

## Sr Diane – a gift to all of us

*Homily preached by Fr Clyde M. Harvey at the Funeral Mass for Sr. Diane Marlene Jagdeo OP, March 26, at Holy Name Convent Chapel*

Today we gather to give thanks. Thanks to God for the life and death of Diane Marlene Jagdeo, Dominican Sister of St Catherine of Siena of Etrepagny. Thanks to Diane herself for the gift she made of herself to God and to all of us. Thanks to her family for allowing her to make of herself a gift to the Church. Family meant a lot to her. We both came to realise that sharing the joys and sorrows of one's family became a major asset in one's own spiritual development and a rich theological source. Thanks to the Congregation for allowing her to become one of their great gifts to the diocese and to the wider Caribbean Church. O what a gift! What a wonderful gift! We have seen the wonders of the Lord.

I was not particularly enthused when I was asked to preach at this liturgy of resurrection and farewell. I was approaching it with some apprehension. Then this morning at 4.00 a.m., after being fairly clear about what I wanted to say, I opened a book that Sr Monique had given me two days ago. In it I found a letter that Diane had written, addressed to "all my Dominican brothers and sisters". I knew then that the best thing I could do was to take the risk beyond the liturgical norms and let Diane speak for herself. (The letter is found in *Building Bridges*, Dominican Publications, Dublin, 2005)

"To All My Dominican Sisters and Brothers Greetings!

My experience of doing theology is obviously shaped from where I live and experience life and share faith. Thus, I share with you my story of doing theology from a Caribbean experience.

It was in a small country (Trinidad), in a little Dominican convent and in its tiny library, I believe that my theological vocation leapt into awareness. Perhaps it was planted within me from my youth when my parents gathered us for night prayer and I listened to and read the Word of God. Perhaps it took root when that inner search for truth led me to the Catholic Church as a teenager. But, what I do know is that this tiny seed stirred and moved within me as I was introduced to Spiritual Reading by my novice mistress. This exercise opened me up to a world of yet unimagined possibilities in my relationship with God, with others, and with the whole of creation. Here was born my consciousness of the inner meaning of my vocation as a Dominican sister. I see my theological vocation simply as the inner dimension of my Dominican vocation, in fact, of every Dominican vocation. It is what makes us real Dominicans, for whatever we do, be it teach, nurse, care for children, water plants, is, in fact, doing theology. Since I do not leave my centre behind, theology gives shape and inwardness to all I do.

My sense of being a theologian is synonymous with my search for truth, and in my search for truth I am like the woman in the Gospel who, having lost her small drachma, diligently searches until she finds it. In my case, however, it is like losing, finding, securing and losing over and over again. Truth seems always to be playing 'hide and seek' with me! '*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans!*' Truth is alluring, for God is alluring. And my vocation as a Dominican and as a theologian is to pursue this alluring God who is Truth. Doing theology is like embarking on an odyssey, and this adventure is taking me into the spaces and places of and within my own Caribbean people. I see my vocation as a theologian as one of exploring and discerning the beauty of life lived in union with God and communion with all beings, calling forth the beauty that lies hidden within the human spirit, within the brokenness and suffering into which most of our lives are plunged. For me then, theology is an art. It is concerned with giving expression to the truth of our life of faith and our faith is cradled in Mystery.

Today, as I reflect upon my theological vocation I am deeply affected by the fears and hopes and deep anguish of our Caribbean people, where hurricane Ivan caused such widespread destruction in some of our Caribbean Islands — Grenada, Haiti, and the Cayman Islands. It sets before our eyes how much ecology is an integral dimension of living and therefore of theology. It is not simply an area of interest for certain theologians and environmentalists. In a matter of hours, before our very eyes, we witnessed a radical shift of centre, from a green earth teeming with life to a devastated land without leaf or life-forms. Such an experience impacts upon the psychological and spiritual lives of people. Devastation and suffering is not simply a question of economics and politics and a loss of

landscape! No doubt, this is also the experience of those living in war-torn countries. It is at the same time a rich context for doing theology, for it raises fundamental questions about life, about meaning, about God, which we take for granted. Healing land and healing lives (ecology and human well-being) seem to me to be the theological agenda for us in the Caribbean

