

Novitiate Module

Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic

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Province of St. Joseph

Dominican Study

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1. *Why Study?*

“Always study!” St. Dominic urged, both in person and in his letters. Why is study such an indispensable part of the Dominican vocation? The obvious answer might be, “So that the Dominican has something to preach about.” Certainly this is true, but it is not the most essential reason why the Dominican studies. The primary reason for Dominican study is *to know God better, and therefore to love Him better*. The more we know God, the more we love Him, and the more we love Him, the more we want to know about Him. This cycle of love and knowledge is tied to the primary purpose of our vocation: personal holiness and union with God in heaven.

For a Dominican, study may start in a search for personal holiness and understanding, but it does not end there. As with St. Catherine of Siena, our love of God must be expressed in love for our neighbors, and there can be no greater love for our neighbors than to bring them to God. The second purpose of study, therefore, is to “share with others the fruit of our contemplation,” as St. Thomas Aquinas says. This purpose has several expressions within the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic. For example, we share the truth with those we meet: family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. This may involve correcting an anti-Catholic’s misperception (we don’t worship Mary), helping a Catholic understand and accept *Humanae Vitae*, or leading an agnostic to hope in God’s love for him. These things are not possible without the direct action of the Holy Spirit, of course, but in order to be useful instruments of the Holy Spirit, we must prepare ourselves with study. In this sense, study is actually an act of charity for others, as we prepare ourselves to be of use to their souls.

Another expression of this preaching element in the Lay Dominican vocation is less personal, but potentially very far reaching. From sharing the Truth with those whom God puts in our immediate path, we may be called to bring the voice of Truth to the “marketplace of ideas.” This may sound far fetched, particularly when one is not in a position to make speeches, let alone write laws, but it is a real option for all Dominicans who can put pen to paper. When a moral issue is in public debate—for example, euthanasia, same sex “marriage,” or embryonic stem cell research—after study of the issues, a Dominican can present the truth through letters to the editor and public officials. For those with the gift to do so, a Dominican may be able to present the truth to an even wider audience through legislative testimony, articles, books, lectures, and debates. As it says in the Rule, “Every Dominican must be prepared to preach the Word of God. This preaching ... involves the defense of the dignity of human life, the family and the person. The promotion of Christian unity and dialogue with non-believers are [also a] part of the Dominican vocation” (par. 12).

2. *What to Study and How to Study It*

According to the Rule of the Lay Fraternities of Saint Dominic, one of the main ways Lay Dominicans can “advance in their vocation. . . . [is through] assiduous study of revealed truth and reflection on contemporary problems, in the light of faith” (par. 10). This is clarified later on in the Rule, when it states, “The sources of Dominican formation are:

- a) the Word of God and theological reflection,
- b) liturgical prayer,
- c) the history and tradition of the Order,
- d) contemporary documents of the Church and Order,
- e) awareness of the signs of our times.”

These items need to be considered one at a time.

a.1) *The Word of God*

The most important of all the objects of study is Sacred Scripture. “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ,” notes St. Jerome. The opposite is also true. “The Church ‘forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful . . . to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ,’ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures’” (CCC 133). Due to the surpassing importance of Scripture, this section of the module will be longer than the other sections.

The most important concept in the interpretation of Scripture comes from the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum*, which sets these basic guidelines for study:

1. *Be especially attentive “to the content and unity of the whole Scripture”* (CCC 112). In other words, the entire Bible should be considered as a united whole, with Jesus as its center.
2. *Read the Scripture within “the living Tradition of the whole Church”* (CCC 113). The word “Tradition” here means that which “transmits. . . to the successors of the apostles” the “entirety of the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit” (CCC 81).
3. *Be attentive to the analogy of faith* (CCC 114). In other words, as one reads and studies, one is to be aware of “the coherence of the truths of faith.”

Pope John Paul II once stated, “Catholic exegesis does not have its own exclusive method interpretation . . . [instead,] it makes the most of all the current methods by seeking in each of them the ‘seeds of the Word’” (April 23, 1993). With that caveat in mind, one method of Biblical interpretation *is* favored above other methods by special mention in the *Catechism*. This tradition, one that Pope John Paul II occasionally refers to as “‘mystical’ exegesis,” promotes the idea that “one can distinguish between two *senses* of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses.” This method began with the Church Fathers and was continued throughout the Middle Ages, and it is currently enjoying a resurgence of support from the Magisterium.

Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* affirmed the *literal* sense of Scripture without falling into the trap of *literalist* (i.e., fundamentalist) interpretation. To avoid this flaw, “. . . [T]he reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words” (CCC 109). Additionally, “In order to discover *the sacred authors’ intention*, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current” (CCC 110).

