

The Beggar's Offering

Stories

**Community of the Lamb
2008**

At the threshold...

Magnificat anima mea Dominum (Luke 1:46)

Magnificat! This is the song that bursts forth from the lips of the Virgin Mary right at the beginning of the Gospel, as if it opened its narrative. May her song of thanksgiving also be ours when we read this book, for the Lord has done wonders!

The Lord has done wonders... Yes, overshadowed by the Spirit, hearts open up to welcome the Good News of God's mad love, and the Gospel shines out in the lives of people. We have heard it, we have seen it with our own eyes and, like reapers at harvest time bring back the sheaves of grain with cries of joy, we also tell in these pages the tale of these wonders.

This book is a collection of stories written down following the oral witness of our little brothers and sisters. These tales form something like leaves taken from a diary covering more than twenty years in the life of the Community of the Lamb. In France, in Russia or in Chile, all describe the same story: that of an encounter which is always unique and unexpected.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3: 20)

Mystery of an encounter, mystery of a *visitation*... It is not two or three little brothers or little sisters who come to knock at the door to ask for alms of bread, but God himself. He is the true Beggar: He

comes to us, He knocks at the door, He makes his voice heard, He needs us and our friendship.

Mystery of an encounter, mystery of a *visitation*... Beyond the words that are exchanged, a secret visit takes place, or even - we dare to write it - “an epiphany of love”, of a completely gratuitous love. We have seen it shine out on the faces of those who opened their door: blessed are they!

Madeleine’s face, transfigured by forgiveness, or Pedro’s, flooded with tears, are of an “incomparable beauty”¹. They are faces which are graven on our memory, faces which have become for us icons of this *beatitude*.

For us also, little brothers and little sisters, this encounter has taken place: the call of Jesus to follow him, to leave everything for his sake, has echoed into the very depths of our hearts. On that day, we rejoiced as one does before the rising sun. On that day, for each one of us, there was “a before and an after”. And since then, like children following in their father’s footsteps, we have set out in the footsteps of Saint Dominic and Saint Francis of Assisi in order to follow Jesus.

In the Middle Ages, our fathers Saint Dominic and Saint Francis thrilled with joy as they held the book of the Gospels against their heart. It was their only riches, their treasure, and they wished only to live it completely. They spent their lives reading it, listening to the voice of the Son, keeping his word, meditating it.

Sitting at the foot of the cross or embracing the disfigured face of the leper, Dominic and Francis met the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52: 13-53:12), Jesus in his Passover. They heard him cry on the cross: “I am thirsty!” (John 19: 28).

¹ This is an expression of St Ephrem.

These were the last words of Jesus, but this moment was also in some way the culminating point of the History of Salvation. The veil was torn, their eyes were enlightened, the Beloved Son of the Father was revealed to their sight as a beggar. They contemplated, and they *knew*... God goes begging. God begs for the love of mankind and, by the same token, He offers us all his love, a love that will never end: Love itself, stronger than hate, stronger than death.

Overcome, Dominic and Francis wished only to become one with Jesus, the Lamb of God. So, in the light of his Holy Face, they were sent as witnesses of the Love that goes begging. With their faces shining, their hearts burnt out with merciful love, Dominic and Francis sought to encounter mankind as beggars. As pilgrims, they walked, they prayed, they could be heard singing on their way.

And when they asked for the alms of daily bread, it seemed as if in the hollow of their empty hands, they were carrying invisibly *the Beggar's offering*.

Prologue

The History of a community

The foundation of the little sisters of the Lamb - who are Dominicans – is 25 years old, and that of the little brothers, 18 years old, but at the beginning of that foundation, one finds of course a “pre-history”, which gives light to what was to follow. We must go back to 1968 and the years that followed.

Paris 1968

We were a few little sisters of the Roman Congregation of Saint Dominic, established in Paris, in the Latin Quarter, near the Odeon. At that time, a “Cultural revolution” was taking place, like a violent wind that left chaos and disorder in its trail. The philosophers Marx and Hegel had become the inspiration guiding many people; even Church communities were affected, and many priests and religious left the priesthood or the consecrated life. In our own small community, which welcomed female students, a few flying cobblestones reached as far as our terrace, but none of this could separate us from the love of Jesus, which grew in our hearts. The fraternal love that we were living, and the breath of the Spirit, were stronger than all this. We put a poster in the chapel window, which any passer-by might read: “Chapel open to the public”.

A few young people from the university started to join us. I, for my part, had received the signal grace of studying the Fathers of the Church at the Sorbonne with a group of Christian teachers who stood firm during the storm, and whom the wildest winds could not budge. One day, in an amphitheatre, a student cried out: “Who has lost this?” I recognised my rosary, and dressed as I was in the Dominican habit, signalled that I was the owner and they passed it on to me. From that day on, a good number of students found their way to our community.

