

A Young Prioress General Reflects on the Intellectual Profile of her Congregation of Dominican Sisters

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It is not an easy task to write about the intellectual profile in the Dominican tradition of such a young community of Dominican sisters as our Congregation named after Saint Margaret of Hungary. Then, to speak about the intellectual profile of our Congregation one needs to talk at the same time about the basic outlines of the evolution of our Dominican identity and self-image which, of course, cannot be disconnected from our history.

Therefore, I would like to embed this profile into our historical background.

Our Congregation was founded in 1868, as a kind of side-effect of the wholesale restoration of the Dominican Order after the French revolution, in a light of the strict religious observance. The reform-movement was extended to the countries of the Habsburg Monarchy, as well. A central role in it was played by Tommaso Anselmi, an Italian friar who was sent to complete the reform of the Order in Austria and Hungary. During this activity he became the founder of a new community of Dominican sisters: three daughters of an Italian-speaking Austrian family, the D'Azula, along with some other German-speaking women, asked for his help to become religious. Their aim was to resurrect the Dominican monastic life which had been extinguished in Hungary during the Turkish occupation in the 16th century; this is why they chose Saint (at that time blessed) Margaret as their patroness. Thus the first convent was established in 1868 in Kőszeg (near the Austrian border). Providing Catholic education did not figure originally among the goals of the first sisters; however, since they had to support

themselves in some way, they undertook the education of girls in Kőszeg, which in turn resulted in the city accepting the sisters who spoke no Hungarian in a world of strong insistence on national identity in terms of language.

As the years passed, the originally imposed profile of Catholic education became the main goal of the growing Congregation, which by 1950, had 8 convents with schools, and approximately 200 members. Kőszeg, the motherhouse, became one of the greatest educational centres in the country, providing education on all levels: it comprised a kindergarten, an elementary school, a secondary school and a teacher training college. The so-called choir-sisters were all committed to education in one of the Congregation's schools, and they also prayed the Divine Office together. They led a quasi-monastic/encloistered life, where the sisters were allowed to leave the convent only under strict circumstances. The so-called lay sisters were the ones taking care of the material aspects of common life and were not particularly educated.

All this had an abrupt end after the Second World War, when the communist party, with the active help of the Soviet Union, took power in Hungary, like in all other countries of Central-Eastern Europe. It all happened gradually, following the script written by Moscow. In order to destroy the inner structures of society and leave the individual person vulnerable and open to manipulation, the first step was to disband and ban all Catholic youth organizations. Then in 1948 came the secularisation of all the Confessional schools. (There were 6505 schools run by the Catholic

Church – religious orders comprised – at that time.) This affected our Congregation severely: walls were suddenly built up in the schools to separate the now public, state-run institution from the annexed convents. At first the sisters were allowed to continue their religious life in common, though they had great financial difficulties, thus several of them were sent out into parishes to work there and assist the parish priests.

This ambivalent situation did not last for too long. In 1950, the Hungarian Bishops' Conference (after the trial and imprisonment of Cardinal Mindszenty), intimidated and forced by Communists, made an agreement with the government, complying with the total dissolution of religious life in Hungary (in the case of a failed agreement, the alternative would have been the deportation of religious into the Soviet Union. Actually, before the “agreement” took place, the religious were already taken out of their convents and deported.) Only three male religious orders (the Benedictines, the Franciscans and the Piarists) and one female (the SSND) could retain two schools each and keep a restricted number of their members (only 70) to staff the schools. This particularly harsh treatment of religious had been almost without a parallel in other countries under the Communist regime: in Czechoslovakia, for example, religious life could continue, the sisters were allowed to live in common, but in a very restricted way.

Our sisters thus had to leave the convents and look for a secular job. Teaching was out of the question for two reasons: first of all because they were considered ideologically dangerous and as such not employed in any educational institutions, and secondly, because the Bishops' Conference had already forbidden religious to teach in public schools. Despite all the difficulties, the Dominican ideal, and particularly the figure of Saint Margaret of Hungary was still attracting young women, who – without any hope of a legal religious life – entered the Congregation in secret, and even

made their religious profession. It was due to their heroic courage that in 1991 (when after the political transition the Church gained back her freedom), a small group of sisters in their fifties could restart normal religious life in community.

