

HOMILY FOR BLESSED DOMINIC BARBERI MASS
St Anne and Blessed Dominic Barberi, Sutton, St Helens
Monday 28th August 2017

I am sure that the historical account of Blessed Dominic's life, and his role in the conversion of John Henry Newman to the Catholic faith, are, already very well known to you all. What struck me when contemplating the readings for today's Mass and reflecting on Blessed Dominic's mission was the relevance of his message not just for the Church of his era but also its pertinence to the effective evangelisation of our country in our own time.

During his pontificate, Pope St John Paul II presented the Church with a challenge: "*Look to the future with commitment to a New Evangelization*" he said, "*...one that is new in its ardour, new in its methods, and new in its expression*". This challenge was already very much a reality in the mind heart and heart of Blessed Dominic, a shepherd boy born near Viterbo in 1792, who dreamed of joining the Passionist Order and of one day going to England to pray and work for the conversion of its people back to the Catholic Faith. His dream became a reality when, one hundred and seventy five years ago this year, he established the first Passionist house here in England in 1842. His desire to pray and work for the conversion of England, has earned him the title, alongside that of Pope St Gregory the Great, of 'The Apostle of England'.

But how was Blessed Dominic's mission and ministry in England, "*new in its ardour, new in its methods, and new in its expression*"?

In the reading that we heard from the First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, strikingly presents the language of Christ's passion and cross as the language most effective in communicating the power and wisdom of God. As a member of the Passionist Order, Blessed Dominic had a great love for the Passion of Jesus Christ, particularly the sacrifice of Christ's life upon the Cross, or as the founder of the Order, St Paul of the Cross, described it, "*the greatest and most overwhelming act of God's love*".

This Passionist spirituality schooled Dominic in the ability to see the face of the suffering Christ wherever humanity suffers, and to respond to this in love and mercy. It was his earnest desire to reveal the face of Christ by trying to live a life in imitation of his Lord and sharing in the Passion of His Master.

Four years before his conversion to the Catholic faith, Newman wrote this in a letter to a friend, *“If they [Catholic religious] want to convert England let them go barefooted into our manufacturing towns-let them preach to the people like St Francis Xavier - let them be pelted and trampled on - and I will admit that they can do what we cannot...What a day it will be when God will make arise among their Communion saintly men”*. Newman goes on to say that the hearts of men and women are not won over by cleverness, *“...only faith and sanctity are irresistible”* he said.

In the same year that Newman wrote that letter, Dominic Barberi was to arrive in England. Dominic lived out this demand of John Henry Newman. In his own way, Dominic patiently shared in the Passion of Christ. When he first established his Passionist mission in England, as you know, he endured ridicule and even physical assault in the streets. Yet, in all that he endured, he offered his sufferings as an act of love for those who persecuted him. After Dominic’s death, Newman recalled the vivid impression that this ‘Apostle of England’ had made on him: *“Father Dominic was a marvelous missionary and preacher filled with zeal. He had a great part in my own conversion and in that of others. His very look had about it something holy. When his form came within sight, I was moved to the depths in the strangest way. The joyfulness and affability of his manner in the midst of all his sanctity was in itself a holy sermon.”*

Blessed Dominic’s example first and foremost represents a call to holiness. That account of Dominic by Newman vividly reminds us that it is holiness and authenticity in the life of faith which attracts; it is that which people strive and long for. Those who wish to give witness to Christ, to evangelise, must therefore, like Blessed Dominic Barberi, be convinced of the effectiveness of personal holiness for the foundation and the work of evangelisation. Outward visible witness is important, yes, but it is authentic only if it is grounded in what is inward and invisible in a person’s life of faith.

People are able to hear the message of Christ and encounter Christ in the Christian witness of one who is humble and prayerful, joyful and warm, merciful and kind, and who gives selflessly of themselves in their service of others. This was the witness given by Blessed Dominic. This is why, all our efforts for the new evangelisation must, like Blessed Dominic’s, be superimposed on a life of prayer and penance.

This was the ‘new method’ of Blessed Dominic’s evangelisation, the intense call to personal holiness. Dominic knew, as have so many holy men and women throughout the history of the Church; that the renewal of faith and the work of evangelisation

must first begin with the personal conversion and the desire for holiness in each member of the Church. It is 'new' in every age because it finds its new and fresh expression in the lives of those in each generation who, like Blessed Dominic, follow the radical call to holiness.

In our Gospel reading today, St John presents to us the third and last part of the Priestly Prayer of Jesus, in which He looks toward the future and manifests His great desire for the unity of His disciples. Jesus extends the horizon and prays to the Father: *"Holy Father, I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in me. May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me and that I have loved them as much as you loved me."*

This prayer should be especially dear to us because it is Christ's prayer for us; it is Christ's prayer for the Church in every age and for its work of evangelisation: *"Holy Father, I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in me"*. His prayer is that all those who are to follow Him will remain in the love which unifies, not as an end in itself but as a witness to the world: *"May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me"*.

Blessed Dominic Barberi recognised that the face of Christ would be more readily seen by the world if all those who professed the name of Christian lived out in their own lives that love which unifies. He knew that one of the greatest obstacles to the effective evangelisation of the world is the lack of unity among Christians. This is why his desire to restore all things in Christ was so strong and perhaps why Dominic has also been called the 'Apostle of Unity'.

Blessed Dominic won over people and drew them into a love of Christ and into the unity of the Catholic Church not through his persuasiveness or intellectual argument, not as St Paul said "in the terms of philosophy" or "human wisdom", but because he so clearly and evidently loved the people to whom he was sent. His love radiated the love of His crucified Saviour. This was the love that is at the heart of the Trinity, the Love which is God. Blessed Dominic's love, his passion, his ardour, radiated the very love of Christ. This was the 'new ardour' of his evangelisation –

not 'new' because it was 'novel' but because the love of Christ is made 'new' each day in the love which is lived and made manifest by his disciples in every age, particularly in the love and the care which they show to the poor, the vulnerable and those who find themselves alone in the margins of our communities. It is a love which, as St Paul said, speaks in the language of the cross.

In his work on the 'Second Spring' of Catholicism in England, the Jesuit writer, Fr John Brodrick said this of Dominic Barberi's arrival in our land: *"The second spring did not begin when Newman was converted nor when the hierarchy was restored. It began on a bleak October day of 1841, when a little Italian priest in comical attire shuffled down a ship's gangway at Folkstone."*

If we, the members of the Church of today, are to engage fully in the challenge put to us in the evangelisation of our society today and to cultivate a new spring for the Catholic faith in our land, we would do well to pay attention to the new ardour, the new methods, and the new expression we find in the mission and ministry of Blessed Dominic Barberi of the Mother of God.

I pray that through the powerful intercession of Mary the Mother of God and Queen of Apostles, we will be drawn ever closer to Christ her son and, like Blessed Dominic, always seek to grow in holiness, love ardently and live in unity, so that the world may come to know and believe in the one true God, and in Jesus Christ whom He has sent. Amen.

Blessed Dominic Barberi...Pray for us!

✠ Marcus Stock
Bishop of Leeds