The group that came to celebrate the liturgy kept growing. All of us together drew from Eastern and Western patristic sources, we contemplated at length various icons of the Trinity, or of the Virgin and Child, we studied Saint Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa*, but above all, the Gospel.

Some young Dominican brothers, who were finding themselves in an identical situation, came to join us. As they also were young students of Patrology, they loved the Church, Jesus Christ and his Gospel. We were “faithful to the teaching of the apostles, the breaking of bread and the prayers” (See Acts 2:42). One sentence kept coming back in our prayer: “I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children.” (Matthew 11:25).

“Little children”: we felt that we had to surrender ourselves to this, Jesus’ great blessing, and to let ourselves be drawn by the breath of the Spirit of praise and consolation, to the intimate Life of the Trinity. We endlessly sang this blessed and life-giving Trinity:

*O Blessed Trinity,
Eternal fount of life,
Sanctify us by your presence!
May we endlessly sing your Glory!*

We experienced that the only true revolution takes place in the depths of the heart. We had to live the Gospel of Jesus. The Fathers of the Church were our teachers: Ambrose of Milan and Augustine, Cassian, Sophronius of Jerusalem and Maximus the Confessor, and Saint Thomas Aquinas whom Father Hubert was unveiling for us... These became for us so many names of friends... Our intention was to welcome Tradition in the newness of the today given by God, and this, within the heart of the Church, following the inspiration of Vatican II: in the context of those years, this amounted to... a revolution!

While the storm was raging, the Lord continued to build his Church on the rock of friendship, and we lived a deep fraternal unanimity. It was at that time that our first encounter took place with Father Christoph Schönborn, o.p., who is at present the Cardinal-archbishop of Vienna in Austria. At that time of course, we could not have guessed it. He is now also the father of our community! Moreover, his bishop's motto is: "I call you friends" (John 15:25).

Following the teaching of our holy father Saint Dominic, who had learned it from the monk Cassian, we meditated on the Word of God in the light of the Fathers of the Church. We learned the Gospel by heart, we learned it with our heart and, as the Scriptures say, we "ate" it, we *chewed* it. You may read what is said in the book of Ezekiel: "Eat the book" (Ez. 3:1), and in Saint John's book of Revelations, the term is even more precise: "Devour the book" (Rev. 10:9).

Each day, in the light of the Gospel, we asked ourselves this question – and we continue to do so today: "Who is God? Who is man?" Who better than Jesus Christ and his holy Gospel can answer that question? Life, a real, loving life, which enabled us to live, surged in our hearts and triumphed secretly over the nihilistic ambience. Jesus, meek and humble of heart, led us on a path of peace that the violence of the times could not hamper. And thus our life became each day more Marian: we were accustomed to say the rosary, a

devotion that was particularly dear to Saint Dominic, but the “chewing” of the Gospel also united us to the blessed Virgin as she is presented in the Gospel: “Mary kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Our small group of students and university personnel, and of Dominican brothers and sisters, remained gathered around Mary. A renewed fervour was given us in prayer, and our friendship deepened with our contemplation of the Mystery of God.

We had no more wine, and here the best was being offered to us free of charge. The grain of wheat fallen in the earth was dead, the sellers of ideology crowed their victory, but they did not know that if the grain fallen in the earth dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

In fact, life in the Holy Spirit was also surging in other groups and giving birth to new communities: a real springtime was dawning in the Church. On the embers of a fire that has seemed to be dying, the Spirit of God had blown, and a new fire had secretly been lit in the hearts of all believers. The light that the darkness cannot overpower (John 1:5) was in all hearts, a divine and holy unction had come to heal all our wounds. Truly, Jesus is Saviour and Lord, He gives us his Spirit, and the Church is our Mother, our Home.

The revolution of May 1968 had seemed to want to overcome everything, but it had been preceded in the heart of the Church, as we have said, by the Second Vatican Council, which was, if ever there was one, a true revolution, founded on the love of God and of all our brethren in this, our human nature. The Council had given to the world a Church renewed by the Spirit of the Lord. The liturgy of the Council allowed us to live at the rhythm of the heart of God and of his love for all mankind.

The Gospel, if kept in the heart of Mary, lived with love of God and of neighbour, and nourishing our prayer, is a force of resistance which triumphs over every disorder and every evil.

In the heart of the Church, the civilisation of Love was born. “Deep waters cannot quench love nor floods sweep it away” (Song of Songs 8:7).

Saint Dominic and... Dominic, the “child” lost in the night

In prayer during nights of adoration, the cry of our father Saint Dominic became ours: “My Mercy, what will become of sinners?”, to which we added: “...among whom we are the first”. In his prayer, Saint Dominic also ceaselessly said: “It is I who have sinned!”

