LISTENING TOGETHER
Listening Together

Meditations on Synodality

Timothy Radcliffe

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
litpress.org
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All of the chapters of this book were written as small contributions to the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which took as its theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.” This gathering came to be known more commonly as the Synod on Synodality. This synodal process began in October 2021 and will conclude in October 2024. So it might be helpful to situate these chapters in this long and complex process, which at this writing has not finished yet.

The title of this synod suggests introversion, the Church turned in on itself. But this is the greatest exercise of listening in the history of humanity. Pope Francis has invited the Church to embark on a radical transformation of our shared life as a Church through listening together to what the Spirit is saying to us and listening to each other. Millions of Catholics have taken part in meetings at parish, diocesan, and continental levels,
sharing what they had heard with the organisers of the synod. This is a new way of being Church. We are just at the beginning of discovering how to walk in this way, learning as we go.

The purpose of this consultation was “not to produce documents but to open horizons of hope for the fulfilment of the Church’s mission.”¹ This hope is not just for the Catholic Church but for all Christians, indeed all of humanity. We seem to be entering a new time of war, violence, and poverty, living under the shadow of the imminent catastrophe of climate change, a world in which the young often struggle to dream of a future.

Out of this long and complex process of consultation came the Instrumentum Laboris, or Working Document, which was the basis of the discussions at the first assembly of the Synod on Synodality, which took place in Rome from October 4 to 29, 2023. This was preceded by an ecumenical prayer service, to which the leaders of all the major Christian churches were invited. The members of the synod, including delegates from other churches, were then bussed to the conference centre, the Fraterna Domus at Sacrofano, sixteen miles north of Rome, for a

¹. XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session (October 2023), Foreword, n. 3; https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf.
three-day retreat. At the request of Pope Francis, every morning and evening, Mother Maria Ignazia Angelini gave reflections on the scriptural texts of the day, and I offered conferences. These six conferences form the first part of this book.

On October 4, hundreds of members of the synod, including lay people, delegates of other churches, bishops, and cardinals, processed together—a moving image of a shared ecumenical journey—into St. Peter’s Square for the formal opening of the synod with a Mass presided over by Pope Francis under a hot sun.

The discussions of the synod were divided into five sections, each beginning with meditations by Mother Maria Ignazia and myself. The three meditations that I gave form the second section of this book.

Following these texts, I have also included a reflection that I prepared after the synod assembly, which I have entitled “Go!” Here I reflect on how far we have come, the challenges we face, and how to prepare for the next session of the synod in October 2024.

The appendix, “Accountability and Co-responsibility in the Government of the Church: The Example of the Dominicans,” is based on a paper I gave at a meeting of the Peter and Paul Seminar, which met in Quebec in April 2022, before I knew I would be invited to attend the synod. It was later published in the distinguished
periodical for canon law, *Studia Canonica.* My brethren were highly amused that I published an article there, given my almost complete ignorance of canon law!

I thank Mother Maria Ignazia, my fellow spiritual advisor to the synod, for her kindness and encouragement in our shared service. I am indebted to Professors Massimo Faggioli, Anna Rowlands, and Dr. Sarah Parvis for their wise and helpful comments and suggestions for my retreat talks, and to my brother Łukasz Popko, OP, of the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem, for his inspiring help in listening to the Word of God. “Listen to him!”

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Retreat Talks
When the Holy Father asked me to give this retreat, I felt enormously honoured but nervous. I am deeply aware of my personal limitations. I am old—white—a Westerner—and a man! I don’t know which is worse! All of these aspects of my identity limit my understanding. So I ask for your forgiveness for the inadequacy of my words.

We are all radically incomplete and need each other. Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian, wrote of the Catholic “both/and.” For example, Scripture and Tradition, faith and works. He is said to have called it “that damned Catholic ‘and’”—“das verdammtte katholische ‘Und.’” So I pray that when we listen to each other during the coming weeks and disagree, we shall often say, “Yes,
and . . .” rather than “No!” That is the synodal way. Of course, “no” is also sometimes necessary!

In the second reading at Mass today, St. Paul says to the Philippians: “[M]ake my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2:2). We are gathered here because we are not united in heart and mind. The vast majority of people who have taken part in the synodal process have been surprised by joy. For many, it is the first time that the Church has invited them to speak of their faith and hope. But some of us are afraid of this journey and of what lies ahead. Some hope that the Church will be dramatically changed, that we shall take radical decisions, for example, about the role of women in the Church. Others are afraid of exactly these same changes and fear that they will only lead to division, even schism. Some of you would prefer not to be here at all. A bishop told me that he prayed not to be chosen to come here. His prayer was granted! You may be like the son in today’s gospel who at first does not want to go to the vineyard, but he goes!

