My New Zealand Experience

By Sr. Marie Constance O.P., Asia / Pacific Continental Coordinator, DSI

In New Zealand was quite strange to me because I had not set my feet there before! However, it seemed special and somehow close to my heart because there are many Dominican Sisters and Brothers living there. Moreover, almost 20 years ago, I had befriended Sr. Margaret Heath (now deceased) and we regularly communicated through mail. For these reasons, I felt that I had to be in New Zealand the 1st chance I got!

After attending the canonization of Saint Marie Alphonsine Danil Ghattas on May 17, I returned to Vietnam to leave for New Zealand on May 19. I met the first Sister, Mary Anna Baird whom I was very pleased to see at Queenstown airport awaiting me with a blue jacket to warm me up from the winter.

Several visits of the sisters and their mission were planned and we started with one of the schools previously owned by the Sisters. It is now under diocesan administration but the Dominican spirituality lives on. I was given the opportunity to speak with the Grade 5 students about Dominican life. Later we went to Invercargill where we visited 5 of our sisters at Calvary Hospital, an assisted living care facility. They awaited our arrival with excitement. After sharing with them about DSI, I happily accepted an invitation despite the high winds and some rain, to visit my friend Sr. Margaret Heath now buried in the cemetery.

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A WORD OF HOPE
The Story of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic, Province of St. Joseph, Norfolk

By Sr. Marjolein Bruinen, Dominican Sisters of Bethany of Thorn

This story actually begins one hundred and fifty-one years ago when, in September 1864, a young Dominican priest, Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P., was sent to preach a spiritual retreat at the women’s prison in Cadillac, France, near Bordeaux. He went there with skepticism and all the preconceived notions pertaining to the incarcerated, which permeated society. He would later confess to a friend, “I entered with considerable embarrassment, persuaded that the undertaking would prove futile.”

During the retreat there was a transformation. Père Lataste was the first to be converted by what he preached, and then the Word of God touched the prisoners’ hearts. During the retreat, Père Lataste kept asking himself, what would happen to these women when they left prison. Society would surely mark and stigmatize them as former prisoners, which would draw them back down that dark road of sin. Who would help them? While praying with the prisoners in front of the Blessed Sacrament, he came up with a radical idea for that time - to found a new religious congregation for women coming out of prison. The answer he proposed was called the House of Bethany. Why Bethany? Père Lataste explained:

The Gospel tells us that at Bethany there lived two sisters: Martha of inviolable virtue and Mary Magdalene who had been a sinner. Jesus loved to come and rest in their home, where one served him and the other listened to his words. He made no distinction between them—or did he…? It is rather Magdalene who is preferred. Martha is surprised and Jesus answers kindly but still gives preference to Magdalene: “You worry and fret about so many things; yet, few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the ‘better part’ and it is not to be taken from her” (Luke 10:41). What was the better part? It was that Magdalene loved more. She who had been a sinner had advanced further in the way of divine love than Martha, the model of virtue. When God loves us and gives us his grace, he does not ask us what we have been; he is only concerned with what we are—not with how far we have fallen, but with how much we love. He judges us only on the strength of our love. Happy are those whose past urges them on to a greater love, and happy those others who, in a sort of rivalry, redouble their own efforts in order not to be left behind.

The congregation that Père Lataste founded with Mère Henri-Dominique would come to be known as the Dominican Sisters of Bethany. From France eventually to the United States, the Dominican Sisters of Bethany would prosper and grow. Père Lataste’s vision for the rehabilitation of prisoners, the rejected, and for all sinners to a new life in God continues to this day. His spirit and vision are alive. They have journeyed across the Atlantic to a prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts. The radical ideals of St. Dominic and Père Lataste continue to spread across the United States and to all corners of the world.

On 1 June 1927, 162 prisoners from the Charlestown State Prison were transferred to Norfolk, Massachusetts. Today, MCI Norfolk is a medium security prison and the largest prison in Massachusetts, housing between 1300 and 1400 prisoners. The Dominican spirit arrived at MCI Norfolk in 1988, when Ruth Raichle was invited to join the chaplaincy team. Raichle had been a member of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany in Millis, Massachusetts, for eight years but left the Order before making her final vows. The sisters have since closed their foundations in the United States and have all returned to Europe. In 1989, Raichle invited Sister Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., to join her in ministry at MCI Norfolk.