“My Mercy, what will become of sinners?” This cry of our father Saint Dominic which echoed during his nights of prayer and tugged at his heart during the day, this cry of supplication, was one which he perceived as emanating from the midst of the Trinity: God the Father, friend of mankind, turns towards his Son and calls to Him thus: “You, my Mercy, (a perfect expression of my merciful love), tell me, what will become of sinners?” And the Son answers as the Scriptures tell us: “Here I am! I am coming, send me!” (Ps 39:8; Hebrews 10:7).

In union with this overwhelming mercy, Dominic stood up, ready for mission. As for us, confident in his intercession, and obedient to Jesus and to his Gospel, we went.

With a few university students, I started going at night to the hard neighbourhoods that are the refuge of “those who lie in darkness” (Luke 1:79). And there, we met the most deeply lost, the poorest of young people. I cannot forget the face of a “child”, Dominic – just so! – aged sixteen at most. He is graven inside me. In Paris, these were the early years of drug addiction. Dominic used to inject heroin, and death already marked his face.

That day I began to sense that the feeling of impotence that we experience when approaching the poor, and the fear that sometimes gnaws at us, are replaced by a *love* that our poor little hearts are incapable of producing, and which until then was unknown to us.

Yes, another heart beats within ours, the heart of Jesus who loves the poor and saves them by becoming one with them and one with me. Yes, the Mercy that sent us to the poor is a love that is stronger than death.

From the midst of that darkness, among so many faces full of suffering, the “Holy Face” of Jesus irradiated the light of the Love that the darkness cannot reach. The “Divine Beggar” begged for our faith, our love, our adoration, so that the tenderness of the Father and the consolation of the Holy Spirit, the power of the Resurrection which overcomes darkness, evil and death, could break through into the night of this world.

When allowing me to go on those night missions, my superiors had made one single recommendation: “Never give out our address!”, but, unbeknownst to me, the poor followed me and found it by themselves! They invaded the house, which rapidly filled up. From then on, we shared the destiny of these poor at our door, in our house, and everywhere they led us. We could tell many more stories about that time. From that moment, they took the lead. There would be no turning back.

But of course the reality of running the students’ home interfered with the welcome offered to the poor, and things could not go on like this. The buildings themselves could not accommodate it, and a few neighbouring families started to worry. We handed it all over to the Lord, and invoked the Holy Spirit together. In the fraternal and prayerful discussion that followed, the next stage took shape.

This first “head-on” and cordial encounter with the poor, this joining of the fight against evil and death in the darkness of night, were

leading us to a second call: a call to conversion, to faith, to belief in the Gospel, to union with Jesus in his Passion and his Cross, which are victorious over every evil and even death itself. We had to remain in prayer at the feet of the Cross of Jesus.

Vézelay 1974

In August 1974, we went on retreat to Vézelay, at the bottom of the hill, in a small Franciscan hermitage called *La Cordelle*. In 1217, this place had welcomed a few of the first companions of Saint Francis of Assisi, among whom was Brother Pacificus. They had come to live and preach the Gospel. And in our day, their brethren welcomed nine little Dominican sisters from Paris. We wanted to listen to the Word of God in this place full of silence and light, where the Gospel had taken root so strongly. The retreat was preached by Brother Jean-Claude, a Franciscan. It was a decisive encounter. This brother of Saint Francis shared the same desire as us: prayer, a passion for the Gospel, a desire to become totally one with Jesus, the need to proclaim, like Jesus, the Good News to the poor.

You know, a story is told about a meeting that took place one day between Saints Francis and Dominic, who ended by embracing each other... Both Francis and Dominic were poor for Christ, beggars for him. No-one has forgotten that Saint Francis had wed “Lady Poverty”, yes, everyone knows him as the *poverello*; but who remembers that Dominic also imitated Christ’s own poverty?² The grace of this encounter between the two Saints was reaching down as far as ourselves.³ Our story from now on would include the friendship that once united our fathers Saint Dominic and Saint Francis.

² Cf. Early texts of the Dominican order, and in particular the Pontifical Bulls that confirm the Order.

³ Historians can demonstrate nowadays the importance that St Dominic gave it in the establishment of his own charism.

During this retreat, a prayer of petition kept coming back, summing up all our other prayers: “Give us, Lord, the gift of the impossible poverty of your Gospel!” At the end of the retreat, no other prayer remained. We were not able to invent the smallest human means or strategy to enable us to live the Gospel in the footsteps of Saint Dominic, no community thought had been put down, no project had been planned: there was nothing except an immense hope, a renewed gift of our lives, and we were sure that God would provide.