As a trained theologian, I have been teaching courses in systematic theology at our Regional Seminary. However, the more exciting dimension of my vocation has been doing theology within small rural communities. I find this fascination for God so overwhelmingly present in very simple yet such profound ways. Doing theology is an art, and my doing theology is not only about teaching and explaining the faith, but about awakening the theological imagination of people and, through dialogue, strengthening their theological vocation. I believe that every person who desires God is a theologian, and as a partner in dialogue the trained theologian helps to evoke, confirm, and offer guidance in people's growth as theologians and in their search for God. In this encounter, my own theological vocation is constantly being fashioned and refashioned. This is true of my encounter with the children whom I am preparing for Confirmation. It is true also of the young and old men and women in small villages who may not be able to read and write but whose theological mind is so evocative and rich. Wisdom is a fire. And theology keeps it ablaze. The theologian is the stoker of the fire.

While as a trained theologian I read books, and enjoy the fresh insights of other theologians and creative thinkers (Brian Swimme, Thomas Moore), these books are usually written from European and North American perspectives. In a Caribbean context I must 'read' the scripts of the daily lives of people in local communities which force me to see the relevance and irrelevancies of many theological positions, even of my own.

There is definitely an integral connection between doing theology and participation in community, in fact, there is no such thing as theology outside of a shared faith community. I feel privileged to belong to a Dominican sisters' community here in Gran Couva where life and faith are shared. Our daily reflection and sharing on the Gospel and our weekly study are dimensions of our community life, and, together with belonging to a rural neighbourhood, provide stimulating and challenging opportunities for articulating and learning to think theologically. Thus, doing theology and living out our own charism are two sides of one life, a true Dominican life! It is here where 'passion for God and compassion for humanity,' together with the whole of creation, is nurtured. Life and mission are intertwined. We are now beginning to dream about the possibility of some of us, brother and sister and lay Dominicans, coming together to foster the community dimension of our preaching. The dream is to develop a preaching community with a contemplative base.

I live among the 'poor' and share ministry with them. But when 'the' poor' are known by name the idea of 'the poor' disappears. They become my/our friends and neighbours with real names and faces and real needs that are also mine. I do not deny poverty and all its causes and shapes and how they affect people's lives and self-perceptions. But once the befriending begins the tag/label of 'the poor' drops away and caring and sharing among friends in need become the driving force for lobbying to have roads fixed and water for all running through our pipes etc. The term, 'the poor', now seems to me so cold and distant. When I know people, I am embarrassed to refer to them as 'the poor'.

Undoubtedly, women theologians are a special gift to the Church, especially the Caribbean Church as we struggle to shape our lives as a people. Our specific contribution, as I see it, is to help carve a space within the Church so that true and inclusive participation can enable the Church as Communion to become an effective place of encounter for liberation, progress and salvation. The voice and wisdom of women must sound like a trumpet heralding a time of new birth of a Church that has been too clerical, too distant, too 'other', too dry! Caribbean women must bring to the Church their life's flavour of creativity and boldness, daring and enchantment, so that the Church is seen and experienced as a celebratory inclusive community, that life itself in spite of all its darkness and suffering is seen as celebratory. The Church is in essence celebration! It must radiate joy while taking seriously the suffering, pain and trauma which mark our lives both individually and as a people. Is not that celebratory joy the heart of our Dominican charism ?