At crucial moments in the gospels, we always hear these words: “Do not be afraid.” St. John tells us, “[P]erfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). So let us begin by praying that the Lord will free our hearts from fear. For some this is the fear of change and for others the fear that nothing will change. But “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

1. Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933.
Of course, we all have fears, but Aquinas taught us that courage is refusing to be enslaved by fear. May we always be sensitive to the fears of others, especially those with whom we disagree. Like Abraham, we leave not knowing where we are going (see Heb 11:8). But if we free our hearts of fear, it will be wonderful beyond our imagination.

To guide us during this retreat, we shall meditate on the transfiguration. This was the retreat Jesus gave to his closest disciples before they embarked on the first synod in the life of the Church, when they walked together (synhodos) to Jerusalem. This retreat was needed because they were afraid of the journey they had to make together. Until now they had wandered around the north of Israel. But at Caesarea Philippi, Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ. Then Jesus invited them to go with him to Jerusalem, where he would suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. They could not accept this. Peter tried to prevent him. Jesus called him “Satan,” “enemy.” The little community was paralysed. So Jesus took them up the mountain. Let us listen to St. Mark’s account of what happened.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who
were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. (Mark 9:2-8)

This retreat gave them the courage and hope to set off on their journey. It did not always go well. They immediately failed to free the young lad from the evil spirit. They quarrelled about who was the greatest. They misunderstood the Lord. But they were on their way with a fragile hope.

So we, too, prepare for our synod by going on retreat, where, like the disciples, we learn to listen to the Lord. When we set off in three days’ time, we shall often be like those disciples and misunderstand each other and even quarrel. But the Lord will lead us onwards toward the death and resurrection of the Church. Let us ask the Lord to give us hope, too: the hope that this synod will lead to a renewal of the Church and not division; the hope that we shall draw closer to each as brothers and sisters. This is our hope not just for the Catholic Church but for all our baptised brothers and sisters. People talk of an “ecumenical winter.” We hope for an ecumenical spring.
We also gather in hope for humanity. The future looks grim. Ecological catastrophe threatens the destruction of our home. Wildfires and floods have devoured the world this summer. Small islands are beginning to disappear under the sea. Millions of people are on the road fleeing from poverty and violence. Hundreds have drowned in the Mediterranean, not far from here. Many parents refuse to bring children into a world that appears doomed. In China, young people wear T-shirts saying, “We are the last generation.” Let us gather in hope for humanity, especially hope for the young.

I don’t know how many parents we have at the synod, but thank you for cherishing our future. After a difficult time in South Sudan, on the frontier with the Congo, I flew back to Britain beside a child who screamed without interruption for eight hours. I am ashamed to confess that I had murderous—Herodian—thoughts! But what more marvellous priestly ministry is there than to raise children and seek to open their minds and hearts to the promise of life. Parents and teachers are ministers of hope.

So we gather in hope for the Church and for humanity. But here is the difficulty: we have contradictory hopes! So how can we hope together? In this we are just like the disciples. The mother of James and John hoped that they would sit on the left and the right of the Lord in glory and so displace Peter; there is rivalry even within the closest circle of Jesus’ friends. Judas probably hoped
for a rebellion that would throw out the Romans. Some of them probably just hoped not to get killed. But they walk on together. So what shared hope can we have at this synod?

At the Last Supper, they received a hope beyond all that they could have imagined: the Body of Christ and his Blood, the new covenant, eternal life. In the light of this eucharistic hope, all their conflicting hopes must have seemed as nothing, except to Judas who despaired. This is what St. Paul called “[h]oping against hope” (Rom 4:18), the hope that transcends all of our hopes.

We, too, are gathered like the disciples at the Last Supper, not as a political debating chamber competing to win. Our hope is eucharistic. I first glimpsed what this means in Rwanda in 1993, when the troubles were just beginning. We had planned to visit our Dominican sisters in the north, but the Belgian ambassador told us we should stay at home. The country was on fire. But I was young and foolish. Now I am old and foolish! That day we saw terrible things: worst, a hospital ward filled with young children who had lost limbs through mines and bombs. One child has lost both legs, an arm and an eye. His father sat beside him weeping. I went into the bush to weep, accompanied by two children each hopping on one leg.