When we were about to disperse, and each little sister was going away for her annual period of solitude, two little sisters still remained for a few hours more in Vézelay. Then, a very small event took place. A Franciscan brother, happy to find the two little sisters still there, flung out a remark that seemed a simple jest: “If you want to live as the poor do, there is in the village a small house that someone is ready to lend to you for a few months!”

Back in Paris, everyone in the community saw, in this offer of a little house in Vézelay, a sign given in answer to our prayer. We had to go. The young university students also recognised in this a sign from God. God’s signs are often very small, and furthermore, the unknown awaited us, and this was just the way the Lord liked to act!

“Leave your country and your kindred for a country that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). “Go, sell what you own, give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mark 10:21). Yes, the time had come for us to leave everything once more, the university environment, Paris, the poor also, in order to follow Jesus and Jesus alone, poor and crucified. We had to go “into the desert”, in order to be sent again in God’s own time.

Two sisters were sent to Vézelay, an older sister and I. Sister Jean-Paul, o.p., who was then the provincial superior, confirmed this mission with a prophetic word: “In order to know whether something

comes from the Holy Spirit, we must do it!” We left “without gold or silver” in order to live in prayer and poverty.

At the beginning of November 1974, Vézelay welcomed us, and each morning its basilica was full of the Saviour’s light, “the rising sun which comes to visit us” (cf. Luke 1: 78), and inhabited by the presence of Saint Mary Magdalen. We entrusted to her intercession all those we had met during our night visits and began to follow her schooling, “sitting at the Lord’s feet” and listening to his Word (cf. Luke 10:39), with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who “kept all those things in her heart”.

Living in Vézelay allowed us to see Brother Jean-Claude again. He was our spiritual father at first, but then the Lord later gave him to us in order to found the Community of the Lamb. Father Christoph Schönborn and Brother Jean-Claude themselves give an account of these first days in Vézelay. Let us listen to them.

Brother Jean-Claude recounts: “On All Saints’ Day 1974, in Vézelay, I found myself in a very small house which was very poor: there Father Christoph Schönborn entrusted the Lord’s Eucharistic presence to little sister Marie and little sister Reginald. That was the beginning of the Community of the Lamb, but we did not know it yet. During the previous days, both Brother Michel Hubaut, o.f.m., the parish priest, and I, had been getting that little house ready. The whole story was already present in embryo... It is good to keep this in mind in order not to lose anything of God’s gift.

“It is the Lord!” (John 21:7). On the first day, Jesus took possession of this place, He was the only Master, the Friend, the Bridegroom, the Lamb. Putting the Blessed Sacrament in this place would constitute from then on the point of departure, the basis, the first seed, the only reference point.

“I no longer call you servants, but friends” (John 15:15). Yes, it was friendship that joined us together: Marie and her sisters, Father

Christoph, the two Franciscans... and this was only the start of the marvels brought about by the phrase “Love one another as I have loved you” (cf. John 13:34), which had been so clearly indicated at the beginning.

A house of prayer now functioned right in the middle of the village, far from large towns, but among people. They called it Saint Dominic’s hermitage – and indeed, during the first nine months, little sister Marie lived there all on her own. It was a place of retreat, of solitude, dedicated to praise and intercession, to solitary prayer, to the liturgy, which would gradually increase, to study, to the keeping and transmission of the Word of God.

“Blessed are the poor” (Matthew 5:3). It was a very poor little house, which reflected the first of the Beatitudes. Together, we prayed: “Lord, give us the gift of the impossible poverty of your Gospel!” A while later, begging and wandering inevitably flowered out of that mystery of evangelical poverty.”

“As for me, I am still astonished”, says Father Christoph, “to have been the privileged witness of these first hours when, by accompanying you to Vézelay, I celebrated the first Eucharist and left the presence of Jesus to little sisters Reginald and Marie, so that they could adore him in that very poor little house, such as were loved by our father Saint Dominic. I read the Gospel of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). Of course, I preached on this subject, as everyone remembers. It was the first of November 1974, All Saints Day. I remember my mother’s words - she was with me on that day – as we left our two sisters who were remaining there with Jesus: “You are leaving them... in that poverty!” I believed, as they did also, that they were “blessed”.... Yes, filled with that joy that no-one can take away from us when we discover that it is possible to leave everything for Jesus, and that the Lord works it out in our lives.”

Our two little sisters remained there together for two months, after which the Paris community called for help, and asked little sister Reginald to go back. For little sister Marie, it was the hour of Saint Dominic's hermitage.

Nine months in the hermitage

From the first moment when I found myself alone in that house, still surprised at this situation and unconsciously wanting to be distracted from it, I thought of busying myself with cleaning tasks, but an interior voice told me that if I did not begin with prayer, the whole story would no doubt come to a halt right there.

