**Difficult conversations**

What does it mean to seek the truth in the age of fake news? There has always been fake news. Just think of early Christian reports of the new religion Islam which projected upon it all our fantasies about the mysterious East.

But fake news has never been so all pervasive and destructive as now. It is undermining our common life.. The antivaccine movement imagines strange plots by governments to control us. The mad Qanon conspiracy theory is sweeping the USA and is now becoming popular even in Europe. It maintains that the world is run by a secret elite of kleptomaniac paedophiles; Michelle Obama is really a man. Trump has refused to deny he is leading resistance to this global conspiracy. Fake news leads directly to violence. This morning I received an email from a certain General Flynn, denying the election of Mr Biden It’s headlined: ‘We are in a battle between good and evil. It is time for God-fearing Americans to fight.’

So fake news leads not just to the propagation of untruths. It subverts society and stokes violence. These examples are from America but similar illusions are spreading throughout Europe as well. The promotion of fake news is actively promoted by foreign government to destabilise Western democracies, especially Russia. France, the nation of reason, has the strongest anti-vaccine movement. Fake news even poisons the life of the Church. Think of Archbishop Viganò’s extraordinary denunciation of Pope Francis, stuffed full of bizarre inventions.

So we Dominicans, with our motto of *Veritas*, have a mission to fulfil. Truth telling in the age of fake news is not just about making accurate, verifiable statements. It is telling the truth in a way that overcomes social fragmentation and violence. How are we to do this?

**Portrait painting**

Let me offer you an image which I find helpful. You may think it is completely nuts. In which case you can sneak off and get a cup of coffee.

When I was a young friar at University I became a friend of a portrait painter called Diccon Swan. He has painted me often, including the portrait which hangs in the Master’s corridor at S Sabina. Alas, it is the worst one he ever did! Maybe the setting was too solemn. A good portrait brings to light the truth of a person. More than most photographs, it reveals who you are. That is why having your portrait painted can be nerve wracking. Winston Churchill hated his portrait by Graham Sutherland. He said that it made him look half-witted and his wife destroyed it. Maybe it revealed too much. So the process of painting a portrait may show something of how we seek the truth in an age of fake news.

There were two distinct moments in sitting for Diccon. A lot of time was spent chatting, perhaps sharing a few glasses of white wine, laughing, telling stories. Perhaps the best portraits are founded on such moments of friendship. Conversation was part of the process whereby he sought to capture to the truth of the subject of the painting. He could only paint my face if we were also relating to each other, face to face.

Conversation was interspersed with Diccon actually painting! He would then come close, paint brush in hand, and look at some part of my anatomy intensely, for example my nose or an ear. He would peer closely and try to capture what it was really like. He had an objective, dispassionate look at me. It is as if after having been related to as a subject in conversation, I needed to become an object to be inspected. Then we talked again and I would become again a subject. The truth of my appearance emerged out this alternation, as both subject and object, addressed and seen. It is only thus that, in the words of Wittgenstein, the face may be seen as ‘the soul of the body.[[1]](#footnote-1)’

Our pursuit of truth today requires both dimensions, the objective and the inter-subjective, the two wings by which we rise upward. Some of us will be better at one or other. This is why we seek the truth together, as a community rather than as solitary seekers. No one has all the skills.

**Peering closely**

Let us begin by looking at the close-up work, the intense peering at my nose or ear. You do not have to actually do that! Truth seeking demands constantly asking the question: But is what you say true? What is the objective meaning of the passage from the Scriptures that I quote? What does the Hebrew or the Greek really mean, not what I would *like* it to mean?

I am working with a member of a fascinating group who are seeking for the real equality of women in the Church. When she quotes Galatians, ‘in Christ there is neither male nor female’,(Galatians 3.28) I ask: But what did Paul mean by that? What light is shed by the other things that he says about men and women? What does the Greek say?

Truthfulness demands humility faced with the Word of God. As Luke says at the beginning of his gospel, we are ‘servants of the Word.’ We owe to the Scriptures what Paul calls in Romans, ‘the obedience of faith.’ We are not the Masters of the Word. We should attend to the scriptures with careful attention, especially when they seem to be saying something with which I disagree. I must not use the Word of God for any cause. That would be to make the Word of god my servant.

When I am preaching, my interest is woken by whatever seems to contradict my assumptions. Whatever jars, or makes me feel uncomfortable. What does Jesus mean when he says that if my eye offends, we must pluck it out? Why aren’t there more one-eyed Christians? We do not value God’s Word because God agrees with us!