We went to our sisters, but what could I say? In the face of such meaningless violence, one has no words. Then I remembered the words of the Lord: “Do this in memory
of me.” We are given something to do. At the Last Supper, there seemed to be no future. All that lay ahead apparently was failure, suffering, and death. And in this darkest moment, Jesus made the most hopeful gesture in the history of the world: “This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you.” This is the hope that calls us beyond all division. One of the reasons I value going to places of war and suffering is that it is in such places that I learn again and again the beauty of our eucharistic hope.

A priest in the east of Ukraine went to say Mass for some sisters who were moving, faced with the threat of being overwhelmed by the violence of war. Everything was packed. All they could offer for the paten was a red plastic plate. He wrote: “This was how God showed us that he was with us. ‘You are sitting in a basement, in the damp and the mould, but I am with you—on a red child’s plate, and not on a golden paten.’”² This is the eucharistic hope of this synodal journey. The Lord is with us.

The hope of the Eucharist is for what lies beyond our imagination.

I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the

². Quoted by Jaroslaw Krawiec, OP, Vicar for Ukraine, in his letter to the Order, Ash Wednesday 2023.
throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev 7:9-10)

This is the hope that the disciples glimpsed on the mountain in the transfigured Lord. It makes the conflict between our hopes seem minor, almost absurd. If we are truly on the way to the kingdom, does it really matter whether you align yourselves with so-called traditionalists or progressives? Even the differences between Dominicans and Jesuits pall into insignificance! So let us listen to him, come down the mountain, and keep on walking confidently. The greatest gifts will come from those with whom we disagree, if we dare to listen to them.

During our synodal journey, we may worry whether we are achieving anything. The media will probably decide that it was all a waste of time, just words. They will look for whether bold decisions are made on about four or five hot-button topics. But the disciples on that first synod, walking to Jerusalem, did not appear to achieve anything. They even tried to prevent blind Bartimaeus from being cured by stopping him near to Jesus. They seemed useless. When the vast hungry crowd gathered around Jesus, the disciples asked the Lord, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” Jesus
asked them what they had—just seven loaves and a few fish (Mark 8:1-10). That was more than enough. If we give generously whatever we have in this synod, that will be more than enough. The Lord of the harvest will provide.

Next to our priory in Baghdad is a home for abandoned children of all faiths, run by Mother Teresa’s sisters. I shall never forget little Nura, about eight years old, born without arms or legs, feeding the younger children with a spoon in her mouth. One can wonder what the point of small acts of goodness in a war zone is. Do they make any difference? Aren’t they just sticking plasters on a rotting body? We do small good deeds and let the Lord of the harvest give them the fruit he wishes. Today we gather on the feast of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. She was born one hundred fifty years ago. She invites us to follow her “little way” that leads to the kingdom. She said, “Remember that nothing is small in the eyes of God.”

In Auschwitz, Primo Levi, the Italian Jew, was given a share of bread every day by an Italian lay man called Lorenzo. He wrote: “I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage . . . something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth
surviving. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.”3 The small portion of bread saved his soul.

The last words of St. David, the patron saint of Wales, were “Do simple things well.” Our hope is that whatever small deeds we do in this synod will bear fruit beyond our imagination. On that last night, Jesus gave himself to the disciples: “I give myself to you.” During this synod let us share not just our words and convictions but ourselves, with eucharistic generosity. If we open our hearts to each other, wonderful things will happen. The disciples gathered all the fragments of bread and fish left over after the feeding of the five thousand. Nothing was lost—as nothing will be lost of every effort we make to reach out to each other.

A final point. Peter tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem because it made no sense to him. It was absurd to go there to be killed. Despair is not pessimism. It is the terror that nothing makes sense anymore. And hope is not optimism but the confidence that all that we live, all our confusion and pain, will somehow be discovered to have meaning. We trust that, as St. Paul says, “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12).

Jesus also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Meditation
In a few days’ time, we shall go home for eleven months. This will be apparently a time of empty waiting. But it
will probably be the most fertile time of the synod, the time of germination. Jesus tells us, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.”