It was in very early January, perhaps on the 3rd. On an icy morning at 7 o'clock, I walked up to the basilica: "I promise, Lord, with you grace, to remain before the Blessed Sacrament for an hour, and – following the advice of the desert Fathers – I will stay two minutes more!" Even if the loneliness and the cold violently tempted me to shorten that period of time, I sensed that these small gestures of fidelity were preparing me for the future which was still completely unknown to me. During the time of prayer, I kept on, like a studious child, with the continuous recitation of the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus, Son of the Living God, have pity on me, a sinner."

How good and gentle is this prayer for the poor person who is alone and feels lost! But experience has shown that this stripping is necessary for the coming of the Lord in our hearts. And the Lord did not resist this repeated cry of the poor one who was imploring his mercy and pity. The Father always sends his Son, the Word who is made flesh in the heart of the poor (cf. John 1:14), the Saviour of all mankind. On this winter morning, during the two minutes added to the hour of prayer, the Father sent his Son, the Word made flesh for me. Today I can say that this was "from the heart of the Trinity, Bethlehem, the first stone of this small foundation whose existence I still was not aware of!"

The pilgrim

As I was leaving the basilica, another small event took place. On this icy day, each inhabitant had remained at home, yet I heard someone call me: “Sister, sister!” A man was there who seemed to have come from faraway Russia... He held out a ten-franc note: “Here, sister, it’s for your community!” This sentence, uttered in those first hours of solitude, found me quite empty and sheepish, and of course I answered him: “But I am alone!” I pronounced those words with the insistence of one who submits to the reality of a situation, and even with a few tears in my eyes. He answered: “There will be a community!”, and then left.

The following year, that man came back, saw the first little sisters, and declared himself happy: “There is a community!” And he went on his way. When we have no projects, the Lord reveals his plans in the smallest events of our humble daily life.

My solitude did not last very long, around two months only; then the young people from Paris and also some poor people came to spend weekends, seeking the bread of the Word of God. They wanted to celebrate the liturgy, to adore the Lord in his Eucharist, to study the Word of God... I tried with them to face these demands, to respond to their requests, to cook also, etc. I was still alone, but less and less a hermit! In those days I still had to do some work in order to earn enough to live on. Everything became more intense as the weeks and months went by. I had to ask my sisters in Paris: “What must I do?” My mission here was above all one of prayer, however my activities, almost my obligations now, kept multiplying. My sisters, in the light of the Gospel and the fervour of the Holy Spirit, gave this advice: “Leave your job, we’ll see!” It was my first step towards a life that would become completely abandoned to divine Providence, in order to be entirely consecrated to prayer and the proclamation of the Word of God.

Return to the sources in the spirit of Vatican II

During that time, I was asked to study the Latin texts which explain the original and primitive charism of the Order of Preachers. Thus, we were invited to return to “the founders’ sources” as Vatican II had requested. It was an overwhelming grace to experience the coincidence between the recent abandonment to divine Providence and what the texts were showing. The charism of Saint Dominic was unveiled, and expressed startlingly and succinctly: to preach the Gospel while being totally united with the Suffering Servant, “imitating the poverty of the poor Christ”, becoming a beggar every day in order to reveal the begging Love of God who goes as far as offering himself up as a sacrifice; in one word, becoming a beggar in order to reveal the Lamb of God to the world: “This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1: 29), all the evil of the world.

These texts revealed the experience of our father Saint Dominic, when he prayed at night. He contemplated the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus’ pierced Heart allows us to perceive the Father’s begging Love, awaiting the lost sheep whom the Son is seeking, He, the Envoy of Mercy. This light emanating from begging Love transfigured our father Saint Dominic hour by hour... into the image of the suffering *Servant*, whose features he was acquiring. A poor beggar, there he was, in every place, preaching a Christ who was poor and despised.

God, in his Providence, was leading us through a succession of small events, in the footsteps of Saint Dominic, to follow Jesus. These texts were throwing light on the gift that God was giving us every day, and meditating them became for us a thanksgiving. Everything that we had been living was becoming clear: an evangelical life, such

as Dominic wanted it, had just been given to us: simple, and with the taste of water from a living fountain.

And as always, God's gift was embedded within humble daily life.

August 1975

First begging experience on the road

I was still living alone in Vézelay, and had to go and meet my sisters in Aubrac for a retreat where we would continue to meditate the early texts of the Order of Preachers. One of the students, who had started his professional career, said: "It would be a logical step to take if, faithful to everything that we have lived and prayed through these last years, you were to leave tomorrow 'without gold or silver'..." To my great surprise, Brother Jean-Claude blessed me and let me set off alone on the road 'without gold or silver', walking, praying, and of course, thumbing lifts.