So truthfulness demands that we be confronted with the gritty otherness of the text, which is written in a language that is not mine and for a world which in which I have never lived. The word we do not understand is the grit that may produce the pearl in the oyster. We wrestle with the Word of God as Jacob wrestled with the God and limped away wounded. In a sense every good lecture is the fruit of a certain defeat. Because the Word of God has not meant what we expected or wanted, but more than we could have imagined. James Alison wrote a marvellous book called *The Joy of being Wrong*.

I am not a real Biblical scholar, so I need scholars who are humble expert. If the Order is to seek truth, we must spend money on their formation, and give them time to go on studying and refuse to elect them to be bursars or priors or prioresses. In some provinces, the moment a brother has gained a doctorate you can be sure that he will be named parish priest. It makes you want to scream.

When I had a month in the Ecole Biblique in February, I became friends with a Polish Dominican scholar who teaches there, Ɫukasz Popko. He reads fluently Hebrew, Greek, Syriac and Latin, and half a dozen modern languages. He is a tough-minded scholar, which I am not. Whenever I am writing a lecture such as this one, I share my ideas with him and listen carefully to what he says. He often says, ‘God is in the detail. Even in a letter’ So truth seeking includes cherishing our scholars, whether they are working on the Scriptures or fundamental theology or archaeology or science. When I asked Simon Tugwell what we needed for the Historical Institute he replied, ‘People who can read Latin well.’ Once he told me, ‘Today I finished writing a footnote. It was 120 pages long!’

So this is the objective, nighty gritty aspect of scholarship. This is Diccon looking at my nose with careful attention!

**Conversation**

Then there is the other dimension of Diccon’s portrait painting, which is the standing back, chatting, having a laugh and a conversation. Our search for the truth requires both the objectivity of the scholar, and also the intersubjectivity in which I enter into the mind and the heart of the other person. Both are needed to lift the veil on the unique individual before the painter; the objective dispassionate gaze and the exhilaration of conversation.

When I was thinking of joining the Order, my future novice master suggested that every day I give time to reading two texts. In the morning, I read the New Testament. As a good Catholic, of course I had never done this! And then in the evening I read the Platonic Dialogues. I especially enjoyed the Symposium, which means literally ‘The Drinking party’! Philosophy sounded as if it might be fun!

Both the parents of Western Christianity, Jewish revelation and Greek philosophy, are founded on conversation. Philosophy finds its origins in witty conversations over a flask of wine. Revelation, Vatican 2 taught us, is God’s invitation to humanity to enter into dialogue. The Word became flesh in a person of conversation. John’s gospel shows us Jesus always talking with people, beginning with the disciples whom he invites to his home until the end, when he talks with the disciples on the beach. The first documents of the New Testament are Paul’s letters, which are one half of his conversation with the churches.

So it is not surprising that the idea of an Order with the motto *Veritas* came to Dominic after a conversation in a pub. He argued all night with the Albigensian inn keeper. As the Irish Dominican Liam Walsh said, ‘Dominic cannot have spent the entire night saying, “You are wrong, you are wrong, you are wrong!”’

So truth seeking demands at least two skills, the objectivity of the scholar and the art of conversation leading, one hopes, to friendship. Few of us like Lukasz have both, which is why theology is usually a social activity, a team work. My happiest time was teaching with two brethren. One was a patristic scholar, with immense learning, and the other was a philosopher, with a brilliant analytical mind. They were both much cleverer than I am. That is true! But we each had our own skills in seeking the truth. We used to plan our lecture courses in the pub. Where else? So faced with the violence and social fragmentation of fake news, we need objective scholarship and conversation which brings peace and reconciliation. We needed the library and the pub.

So what are the skills of the skills of the conversationalist who seek the truth? A book was published a couple of weeks ago called *Charitable Writing*, by Richard Gibson and James Beitler [III]. It’s great strength is the marvellous quotations it includes from other people. As Dominicans we need the art of charitable writing and talking. This is not just being nice and polite. The authors quote Marguerite Paulsell, who asserts that charitable writing is a ‘a discipline within which we might meet God.[[2]](#footnote-2)’ Learning charitable communication is the especially Dominican way of holiness. It forms us to love God with all one’s heart, one’s mind, and one’s neighbour as oneself.

How do we argue lovingly? Argument is usually thought of as a combat. When we were children my father used to say. ‘Stop arguing’ because it looked like fighting! Argument is seen as inherently aggressive. The way that we talk about argument is steeped in warlike metaphors. We win arguments; we thrash our opponents, we wipe the floor with them; we dismiss their arguments as indefensible[[3]](#footnote-3). If you want to see this in practice, just watch the British Parliament which is filled with rowdy aggression. They call it ‘debate’ but it mainly shouting.