We have listened to hundreds of thousands of words during the last three weeks. Sometimes we may have thought, “Too many!” Most of these have been positive words, words of hope and aspiration. These are the seeds that are sown in the soil of the Church. They will be at work in our lives, in our imagination and our subconscious, during these months. When the moment is right, they will bear fruit.

The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

In spite of all the farmer’s work and worry,
He can’t reach down to where the seed is slowly
‘Transmuted into summer’. The earth bestows.¹

Although nothing may appear to be happening, we can be confident that if our words are loving, they will bud in the lives of people whom we do not know. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux said, as quoted by the Holy Father recently:

“C’est la confiance et rien que la confiance qui doit nous conduire à l’Amour”—“It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to Love.”

These eleven months will be like a pregnancy. Abraham and Sarah were promised that they would have descendants more numerous than the sand on the seashore. But nothing seemed to happen. Sarah laughed when she heard this promise the third or fourth time, as she listened, hidden in the tent, to the strangers in Genesis 18. Probably a bittersweet laugh. She had heard all this before, but she had remained barren. But in a year’s time, she would bear Isaac, the child of laughter.

So these eleven months will be a time of quiet pregnancy, of a new way of being Church, a deeper communion. If you will forgive me, this reminds me of the first time I tried to make a speech in Spanish, in Latin America. A bishop got confused—which is very rare. He thought that I was an Irish Franciscan. I explained that I was an English Dominican. I said, “El obispo está embarazado.” I meant to say, “The bishop was embarrassed.”

Alas, what I actually said was, “The bishop is pregnant.” Even more rare!

This is a time of active waiting. Let me repeat the words of Simone Weil that I quoted during the retreat. “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. . . . This way of looking is, in the first place, attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the human being it is looking at, just as he or she is, in all their truth.”

This is profoundly countercultural. The global culture of our time is often polarised, aggressive, and dismissive of other people’s views. The cry is: Whose side are you on? When we go home, people will ask, “Did you fight for our side? Did you oppose those unenlightened other people?” We shall need be profoundly prayerful to resist the temptation to succumb to this party-political way of thinking. That would be to fall back into the sterile, barren language of much of our society. It is not the synodal way.

The synodal process is organic and ecological rather than competitive. It is more like planting a tree than winning a battle (though battles are sometimes unavoidable, as St. Athanasius knew so well!), and as such will be hard for many to understand, sometimes including ourselves (see Mark 8:33)!

3. Weil, Waiting on God, 169.
But if we keep our minds and hearts open to the people whom we have met here, vulnerable to their hopes and fears, their words will germinate in our lives, and ours in theirs. There will an abundant harvest, a fuller truth. Then the Church will be renewed.

Humanity’s first vocation in Paradise was to be gardeners. Adam tended creation, given a share in speaking God’s creative words, naming the animals. In these eleven months, will we speak fertile, hope-filled words, or words that are destructive and cynical? Will our words nurture the crop or be poisonous? Shall we be gardeners of the future or trapped in old, sterile conflicts? We each choose.

St. Paul said to the Ephesians: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (4:29).
"Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen 12:1). Summoned out of Egypt into the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land; called back home from Babylonian exile; journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem, the first synod—the risen Lord sends us with another “Go”: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). At the end of every Eucharist, we are told to “go in peace.” We hope to hear that final summons: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt 25:34). Discipleship is a journey into the mystery of God. The only question is whether we accept to travel together (syn-hodos).
“It is the L ORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed” (Deut 31:8).

The media, both mainstream and “independent” Catholic media, mostly concluded that during this first session of the Synod on Synodality, the Church did not make any significant progress. The Synthesis Report was greeted with disappointment. The Church was asked for the third time to study the issue of ordaining women to the diaconate. Pope Francis has constantly urged the Church to welcome everyone—“todos, todos, todos”—but the Synthesis Report retreated from explicitly naming the LGBT community, which both Pope Francis and the preparatory document had done previously. Rather than going anywhere, it seemed that the Church is aimlessly wandering around in the wilderness, like the people of God after the exodus.

The downbeat reaction of the media initially irritated me. It had been made clear from the beginning that the purpose of this session of the synod was not to make audacious decisions. In my first retreat talk, I had said that “the media will probably decide that it was all a waste of time, just words. They will look for whether bold decisions are made on about four or five hot-button topics.” Hadn’t they listened? But I had to admit that I, too, was a little disappointed! So many people would feel discouraged, especially women who were waiting to see whether we had responded to their desire to have a strong voice
in the Church. Some of them have been hanging on by their fingernails. How would they bear the news?