On 14 August, at 9:00 in the morning, I was standing before the *Golden Lion* in Vézelay, thumbing a lift. Two successive cars brought me as far as Clermont-Ferrand. It was noon. I had to cross the town. I reached the other side of town. It was hot, I was walking, and felt thirsty and hungry. Would I dare to beg for, oh!, a glass of water? A woman was returning home. I asked her for a glass of water. I went up the stairs with her, and her gesture indicated that I should remain on the doorstep; I was thinking of all my brethren who are beggars and who do remain on the doorstep, and thinking of Jesus. The woman returned and offered me a glass of water. When I gave it back, I dared to ask for a piece of bread. Her face changed: I think at last she realised that I had nothing, absolutely nothing. So she went and came back with a piece of bread, an orange, a banana and a piece of cheese in a small box, called... 'Caprice of the gods'! I thanked her discreetly. Maybe she was aware of my beating heart, she had a kind look on her face in spite of her silence.

I ate this 'daily bread' while setting off on the road to Issoire. Just as I was finishing, a lorry driver stopped: "What's that uniform?" he asked. Climbing in, I had to shout louder than the music he was playing: "I am a nun!" "There is something I can't accept in the Church: the vow of chastity!", he said. And the conversation started: he was faithful to his wife... while at home! But on the road...well, he was a long-distance driver! And so, of course, there were a number of adventures... but slowly, the tone changed. He was the same age as me, he had taken part in the war in Algeria, he was 'happy', he said, to have killed people. I opened the New Testament which was in my hand. "What are you doing?", said he, "is it a bible? Ah! I have one too, someone gave it to me, I think one day I'll read it, I'm curious to know." I strongly encouraged him to do so, and suggested I should read a passage to him. "If you want to, go on!", he said. I read the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Blessed are the gentle... Blessed are those who mourn..." After a moment of silence, he said: "It's beautiful!" Just now he had told me that he had taken part in the Algerian war and that he was 'happy' to have killed. 'Blessed', yes, blessed were you who were letting yourself be changed by the word of God, through the encounter with a little sister who was also being changed together with you. "I'm hungry!", said he suddenly. He stopped the lorry in front of a bakery and came back with two large baguettes: "There, one for you and one for me!" I could only say a fraternal 'thank you', as there were so many things jostling in my heart: it was enough for one to beg for some help, for a murderer to be reborn as a child of God. The dialogue continued and we became friends: he made a forty-kilometre detour in order to get me further along the way.

The next people to take me were a couple and their eight-year-old child. Happy to be taking a 'sister' on board, they talked about the Lord, and even started to pray the Rosary for their grandfather who had just died. At the third decade, I stopped, incapacitated by one of those bad migraines that got me about three times a year. I told them

that I would continue silently because of the migraine. The lady wanted to give me some aspirin, but I explained that nothing would touch it, except a specific strong remedy that I just didn't have. She suggested stopping at a chemist's. I tried to resist, and admitted to her that I had no money. I added: "I must not be a nuisance to you, I deliberately decided to travel in this way." "But sister, may I not also practice what the Gospel teaches?" There was nothing else to say. We stopped at a chemist's. The lady gave me her purse. I went in and asked for the "miracle drug". The pharmacist replied: "Sister, without a prescription, it's impossible!". I explained that I was on the road, that I had a bad migraine, that I could not go on...and it occurred to me to ask for a glass of water and a pill. The pharmacist went to fetch it and gave me one, then closed the tube of pills, checked if anyone was looking, put the full tube in my hand, and fled. I did not have a chance to thank her. I had the medicine I had asked for, without a prescription, and furthermore, I had not paid for it! The pharmacist did not know that the purse was not mine. I went back and gave the purse to the couple in the car. So they also came to understand that God takes care of us. Yes, even in 'impossible' and 'unreasonable' things, even to provide a medicine which required a prescription!

Another car brought me as far as Aubrac itself. From there, only sixteen kilometres remained. It was only 6: p.m., and I decided to take my time and wait for the headache to abate somewhat. I leaned against a low wall by the side of the road, without making any sign for a lift. With hands joined together and against my heart, I prayed. At the moment when I was blessing the Lord for everything he had done for me, two little girls of seven and eight years of age ran towards me with a good strong staff cut out of a straight branch, just the right length for me. "Here, take this!", they insisted, and ran away. To me, it was the latest sign of heaven's delicate protection, which was encouraging me to finish the day's travel leaning on a staff. It filled my heart with joy, with peace, with gentle sweetness. The two children had disappeared like two little angels. A kind woman came along: "Go on, sister, you must make a thumbing

sign!” and she did it for me, but it didn’t work and no-one stopped! “Right! I’m going to get my husband!”, she said. Her husband came with a friend of his and drove me to my destination, where I found my brothers and sisters.