In 1992, Raichle and Denevan founded Bethany House Ministries. Its mission was rooted in the spirit of Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P., and in the Gospel. Père Lataste recognized through his work with prisoners that God’s love has the power to heal, transform, and renew
what to many may seem hopeless. A “community” had been emerging in Prison! This gift of God’s goodness to all of us needed to be publicly acknowledged and celebrated; and so, the prison community was blessed and given the name “Bethany”.

Ruth wrote:

“What we, Sr. Kathleen Denevan, and myself, are witnessing at Norfolk Prison is truly God’s Grace. We have tried to re-create a Parish Community within the Prison walls. The Bethany Catholic Community at Norfolk Prison has a Parish Council with 8 inmates. The prisoners themselves take on the roles of Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors, Choir members, and Outreach ministers. They are involved in weekly prayer groups, Scripture Study, and Scripture Sharing, Cursillo weekends, and Cursillo Reunions, Recovery Groups, and discussion groups. Twice a week we have Eucharistic Adoration. Some of the men pray the Office of the Church every day in order to be united with the Church. They take this very seriously. I believe that the establishment of a Dominican Laity Chapter at Norfolk Prison is a powerful source of hope for the men at Norfolk Prison, for the Dominican Order, and for the Church. Fr. Lataste said that the greatest sinners have the potential to become the greatest saints. Sr. Kathleen and myself have given witness to the truth of these words.”

Beginning in early February 1998, nine prisoners, chaplains Raichle and Denevan, and three outside volunteers gathered in the Catholic Office to study and to pray for acceptance into the Dominican Order. The Provincial Council would be meeting on 25 April 1998 in Washington, DC, and decide the fate of the group. While waiting for the decision, the men continued to meet and pray the Divine Office. Finally, on 24 May, Raichle gathered the group together to share the letter on the Council’s vote. Their request was rejected.

On 14 November the group gathered to discuss the execution of Jonathan Wayne Nobles who had been executed in Texas on 7 October 1998. In 1986, Nobles was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. While in prison, Nobles had a conversion experience. He made his final profession into the Dominican Laity in 1991, as a member of the St. Martin de Porres Chapter. On the day of his execution, Jonathan fasted. When it came time for the traditional last meal, he asked only for the Holy Eucharist, ‘Spiritual food for the journey home.’ It’s all that he wanted; it’s all that he would have. That was a profound statement of faith. Noble’s conversion and death would come to have a profound effect on the events leading up to Our Lady of Mercy’s acceptance into the Dominican Laity.

The group’s spirit continued to be lifted when several members received reply letters from the Master of the Order. In those letters, Fr. Radcliffe assured the group of his full support in their gaining acceptance into the Dominican Order. On 27 April 1999, Ruth called all the men in the group to her office. She appeared solemn as they assembled. The men thought the worse. Unable to keep her composure for long, she jubilantly announced, “We’ve been accepted!” Tears of joy and thanksgiving flowed from every eye in the room at the news. On 16 May 1999, nine prisoners, three outside volunteers, and Raichle began their journey with their first postulancy formation. Fr. Radcliffe concluded his letter by stating, “I therefore see the foundation of this new fraternity as not an exception but as the fruit of a long tradition of which the Order is proud, and to which I am happy to give my wholehearted support.”

At the reception Mass, with Fr. Radcliffe held on 7 October 2000, all thirteen novices made their temporary profession while five postulants were received into the novitiate. Nine additional prisoners and one outside volunteer applied for and were accepted into the postulancy phase. In addition, five prisoners shared their desire to aspire to the postulancy the following year.

In his book, Seven Last Words, Fr. Radcliffe would later write about his visit:

“A cross was made by members of the Lay Dominican Fraternity at Norfolk Prison. Most of our brothers there are serving long sentences. Some will never obtain parole. During the General Chapter in Rhode Island, on July 29, 2001, I went to spend some time with them. I thought that I would have to cheer them up but they gave me enormous joy. Among the gifts that they gave me was a statue of St. Dominic carved out of wax, and this cross made of paper. For reasons of security they are not allowed to use more solid materials.

On this cross they have written their names. We do not know the name of the person to whom Jesus promised Paradise as
be hung on the cross. But every day I can see the names of those brothers of mine who endure their own crucifixion. They asked me what might be their vocation as members of the Order of Preachers in this prison. I suggested that they might be preachers of hope. And this is what they are, for those inside and outside the prison. When I left they gave me 200 lovely paper roses, one for each of the members of the General Chapter. That was also a preaching of the gospel, and the sharing of a hope for happiness.”  