The hope for tangible, structural changes in the life of our Church is valid. I share it and pray for it. But even after a month in synod, it was easy to forget that the transformation that it is bringing about is far more radical than we can easily grasp. It is a new way of being Church, a deeper sharing in the life of Christ and in the communion of the Trinity. It is from that communion that structural changes will come when the time is ripe. Doing springs from being, from our encounter with the one whose name is I AM. If that is not the foundation, we shall just be shifting the deck chairs on the ecclesiastical Titanic.

The Church is the community born of the living encounter with the Lord.

The way in which Jesus formed the disciples constitutes the model we need to follow. He did not merely impart teaching but he shared his life with them. . . . He makes new life possible with his presence: those who meet him come away transformed. This happens because the truth of which Jesus is the bearer is not an idea, but the very presence of God in our midst; and the love with which he acts is not just a feeling, but the justice of the Kingdom that changes history. (Synthesis Report 14 b, 15 f)
APPENDIX

Accountability and Co-responsibility in the Government of the Church

The Example of the Dominicans

Recent crises in the life of the Roman Catholic Church, especially that of the sexual abuse of minors, have made the question of accountability and co-responsibility of the utmost urgency. The words of St. Paul ring in our ears with a new insistence: “[T]he night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Rom 13:12). In a society in which democracy is on the retreat and political power often evades accountability, the Church should embody openness and mutual transparency. I have been asked to explore whether the government of a
religious order, in this case the Dominicans, has any lessons to offer the Church in this time of self-questioning.

But how can the government of a relatively small group of men, all trained in theology and philosophy and committed by lifelong vows, be in any way illuminating for the government of a diocese, a complex hierarchical structure embracing hundreds of thousands of people with varying degrees of formation and commitment, and *a fortiori* for the universal Church?

### 1. Fraternity

Every religious order and congregation is animated by a spirituality. St. Francis, *il poverello* of Assisi, has attracted people in every century by his dramatic imitation of Christ; St. Ignatius of Loyola gave the Jesuits the Spiritual Exercises, the heart of their life and mission; the mystical teachings of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross lie at the roots of Carmelite religious life. In contrast, St. Dominic left his brothers and sisters a spirituality embodied in a form of communitarian government.¹

The brethren make their profession to God and to the master of the order by vowing obedience on the Book

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of the Constitutions and Ordinations of the Order of Preachers. This orders our common life and mission, our fraternity and our preaching. A theological vision of what it means to be preaching friars is incarnated in legislation on government, how chapters are to be held, how superiors are to be elected, how decisions are to be made, and so on. A spirituality embodied in a dry book, mostly concerned of legislation, may seem uninspiring, even legalistic, but it forms the brethren, and the sisters analogously, to live in mutual charity and missionary outreach.

So the first lesson of the Dominican tradition is that a spiritual and a theological vision may be embodied, implicitly or explicitly, in the processes of government, in how decisions are made, how people are chosen for leadership, and how debates are conducted so that everyone’s voice is heard. What theological vision do the present structures of church government embody? What vision of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and minds is incarnate in the decision-making processes? What new structures of government does the Church need if we are to respond to Pope Francis’s invitation to embark on the synodal path, a way of government that is “so ancient and so new”? The Dominican tradition suggests that unless a new vision of the Church is embedded in fresh institutional structures, it will remain an unrealisable aspiration, mere words.
Secondly, this Dominican form of government embodies a spirituality that speaks with beauty and clarity to this new moment in the life of the Church. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis invites the Church to rediscover its fundamental identity as a community of brothers and sisters. This fraternity, for want of a more inclusive term, is fundamental to the mission of the Church, the gathering of humanity into Christ’s kinship. Francis quotes Pope Benedict: “The Church . . . works ‘for the advancement of humanity and universal fraternity.’”2 *Brother* and *sister* are the most ancient and fundamental Christian titles, pointing to the promised unity of all people in Christ.

The title of the encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is a quotation from St. Francis of Assisi, who believed that we are not only brothers and sisters of the extended human family but of the whole of creation, of Brother Sun and Sister Moon and so on. The spirituality of St. Francis’s contemporary, St. Dominic, was also fundamentally fraternal. They both founded orders of friars, *fratres*, brothers, and there were Dominican sisters even before there were brethren. Our founder wished to be known only as “Brother Dominic.” Fittingly, his first biography is found in the *Vitae Fratrum*, “The Lives of the Brethren,” written some thirty years after his death. Rather than a

towering founder figure, he was one of the brethren. His self-effacement, typical of the preacher who does not wish to get in the way of the Word, is his most beautiful gift to his brothers and sisters.