The following day, we were all studying the texts of the beginning of the Order, and a brother who did not know about the end of my previous day’s journey, or about the children with the staff, said: “For the first brethren, the staff held in their hand as they went along the road seemed a symbol of the presence of Mary!...” I think I cried softly, blessing and praising God peacefully.

“Lord, if you want, lead us from now on, without gold or silver, along your roads, so that we may follow you together with Mary!” That was the morning of the feast of the Assumption, 15 August 1975. Of course She had been there at the end of that journey, which was the prelude of so many others...

Night of 13 to 14 September 1975

“In his own flesh, He destroyed the enmity”

At the end of that retreat, we learnt that two older little sisters would be sent to Vézelay. Little sister Reginald would be coming back, with little sister Christine. The hermit life would end, and a life of fraternity would take its place. This was on 13 September 1975. The following day was the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and we found ourselves all together for the vigil of the feast. The Lord inspired us to spend the whole night praying in Eucharistic adoration. As the hours fled, the cry in my heart, which had become more intense during the battle against evil perceived in the night, in darkness, in the proximity of the poor crushed by suffering, this cry kept returning: “Why, Lord, why does evil seem to be winning everywhere? Help us, Lord, to radiate your love, the victory of your

love. Why, Lord?” The contemplation of the Cross sent us back also to our own violence and hatred: “Lord, have mercy!”

Then, in the middle of the night, this sentence of St Paul’s arose in my heart: “In his own flesh, Christ destroyed the enmity, in his own person, he killed hatred!” (cf. Ephesians 2:13-19). This Word, victorious over every kind of darkness, illuminates our night; the pierced heart of Jesus pours out onto the world the divine tenderness which destroys every hatred, and the Love which is stronger than death.

This is the Lamb of God
who takes away the sins of the world,
all the evil of the world.

Lamb of God,
who takes away the sins of the world,
grant us peace!

The Community of the Lamb had just been born into the light of the mystery of the Lamb. With time, that grace would become incarnate in humble daily life, with the practice of what would become the motto of the Community: “Wounded, I shall never cease loving.”

Let us also remember that our father Saint Dominic used to like to affix the seal of the Lamb on the letters he wrote. And then one day, he replaced it with the image of a friar preacher, with a staff in his hand. The substitution of one for the other is worth pondering. The preachers were entrusted with unveiling to mankind the Lamb, the vulnerable love of our God. Unarmed and begging, vulnerable and poor, we must proclaim “by word and example”⁴ the love of our

⁴ “The Order of Preachers is charged with travelling the world in order to evangelise it by word and example.” Constantine of Orvieto, quoted in *Dominic and his Brethren*, by M.H. Vicaire, o.p.

God who made himself poor, begging for our love. In our own flesh, in our own persons...

The nine months of life as a hermit which had begun in the light of Bethlehem were ending in the light of the Glorious Cross.

From the Lamb of Bethlehem,
Word made flesh,
to the Lamb of the Glorious Cross,
who takes away the sins of the world,
and pours out on mankind his peace
and his divine tenderness
in the consolation of the Spirit...

The road we had to travel to follow Jesus was clearly marked, and we had to walk it with loving steps with the Virgin Mary, within the heart of the Church.

A Community at the heart of the Church: 1982-1983

Soon other sisters, and then some young women, joined the first three little sisters. In 1982, the Mother General of our Congregation called me to say: "What you are living is something new, you must have the courage to make a new foundation." In reality, we were giving birth to a new community within the Dominican family. We had to found it within the Church. But which bishop would be willing to receive, under the protection of his episcopal staff, this very small newly born flock? We asked the Blessed Virgin. And so, little sister Marie and I took to the road and went to Lourdes as pilgrims to beg from the Virgin Mary a bishop "who would be a father, a brother, a friend".

After many days, we entered the town on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, on 11 February 1982. We were hastening to the grotto,

when suddenly the beep of a car rang out. A long-standing friend, who lived in the area, came out of the car: “What are you doing here?”, he exclaimed. We told him briefly about our errand. “I know who is this bishop you are seeking”, he said, “and so it must be for this reason that I have driven to Lourdes. This morning, I was literally pushed to the wheel and in my heart, I constantly heard: ‘Father Jean in Lourdes!’ Yes, for you, it is Father Jean Chabbert, the archbishop of Rabat in Morocco!”