Blessing of the new part of the house

15 January 2004, Our Lady of Mercy Chapter spawned a satellite pro-chapter, Bethany House, outside the prison walls. Making the transition from prison back into society can be difficult for many, because they have spent most of their lives separated from the rest of society. They are returning to communities that do not want them, and with a stigma that prevents them from obtaining gainful employment.

In the article, “Can Anything Good Come Out of Norfolk Prison?” a former prisoner wrote, “Something I feared and many others too … that if and when we get out of prison would we lose that which we have at Our Lady of Mercy Norfolk … the people that I love and was loved by in return.”

The Bethany House attempts to ease this transition by providing a place of acceptance for those coming out of prison that have chosen to remain part of the Dominican Family. In the same way as Père Lataste’s Dominican Sisters of Bethany, Bethany House consists of a mix of former prisoners and those coming from “normal” backgrounds. Père Lataste’s spirit and vision are alive today in a medium security prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, where the members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter strive to be a word of hope for others in like situations. It is their hope that Père Lataste’s spirit continues to spread throughout the world.

With their new status, on 24 April 2005, the members unanimously adopted their mission statement: “To strive to enflesh the Gospel, and to illuminate hope in the hearts of all with whom God asks us to share the gift of life we have been given. To teach, that “Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” The members from the outside are a valuable and integral part of the Chapter. As stated earlier, they hold offices that the prisoners, due to their incarceration, cannot fulfill. More than that, however, is the humanity aspect that the volunteers bring to the prisoners—the fact that members of the free society care and believe in their rehabilitation, that they share the same consecrated life.

On 15 October 2006, Our Lady of Mercy Chapter consisted of seventeen perpetually professed members, nine temporary professed, six novices, and seven postulants. Of these, thirty-two were prisoners and seven were from the outside.

Like Père Lataste’s women in Cadillac Prison, the men leaving MCI Norfolk wanted to continue their religious vocation on the outside. In response to their desire, on
The Dominican Sisters of Apostolic Life, who belong to the “Groupement Fraternel” in France and Belgium, were invited by the members of the Bureau of this entity. During their last General Assembly held in Paris on November 20, 2014 Sisters Maria Fabiola, Odette, Marie-Rémi and Marie-Pascale were asked to attend as many celebrations as possible among those planned for the Order’s Eighth Centennial: 1215 – 2015.

To date, we were able to participate in different planned events by the Provinces of France, Toulouse and Belgium held in the various places where the friars are in mission. For instance, on Monday March 2, a large number of us attended the Celebration in memory of the arrival of St Dominic and of his companions in this town where the Dominican Order was born. The celebration was presided by the local Archbishop, Monsignor Le Gall.

Weather it was through the sermon preached by a Dominican Brother or during the Archbishop’s address at the Assembly, all participants demonstrated great joy and profound gratitude for the Charism that St Dominic received in his day and which still live on today within the great «Dominican Family» to which we belong. As members of this Family each one of us is called to share in the same mission to Proclaim the Gospel of Love and of Mercy to the boundaries of the world.

In an atmosphere of silence and prayer, the celebration started with a procession from the atrium of the Church, with the relics of St. Tomas Aquinas which were laid on an altar, while singing Vespers. The Thanksgiving Eucharist was then celebrated and at the end, whoever wished could venerate the relics of our big brother Saint Tomas Aquinas.

During this month of Mary, there are many celebrations. A few of which I will mention: Vigils and the Eucharist of Pentecost, was held in the Church of Jacobins on May 23 and 24.

THANK YOU LORD FOR THESE FRATERNAL SPACES WHICH KEEP US ON TRACK AND FURTHER ROOT US IN OUR DOMINICAN HISTORY.
My New Zealand Experience

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All the Sisters, wherever we went, asked about Sr. Marie Therese who was supposed to be on this trip with me. She was delayed because her visa had not been granted by the time that we were to travel. It was such a moving experience to listen to the sisters’ sharing their concerns for their missions and at the same time expressing great hope in the future since their recent General Chapter. Much of that hope is contained in their Chapter call out of which I quote: “In this time when we are fewer and older, we have unexpectedly found ourselves called to hope. We have opened ourselves to an invitation to see our lives as part of the ongoing mystery of the evolving universe and to place ourselves on the side of its life and protection. We choose to be part of a turning towards life, a future we will not see but for which we sow seeds.” (New Zealand Dominican Sisters – General Chapter, Sep. 27 & Feb. 2-7, 2015).