Dei Verbum and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 109-133, are virtually mandatory for the Catholic who is serious about Scriptural interpretation. However, “mystical” exegesis is not the only tool for Biblical interpretation; far from it! Another important document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1994), discusses the benefits (and occasional hazards) of many modern methods of Scriptural interpretation, such as the Historico-critical method, narrative criticism, and semiotic criticism. Although the past century has seen the development of two different “camps” of interpreters—those favoring “mystical” exegesis and those preferring the more modern, scientific methods, each of whom wish to see the other camp’s hermeneutics officially condemned—the Church has carefully preserved (and even renewed) the older ideas while encouraging scholars to “be alert to adopt without delay anything useful that each period brings to Biblical exegesis,” in the words of Leo XIII. For example, use of the Historical-critical method when

“freed from its philosophical presuppositions or those contrary of the truth of our faith,” has been “vigorously approved” by a succession of popes (John Paul II, April 23, 1993).

The document also points out the flaws in the fundamentalist interpretation, which it terms “dangerous” because it “invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide” (I, F), and warns Catholics not to follow this model. These three texts—*Dei Verbum*, the *Catechism* parag. 50-141 (but especially 109-133), and *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, as well as the slim volume *Bible Sharing* by John Burke, O.P., are necessary readings for those undertaking Scripture studies.

The brevity of this formation module doesn’t permit complete guidelines on interpreting Scripture correctly, but here are some other ideas beyond the above to get you started on the road to further study: (1) To increase your ability to understand the stories of the Bible in their historical context, listen to or watch one of Jeff Cavins’ groundbreaking series, either *The Great Adventure* or *Our Father’s Plan* (both from Saint Joseph’s Communications). These two series break the Bible into 14 easy-to-understand historical periods, making the stories much more accessible for the average reader. (2) To get really in-depth with “mystical” exegesis, you’ll want to read Mark Shea’s book *Making Senses Out of Scripture: Reading the Bible as the First Christians Did* (Basilica Press) and listen to Dr. Scott Hahn’s tape series *Returning to Our Senses* (Saint Joseph’s Communications). (3) For a “reality check” on “mystical” exegesis, as well as to better understand its interrelationship with modern methods of interpretation, read Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. (4) Finally, realize that although specific translations are approved by the Church, you can’t always trust the introductory essays or the footnotes in Bibles, even for a “Catholic Study Edition.” Many excellent editions exist, but some of the best include the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* (Ignatius), still in progress, and the *Navarre Bible*, which is available in separate slim volumes (with extensive commentary) or in larger “chunks” with several books each (containing less extensive, but often more modern, commentary). For readability and poetry, many prefer the *Jerusalem Bible* or the *New American Bible*, but the older versions of these two translations tend to be more accurate than the most recent. (5) Finally, you may wish to pick up commentaries by trusted publishers or by the saints. For example, several of St. Thomas Aquinas’ commentaries on books of the New Testament are currently available in English. “For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.” – *Dei verbum* no. 12

a.2) Theological Reflection

Books of theological reflection are as diverse as the Church. The main thing to be aware of when reading these kinds of books is its alignment with Church teaching. Usually, in these days where *imprimatur*s are almost non-existent, the easiest way to tell if a book’s contents reflect the teaching of the Church is to identify the publisher and see what other books and authors they publish.

Some books, like *The Imitation of Christ*, need no introduction. Others, such as *The Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena, may require you to read her autobiography before you plunge in. To study others, such as the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, you may be best off developing a familiarity with not only St. Thomas, but also Aristotelian philosophy before you even crack the *Summa* itself. Alternatively, consider an introductory book like *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* by Timothy McDermott, O.P. Each work needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis in terms of whether any preparatory work is necessary before true study can begin.

Other well-respected classic and modern works include *The Three Ages of the Interior Life* by Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Summa of the Christian Life* by Ven. Louis of Granada, O.P., *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* by St. Louis de Montfort, O.P., *The Soul of the Apostolate* by Jean-Baptiste Chautard, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* by Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Seven-Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton, *Ways of Imperfection* by Simon Tugwell O.P., and *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. Works by the early Church fathers, especially our holy father St. Augustine, are also highly recommended. Works by contemporary writers including Mark Shea, Scott Hahn, Patrick Madrid, Matthew Pinto, and similar authors can also be profitable.

b) Liturgical Prayer

Studying liturgical prayer can be as simple as a devout and prayerful reading of the Office of the Day, particularly the Office of Readings, or it can be the study and contemplation on the readings of the day's Mass (available in either a daily missal, from www.dailyprayerpage.com, or in such publications as *Magnificat*). NOTE: While *Magnificat* is an excellent source for daily Mass readings, its version of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer is abbreviated, and does *not* fulfill the Lay Dominican Rule's obligation to recite the Liturgy of the Hours). Since *Lectio Divina* is often referred to as "eating" the Word of God, studying the scriptures of the day can be considered eating what your Mother (the Church) serves you!

c) The History and Tradition of the Order

Such works as *A Brief History of the Dominican Order*, and *Dominican Spirituality*, both by Fr. William Hinnebusch O.P., *St Dominic's Family* by Sr. Mary Jean Dorcy O.P., and any of the lives of St. Dominic, give insight and inspiration as to what it means to be a Dominican.

d) Contemporary Documents of the Church and the Order

Among the most important documents of the 20th century is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. An authoritative source of what the Church really teaches, it is the first universal catechism since the Council of Trent. Most people will not find it a book they will be particularly drawn towards in terms of reading it straight through, but will prefer to use it as a reference book. That's a good use of the *Catechism*, but keep in mind that the book *can* be fruitfully read on its own merit. There's some fascinating material there, with gems hidden throughout. This makes the *Catechism* ideal for group study within a chapter, if broken into appropriately sized "bits."