It is true that we had met this bishop a year earlier during the Eucharistic Congress in Lourdes. We had spoken with him from the heart about what we were living. But Morocco! For a foundation of the Church! We simply could not consider it at the very beginning! Our friend, though, knew that Father Jean Chabbert was about to return to France, and proposed calling him at the archbishop’s residence in Rabat. Then and there, too! It would be a sign if he himself were to answer. We called. Father Jean did indeed answer and yes, he was willing to welcome the small community in his new diocese as soon as he arrived.

Later, recalling this date of 11 February 1982, Father Jean confided to us that he had asked the Virgin Mary the grace of remaining mentally all day in prayer at the grotto. A few months later, the nomination became official: Bishop Jean Chabbert was being sent to Perpignan.

All twelve of us little sisters arrived in Perpignan on 23 January 1983, on the feast of St Thomas Aquinas. We found a house at number 33, Joseph-Denis Street, in the St James’ neighbourhood, which was poor and populated by gypsy and North African families, just two steps away from the bishop’s residence. Already, two “watchers”⁵ had taken part unofficially in this foundation. They would become the first little brothers of the Lamb.

⁵ This is the term we use to indicate those who come closer to a religious community in order to discern their vocation.

On 6 February 1983, Mgr Jean Chabbert, archbishop of Perpignan, recognised the Community of the Lamb officially as a new foundation within the Church. On 16 July of the same year, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Father Vincent Couesnongle, who was then Master of the Order, recognised the Community as “a new branch born on to the trunk of the Order of Preachers”. He wrote this to us: “And since one likes to share out one’s riches among brothers and sisters, I declare that from now on, you do participate in the merits of the Order which itself, like Saint Dominic in the days of Prouilhe, already feels enriched by your prayers and the witness of your lives. In this communion and under the protection of Our Lady of Contemplation, I bless you in the name of Saint Dominic.”

Again, on 8 August 1990, feast of Saint Dominic, Father Jean welcomed the little brothers officially within the Church. Then, on 22 November 1999, Father Timothy Radcliffe, o.p., Master of the Order, recognised the little brothers “as being part of the Dominican family.” Two years later, his successor, Fr Carlos Aspiroz, o.p., confirmed this welcome.

Today’s Community

Today, the Community of the Lamb includes 120 little sisters and about 30 little brothers from many countries. In 1996, Father Jean Chabbert retired and passed the responsibility for us onto Fr Christoph Schönborn who, since 29 June 1996, has become our bishop. Little sisters, little brothers... later also families, young people, and even some diocesan priests wished to live “the mystery of the Lamb” in their daily life. They undertook a commitment within the *family of the Lamb*, each of them remaining where God had planted them.

The Community has spread to Europe, to Latin America, to the United States. Fraternities, set as “simple *pied-à-terre*, poor among

the poorest”⁶, are found within large towns. The Church establishes us as communities living among the poor so that between them and us there should only exist “one heart and one soul”. Among them, we learn that we are all poor sinners, begging for Love, brethren living in solidarity with all human beings in their poverty and misery, and that there exists only one land where our religious life may flower: God’s own mercy⁷.

Hidden among the hills of the region of the Aude, a few kilometres away from Fanjeaux where Saint Dominic lived for ten years, is found Saint-Pierre, a privileged place for the whole Community, where contemplative life and fraternal living are learnt.

Some “small monasteries of the Lamb” are also built in the silence and solitude of the countryside, like in Choron in Poland, and even in cities, like in Granada and in Madrid in Spain, in Santiago de Chile, and in Northern France in Béthune. There, “in that desert, we must remain near to the Lord, with great compassion, contemplating the Suffering Servant and interceding for the whole world”⁸

In all these areas where we live, whether in the town or the “desert”, “we like to celebrate with all our heart the glory of God and his love for all mankind”⁹. In the beauty of an ample liturgy, we let ourselves be created anew by the Word of God. And once the Word has been drawn in, studied, endlessly meditated day and night, it becomes like a little stream, the prayer of the pilgrim: a perpetual prayer... a small stream whose waters overflow.

Already, the pilgrim’s heart is burning, for “nothing is impossible to God who leads him everywhere and always, through fields and along

⁶ Extracted from the mission statement of the Community of the Lamb, p. 72. A fraternity is a small group of little sisters who are sent to live in common, and with an intention of charity. Fraternities of little brothers also exist.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 44,50,51.

⁸ *Ibid.* p.34.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.38.

the road. He may go to the ends of the world, but from now on he will only speak with God or about God, praying without ceasing, always seeking the lost sheep”¹⁰.

Like the Poor One, like the Beggar, like the Pilgrim, like the Lamb, we, little sisters and little brothers, are being sent to the field of the world, in order to scatter God’s joy everywhere and to proclaim the Gospel to all Creation (cf. *Mark* 16:15).

¹⁰ *Ibid* p.38.