The way of life of these *fratres* spoke powerfully to the world of Dominic and Francis, in which the old feudal hierarchies were weakening. Democracy was in the air. Strangers, often merchants like Francis’s father, were appearing in the new cities. New ideas were being explored in the universities being founded all over Europe and to which Dominic sent his young brethren to study and teach. For this evolving society, a new spirituality was needed to articulate and embody exciting aspirations towards a wider community. Marie-Dominique Chenu, OP (1899–1995), wrote that “every time the word ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ resurfaces in the Church, it has a utopian charge, the promise of a world in which strangers will be embraced.”

Our society is living in an even more intense time of transformation. Pope Francis challenges the Church to reach out to our unknown brothers and sisters in our global village. The spirituality of the friars surely has something to offer a world in which daily interaction with strangers from all over the planet is for some a joy but for others a threat.

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2. Friendship

From the beginning, fraternity in the Dominican life predisposed the brethren and sisters to friendship. St. Dominic was known for his affectionate relationship with women, especially young women! The second master of the order, Blessed Jordan of Saxony (1190–1237), wrote letters filled with love to a Dominican nun, Blessed Diane d’Andalou (1201–1236). St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) was surrounded by a group of friends, the Caterinati, whose mutual affection and teasing overflows from their correspondence, and she had an especial fondness for Blessed Raymond of Capua, OP (1303–1399), afterwards master of the order. After the Fall, it is hard to think of any easy friendships in the Bible between men and women until the coming of Christ. A sign of the breaking-in of the kingdom was the band of disciples, men and women, who accompanied Jesus in his mission. It was, above all, the women who stayed at the foot of the cross and who were the first witnesses to his resurrection. The joyful friendship between these early Dominican brothers and sisters can be an inspiration for our society, in which the relationships between woman and men are often fraught and fearful, and a sign of the coming of the kingdom.

The tendency of this fraternity to overflow into friendship finds its theological underpinning in the trinitarian theology of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). For those
early Dominicans, friendship was more than mutual affection; it was a sharing in the eternal, equal friendship that is the very life of God. Only God’s grace can overthrow the inequality of God and creature to embrace us in friendship. As Aquinas put it in the *Summa Theologiae*, “Solus Deus deificat”—only God can make us godlike. Pope Francis summons us beyond the stifling clericalism that has deformed so much of the Church’s life for centuries. The Dominican model of fraternity predisposed to friendship offers hints as to how this may be lived.

This vision of fraternity also helps us better to understand the nature of the scandal of sexual abuse and its cover-up. Brothers and sisters are called to live together in the clear light of the truth. More than illicit sexual relationships or the exploitation of power, though sexual abuse is both of these, it is the betrayal of friendship, our participation in the friendship of God. At the frozen heart of Dante’s *Inferno*, Satan devours three figures whose treachery betrayed friendship. The Church can only transcend the crisis of sexual abuse, seeking forgiveness for its failures and offering forgiveness for those who committed the abuse, if we are able to attain a certain clarity about the nature of the betrayal, which has caused such pain and scandal. How can friendship be reknit after such a betrayal?

3. Truth and Unity

The fraternal spirituality of the Order of Preachers is embodied in our communitarian form of government. This has enabled the Order to live fruitfully the irradicable tension between two necessary constituents of brotherhood, especially as it matures into friendship: truth and unity. *Veritas*, the motto of the order, is not merely a matter of factual accuracy, much as that matters. More than requiring just a dispassionate examination of facts, it is our shared search for the truth which Christ has promised will set us free (see John 8:32). Yves Congar, OP (1904–1995), famously said, “I have loved the truth as I have loved a person.”5 This passion for truth, which has imbued the best of Dominican life for eight hundred years, should ideally carry us beyond divisions in our search for the One who is the Truth and who transcends all our conceptions and ideologies. St. Albert the Great (1200–1280), Aquinas’s master, claimed that the greatest delight lies in “seeking the truth together, in the pleasure of companionship” (*in dulcedine societatis quarere veritatem*).6

But Dominican life has always been, and always will be, marked by tensions between different understandings of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. When our