Loving argument invites us to purify our language of aggression. Did you watch the TV series *The Queen’s Gambit?* A young American girl becomes enamoured of chess. She is constantly and mercilessly thrashes her male opponents, and we all cheer. Finally she beats the Russian Grandmaster and is on the way home to have dinner with the President. She has beaten them all! But she gets out of the car, walks over to a group of old men playing chess, just ordinary amateurs, and her final words are: ‘Let’s play.’ Isn’t that a fantastic finale? Let’s play!

We are moved from combat to play, from aggression to the ludic. When I arrived in Rome, I asked the Superior General of the Jesuits, Kaltenbach, how to dialogue with the Vatican. He replied ‘It’s like tennis, keep the ball in the air!’

Thinking should be fun. Theodore Zeldin lamented: ‘Unfortunately, though humans ruminate, cogitate, brood, play with ideas, dream and make inspired guesses about the thoughts of other people all the time, there has been no *Kamasutra* of the mind to reveal the sensuous pleasures of thinking, to show how ideas can flirt with each other and learn to embrace.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

You have asked me to focus on a really difficult issue: How do we pursue the truth in an age of fake news? How do we have loving conversation with people with whom we do not want to talk and who probably don’t want to talk to us? How do we having a loving argument with someone with whom we disagree profoundly? This is especially difficult today when the social media tend to herd us into the bubbles of the likeminded. How do I talk to someone who not only disagrees with Pope Francis but probably thinks he is not pope anyway? It is claimed that is the view of a third of American seminarians. How do I talk to an aggressive atheist or a militant Protestant who thinks that the Church of Rome is the whore of Babylon? Or to an angry Catholic traditionalist?

It is tempting just not to. But when the Word of God became flesh he did not just converse with the inner circle of the disciples. He talked with people who just tried to catch him out, with people who parodied what he said. He talked with people who sets traps and mocked him. Finally he was driven to silence until the victory of Easter dawn. To be a Dominican means that we must not flee from these tough conversations, even when they seem futile and pointless. Even with our own brothers and sisters!

Let’s look very briefly at the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. It is crazier than any conversation any of us are likely ever to have. It should not have happened at all.

Jesus’ first words are: ‘Give me a drink.’ He is needy. We talk with these obstreperous people because they have something that we need. Bishop Pierre Claverie, the Dominican Algerian martyr, liked to say of his dialogue with Muslims, ‘J’ai besoin de la verité des autres.’ I need other people’s truth. Thomas Aquinas quoted Aristotle who claimed ‘we should love both kinds of people: those whose opinions we follow, and those whose opinions we reject. For both study to find the truth and, in this way, both give us assistance’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This requires humility. I hesitate to say this to you, my sisters, since men have been telling women to listen humbly ever since the first argument in the Stone Age. By humility I don’t mean thinking ill of oneself, abasing oneself. Rather it is the self-forgetfulness which allows one to be really open to another. C. S. Lewis said that the humble person takes a real interest in you, and in what you are saying. I quote: ‘He will not be thinking about humility; he will not be thinking about himself at all.[[6]](#footnote-6)’ This is like the humility of the scholar reading the Word of God.

The woman at the well does not even think that the conversation should be taking place at all! ‘”How is it that you, a Jewish man, ask a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.’ She is not just a Samaritan woman, she is almost certainly marginal within her own community because of her immoral life. She is triply unsuitable for conversation.

But talk they do. The gulf between them is overcome by the most intense listening. Imagine them there, alone in the heat of midday, every sense stretched open. Alice Duer Miller said, ‘You can listen like a blank wall or like a splendid auditorium where every sound comes back fuller and richer.[[7]](#footnote-7)’

Amos Oz, the Israeli poet, said of his grandfather: ‘He possessed a quality that is barely ever found among men, a marvellous quality which for many women is the sexiest in a man. He listened. He did not just politely pretend to listen, while impatiently waiting for her to finish what she was saying and shut up. He did not break into his partner’s sentence and finish it for her. He did not cut in to sum up what she was saying so as to move on to another subject. He did not let his interlocutress talk into thin air while he prepared in his head the reply that he would make when she finally finished. He did not pretend to be interested or entertained, he really was.[[8]](#footnote-8)’

It is an odd conversation, with non-sequiturs, like something from Dostoevsky. But it takes off when he penetrates her aggression with a word that touches the naked rawness of her life, of which she is embarrassed, the complexities of her love life: ‘ Go, call your husband and come hre.’ The woman answered him, “I have no husband”, and he answered her ‘You are right in saying,” I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands and he whom you have now is not your husband.’ Wow!