My visit then took me to our sisters in Dunedin where I met with the Prioress, Sr. Elizabeth Mackie and 17 other sisters. The privilege of meeting Sister Mary Horn and experiencing her artwork was inspiring. Her paintings are described as the exploration of the “spiritual landscape” i.e. the journey we essentially make alone and with others in a paradox of certainty and uncertainty, order and chaos, with continual beginnings and endings. After pondering for a while it was time to move on to Auckland where we met with the Dominican Family. I shared something about DSI on behalf of Sr. Marie Therese and of my experience of the Dominican Charism in my Vietnamese context and as the Coordinator for the Asia Pacific Region.

We ended the visitation at the nursing home of the Little Sisters of the Poor where two of our sisters are in nursing care and a visit to St. Dominic’s School at Blockhouse Bay. I remain inspired by this visit and grateful for my Sisters hospitality in New Zealand.

UPCOMING EVENTS 2015

**JULY 5-12**

DSE - TAIZÉ FOR YOUNG RELIGIOUS

A meeting is announced July 5 - 12 2015 in Taizé (France) for young people in monastic or religious life, reflection on the relevance of religious vocations today, with presentations by Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant orders, monasteries and communities. Contact person: Sr. Franziska Madl OP, franziskaop@hotmail.com

**JULY 13-18**

DSE WORKSHOP ON DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY DSE-CE (Eastern and Central Europe)

They will have their next Dominican spirituality workshop on July 13 - 18, 2015 in Badin, Slovakia. It is organized this time, by the Slovakian Sisters of the Congregation of Blessed Imelda. Younger sisters from the other regions of Europe have been invited to participate. Sr. Lucia Petres OP may be contacted for any related questions or clarifications: Petres.Lucia@gmail.com

**JULY 14-16**

GREAT LAKES MEETING

A meeting of African Dominican Justice and Peace Promoters is slated for July 14 - 16 in Nairobi, Kenya to facilitate joint reflection on how Dominicans can play a bigger role in assisting the Church and other institutions to become more involved in bringing peace to the African region. Five African countries in which there is conflict presently (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda) will be invited to participate in the discussions. DSI’s International Coordinator, International Promoter for JPIC and the Order’s Permanent Delegate to the United Nations and Promoter for Justice & Peace are all expected to participate.
**FORMATION COURSE “TRAINING AND PREACHING”**

This course is organized by CODALC and CIDALC for Friars and Sisters of Latin America and the Caribbean with responsibilities for continuing formation and vocations promotion. It will be held on **August 17 to 29, 2015**, in Lima, Peru. Sr. Viviana Sisack, and Fr. Rafael Colomé will coordinate the programme with input from Fr. Luis Javier Rubio. They are open to responding to any questions or clarifications that you might have coordinadora@codalc.org and efecidalc@gmail.com. DSI’s International Coordinator is expected to be present as she visits sisters of that region.

**SEMINAR FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE OF THE DOMINICAN FAMILY AT THE LEVEL OF THE SOUTHERN CONE**

This Seminar will be held in Brasilia, Brazil on **September 3 to 6, 2015**. The theme will be “Human Rights”. On which the 2015 Latin American Agenda, will be devoted. Dominican Sisters, brothers and the Laity are invited to participate in this Seminar.

**MEETING OF J&P PROMOTORS FROM LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**

The Meeting for J&P Promotors from Latin America and the Caribbean will be held in Brasilia, Brazil on **September 7 to 10, 2015**. The promotors for CODALC and CIDALC from all five zones: (Caribbean, Bolivarian, South Cone, Mexico and Mesoamerica) will be present. Sr. Migdalia Perez, Continental Promoter for Latin America and the Caribbean, Sr. Celestina Veloso, International Promoter for J&P for DSI and Sr. Marie Therese International Coordinator of DSI will also be in attendance.

**CODALC THEOLOGIANS COURSE**

5th Latin American and 3rd Inter-American Meeting of Theologians CODALC. This course will be held in Quito, from **October 27 to 31, 2015**, with the theme: “Moved by the Spirit ... Dialogue from the Theological Hermeneutical practices of Dominican Women”.

Dominican Women specially and others linked to Dominican Communities who have an interest in Theology and who are willing to reflect on their community life are all invited.

**DSI General Assembly 2016**

**DOMINICAN SISTERS INTERNATIONAL**

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