Even during the hidden years, there were sisters who despite every ban and the danger of imprisonment hanging in the air all the time, prepared young people for the sacraments and provided them with the basics of Catholic apologetics against the official atheistic indoctrination (e.g. teaching the five ways of Aquinas). This was a new way of living the Dominican charism, one which gives us a beautiful testimony of the conviction ever present among the sisters, that the Dominican vocation has got an intellectual side to it. This conviction, however, gained a new emphasis after the restoration of religious life.

After a forty years of pause during which great changes took place in religious life after Vatican II, restarting religious life proved to be no easy task. Numerous questions needed to be answered and decisions were to be made. What are the priorities of the community's apostolic activities? Should we ask for all the schools we had run before 1950 to be returned into our possession? Or would it be better to start youth-groups and other apostolic activities independently of any institution? All this affected formation, as well: should all the entering young people sooner or later receive training as teachers? What role has the study of theology in our formation? And, more basically, how can we define Dominican identity?

During our chapters we pondered the decrees of Vatican II and subsequent documents on religious life, which emphasize the vital importance of initial and ongoing formation of all members, and also the fact that formation has precedence over an immediate, direct immersion into apostolic activities right after the novitiate. Soon it became a common conviction that if we want to become authentic

Dominicans, and at the same time be able to answer questions from people, we need a more in-depth preparation in theology.

After reflecting together, the time arrived for implementing the decisions. First of all, we gradually realised the need of a good preparation in theology in order to offer guidance to people who are looking for answers and for God. In post-communist Hungary the importance of forming the sisters as spiritual and intellectual guides was made even more urgent by the fact that many people lacked a religious education. Also after 1990 an interesting evolution took place: many people became interested in God and religion, but after a short revived interest towards the Catholic Church, this interest has visibly fallen back. It seems that the Church could not fill that vacuum which came into being after the fall of Communism. And of course, the Church, laity and clergy alike, was not prepared for this: it was more or less like when the lame are suddenly called to run using both legs. And of course, liberal ideologies, completely hostile to any Christian value, also made themselves present. So, in the vacuum left after the fall of Communism, the signs of sheer materialism and consumerism appeared, along with authentic aspiring for God, or for transcendence in general.

So, along with perceiving these realities – which could be felt even in our own families, – in our search for an authentic Dominican identity we gradually understood why and how study played an important and innovative role in Saint Dominic’s project. Our Father Dominic, his life and charisma, his enthusiasm for the Word of God, attracted many young people to the Congregation. It became clear that this is a distinctive feature of Dominican spirituality. It so happened that the superiors of that time were wise enough to give a priority to serious and postgraduate studies over an immediate “use” of people in the apostolate. It became possible that several sisters were able to study at the

Pontifical universities in Rome and in England, thanks to the collaboration with other Dominican congregations. This emphasis on study somehow became a distinctive characteristic of our Congregation amidst the other communities of sisters in Hungary. That every sister gets at least a BA degree in theology has also become a priority.

The first fruits of these decisive steps have now started to become visible. This year our Congregation signed an agreement with Sapientia Institute of Theology of Religious Orders. This institute was founded in 2000 as a merger of the separate theological faculties of the three male religious orders who could operate freely during the Communist regime. It is not exclusively for the formation of future priests but it is also open for all religious and laity who have an interest in theology. It forms future teachers of religion and pastoral assistants, and starting with this academic year, it offers a joint post-graduate program in Christian business ethics with the Angelicum, which wants to address people in business, who are interested in Catholic social ethics and want to apply it practically. Two of our sisters were the main organizers of this program, unique in Hungary.

In this moment, four of our sisters teach various theological or philosophical subjects at Sapientia. Our growing presence, and the importance of theological education was the reason we applied to be an associated member of the sponsors’ conference of Sapientia. All this, of course, is not the only aspect of our apostolate. We are present at the various levels of Catholic education, running two kindergartens, a primary school and two hostels for university students. In all these, an integral human formation in the Dominican tradition is our goal.

This intellectual apostolate has a future in Hungary: we would like to develop it in the form of organizing conferences, and publishing

books related to the Dominican intellectual tradition. Among many things, reliable works on theology are largely missing in our country: this is why we think that our Congregation could have a role in spreading the most distinctive feature of Dominican tradition, that

is theology according to and in the footsteps of Aquinas. Since due to the shortage of priestly vocations in Hungary, the clergy is dedicated almost totally to pastoral work, this commitment to theological reflection seems all the more necessary now in Hungary.