Now they really encounter each other in the truth. She will say, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’ Conversation takes off when we engage with the truth of the other and let them see ours too. The truth which we seek is not a theorem but a person who said, ‘I am the truth’. This is present as we are disclosed in all our messiness to each other. The conversation is even a little flirtatious. In the Old Testament, lovers meet at wellheads!

One of the most intense disagreements I have seen in the Order was at the General Chapter of Krakow in 2004. The Commission on Preaching produced a brilliant paper on preaching today as dialogue. One needed the humility to listen, the openness to receive the gifts of the other person. In other words, just what I have been saying today, though it was not written by me but by Chrys McVey whom some of you may remember.

But some brethren disagreed with it profoundly. Preaching is the proclamation of the truths of the gospel and the Church. If preaching is just dialogue it leads to relativism. No, we preach the truth without apology. One side was stressing the intersubjectivity of truth, the art of conversation, and the other the objectivity of truth. Of course both are necessary.

How could we resolve this disagreement? We discovered that each was speaking from their own lived experience. The brethren who championed dialogue were often, like Chrys, from Asia. Here Christianity is a tiny minority and either one dialogues with other faiths or one is locked into a tiny bubble. The brethren who championed bold proclamation had often lived under Soviet domination. They had been imprisoned and even tortured for their beliefs. They were not going to emerge from prison eager for conversation with their oppressors. Each had to enter imaginatively into the experience of the other. I must under the skin of the other, and see through their eyes.

So Jesus and the woman are divided by a chasm but there is hope. There will be a day in the future when difference is transcended, ‘when the true worshipper will worship the Father in spirit and truth.’ To engage in conversation with the rabid atheist or the extreme traditionalist or even the Jesuits is an act of hope. We cannot see how it will get anywhere. That is for God, the Lord of the harvest, to decide.

But the Word of God was silenced. At his trial in the synoptics, he says nothing and on the cross all words finish. We may experience moments when the talking cannot go on, at least for the moment.

Alan Jacobs read a blog post which blistering attacked Rowan William’s views on sexuality. He was furious and began to write a reply but he had to pause:

‘I didn’t pause because I realised that I was treating debate as war and was desperately eager for victory. I paused because my hands were shaking so violently I couldn’t type accurately. That’s how angry I was. So I had to “give it five minutes”; I didn’t’; have a choice. And during that enforced break I *did* start to realise what I was doing – what I was becoming….I had a problem of my own that I needed to address. So I deleted the comment I was writing and shut down the computer and walked away[[9]](#footnote-9).’

Why was the blog so devastating? Because if you engage with someone at any depth, you let them into your own self. You make a space for them in your ego and sometimes we may not want to do this. It will undermine who we are. Profound conversation puts our identity into question, for we let into our interiority someone who may negate views which are intrinsic to who we think we are. Humble self-forgetfulness makes us vulnerable. We feel annihilated.

Would we dare to have a conversation that reaches across the polarities of the culture wars and open our hearts and minds to someone who is even a mild racist, or misogynist? What will happen to me? But Our Lord did so, and so we should not be afraid. It belongs to our search for the truth in a time of fake news. Remember Herbert McCabe’s famous words:’ If I love I will get hurt; I may even be killed. If I do not love, I am dead already.’

Sometimes, like Jesus during the trial, we may be reduced to silence. Sometimes we shall not be able to find the right words and will have to walk away. Sometimes we may look to someone else to have the conversation that is at that moment beyond our power. But we must keep the hope alive that one day conversation will be possible. Easter morning will come when the silence is broken.

1. *Culture and Value*, revised edition, John Wiley and sons, Hoboken, NJ, 1998, p.23 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted p.16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. P. 88, quoting Geroge Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, JUniversity of Chicago Press, 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *An Intimate History of Humanity,* Vintage, London 1994, p.442 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Sententia super metaphysicam*, XII, 9, 2566, ed., Marietti ,Torino, 1971, p.599. Elsewhere Thomas notes that “any truth no matter by whom it is said, is from the Holy Spirit (*omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, est a Spiritu Sancto).*” S T, I II, q.109, a.1, ad 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quoted page 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quoted by Gibson etc p.47 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *A Tale of Love and Darkness,* Vintage, London, 2005, p.110 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*, New York, Currency, 2017 p.110 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)