As I end this sharing, and as I look back on the adventure of doing theology, it seems to me that my study of theology has certainly impacted on my life of prayer and my spirituality as a whole. It is said that theology ends in doxology and that is indeed the real truth of being a theologian; giving myself to the task of studying and teaching theology has indeed shaped my whole life. I understand now, more than ever before, the great truth of the motto of our Order: 'to contemplate and to bring to others the fruit of contemplation'. My Odyssean voyage has brought

me back to the shores of a contemplative lifestyle and I seek to anchor my boat in this harbour. I feel the call, more strongly today than ever before, to be a contemplative itinerant, in a contemplative community anchored outside the cloister and ready to reach out in service to strengthen and nurture faith communities through proclaiming the Word of God. Our Constitutions remind us that our apostolic life must emanate from a life that is imbued with the Word of God.

From all this, it follows that I am a firm believer that all Dominican, brothers, sisters and lay, should pursue formal training in theology so that the indelible mark of being Dominican, wholly given to the preaching of the Word, may grace our world that is threatened, not only by violence but by all forms of religious fundamentalism. *Diane Jagdeo, O.P. (Trinidad and Tobago) is a member of the Congregation of St Catherine of Siena of Etrepagny. For thirty years she has been senior lecturer in systematic theology at the Regional Seminary of St John Vianney, Trinidad. She received the STM from Yale Divinity School and her PhD in systematic theology from the Catholic University of America in 1985.*

A few final comments of my own.

I had been quite excited by the realisation that the Gospel of today was the road to Emmaus. When today was chosen for her funeral that was not on the minds of Sr Thérèse and the decision-makers. Diane must be delighted. The notion of the journey was central to Diane's understanding of spirituality. The journey from slow, confused and frightened minds to burning hearts was very much her journey. From the shyness of a pioneering woman in a seminary classroom to the burning heart of her passion for God, for life, for people, she not only made her own journey but also invited and challenged others to make their own journeys in faith, in risk, in hope, in fellowship. Her own journey brought her from an original, deeply creative encounter with Christ through the Scriptures to a hunger for communion with Him in all creation. She was a great companion on the journey for many of us. For her the journey was not the destination. The road to Emmaus is not Emmaus. The expression in Latin for on the road is "*in via*". It is also one of the expressions used to mean pregnant. In joking about the tumour in her abdomen, she said, "God is more concerned about what is growing in ME than what is growing in my belly". She was pregnant with God and with her truest self. So she continued her questioning of God, her awesome contemplation of the crucified Christ whose suffering she could now identify with. She was scared, yes. She had learnt how to let go in some critical moments on the way. So she would let go now – not to give up, but to experience more deeply. The frightened mind must give way to the burning heart, the desire to grasp and be grasped by the mystery that is God, to allow one's own emptiness to be filled with the fullness of God. In those final weeks, she remembered that Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Order she loved so passionately, had called Psalm 62, the theologian's psalm and she made it her own.

*O God, you are my God, for you I long*

*For you my soul is thirsting.*

*My body pines for you like a dry weary land without water.*

*So I gaze on you in the sanctuary*

*to see your strength and your glory.*

She found that she could not move on glibly to the second stanza. Life still had a lot to teach. In her passion for truth, she could not yet say that "*your love is better than life*" because true life is God's love. Only a real glimpse of heaven could make the second stanza true for her. She asked of God one final gift, that she should be conscious of everything until she breathed her last. He granted it. She was experiencing what she called "clarifications", as her ideas about God, humanity and creation were stripped to their essentials.

When she said to Thérèse on Monday, "I will see God's face before you", then I knew that we could pray:

*For your love is better than life,*

*My lips will speak your praise*

*So I will bless you all my life*

*In your name I will lift up my hands.*

*My soul shall be filled as with a banquet,*

*My mouth shall praise you with joy.*

Face-to-face with God – the goal of religious life, the focus of the theological enterprise, the final Emmaus of Christian faith, hope and love. She walked with us along the way. We delighted in her word. Some of us rejoiced

in her passion. Others were frustrated by it. Now she has reached Emmaus. Let us share in her rejoicing around the table of the Lord.