Indispensable to understanding the *Catechism* is the apostolic constitution *Fedei Depositum*, the six pages immediately following the table of contents. Don't skip this piece! There are also several guides to the *Catechism* in print; among the best of these texts are the *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, by then-Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) and Cristoph Cardinal Schönborn, O.P., and *The Love That Never Ends: A Key to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, by four Dominican authors. Finally, just released in 2005 are the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, which focuses more on the political and economic realms than personal issues of faith or the sacraments, and 2006 saw the English release of the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which compresses the most important material from the *Catechism* into a book just over 1/8 the size of the original text.

Another type of document outside of the *Catechism* and related compendia is the encyclical letter. Popes Leo XIII, Pius XII, John XXIII, and Paul VI wrote several extremely well-known and influential encyclicals during their pontificates. Since then, Pope John Paul II has elevated the form to an art, producing such works as *The Gospel of Life*, *The Splendor of Truth*, *Faith and Reason*, and *On the Eucharist and Its Relationship to the Church*.

Other Church documents include apostolic exhortations, such as *Christifideles Laici (On the Mission of the Lay Faithful, 1988)*, and letters, such as *Letter . . . on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World (2004)*. The advantage of these documents as study topics is that they are often not only timely, but well-reasoned, and therefore excellent ways to prepare yourself for explaining the truths of the faith.

The Dominican Order also occasionally releases documents, either from conferences or from the Master of the Order. Members are encouraged to study these documents, knowing that as tertiary Dominicans, we fall under the Master's authority in an official capacity.

e) *Awareness of the Signs of Our Times*

Read the newspaper. Watch the news. Browse the Internet. Find out what the moral issues of the day are, and make sure that you understand and can clearly explain the truth. If you feel isolated by the “liberal bias” of certain networks, you can visit Internet news outlets like www.lifenews.com and www.zenit.org/english, or you can subscribe to reputable Catholic weeklies such as *Our Sunday Visitor* and *National Catholic Register*.

These five “sources of Dominican formation” are all excellent topics for study as individuals or chapters. As our rule reminds us, this is one of the main ways we can advance in our vocation.

3. *Avoiding Pitfalls of Study*

Study is a gift without which we cannot fulfill our Dominican vocation, yet the pursuit of study removed from its primary purpose can strangle our vocation. Study merely to satisfy intellectual curiosity can become sterile. Even study that started with a good aim can become a source of intellectual pride and vainglory. The fruit of this study is less likely to bring salvation for our neighbor, and more likely to bring dryness and a weakening of our love of God.

How do we avoid these pitfalls? Study must never be separated from the cycle of love and knowledge, it must always be other-centered instead of self-centered, and it must always be rooted in prayer. St. Albert the Great was described by one of his students in this way: “I have seen and noted that every day for many years when Master Albert was Regent of Theology, he so devoted himself to prayer, day and night, that he recited the 150 psalms of David every day. He dedicated himself to the canonical hours [Divine Office], his lectures, and disputations. Is it any wonder that such a man... should make more than human progress in virtue?” Fr. William Hinnebusch, in *Dominican Spirituality*, writes, “A Dominican intellectual is first a man of prayer; he is also a prayerful intellectual. Prayer seasons and warms his learning, gives it life, frees it from the cobwebs and dust of ponderous tomes.”

Our minds, our souls, must not be filled with “the cobwebs and dust” of learning. Instead, learning must be aimed at developing the love of God and being always “prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). As Dominicans, we must love our neighbor enough to actively seek his salvation, offering him the mercy of the truth, given with love. In order to offer this truth, we must prepare our minds and hearts with study: our minds, that we may explain the truth; and our hearts, that our love for God will overflow into a desire to be of service to the soul of our neighbor.

For Discussion:

1. Why is it important to be especially attentive “*to the content and unity of the whole Scripture*” (CCC 112)?
2. What is the primary reason for a Dominican to study?
3. What have you read pertaining to Dominican history and/or tradition, and what effect (if any) did it have on your vocation as a Lay Dominican? Why?
4. Discuss the “why” pertaining to the following statement: “Study merely to satisfy intellectual curiosity can become sterile.” (see #3. *Avoiding Pitfalls of Study*)

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