastery of Notre Dame de Prouilhe in France, June 1996.