Foreword

To my knowledge, no one has ever published a summary of the mottos and symbols familiar to all Dominicans. In recent years I have often been approached for information concerning the origins and history of one or other of them — origins and histories sometimes well known, sometimes more obscure. I have in each case searched the available literature and consulted with other Dominican historians. I present here the fruits of that research, trusting that others will find it as useful and even enlightening as I have.

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DOMINICAN MOTTOS AND SYMBOLS

Veritas

Already in 1266, a letter from Pope Clement IV to the General Chapter of that year applied to the Order of Preachers the formula of Isaiah 26, 2 as it appears in Jerome’s Latin Vulgate: “a just people who guard the truth” (gens iusta custodiens veritatem). Later, the fourteenth-century Ludwig of Bavaria proclaimed: “The Order of Preachers is the order of truth, which it defends with equal fearlessness and freedom” — a testimony reported by the Polish Dominican historian Bzovius (†1637). It was only in the nineteenth century,

1 Most of the line illustrations in this document are from Clip-op, a CD of Dominican images published by Fr. Óscar Jesús Fernández, Equipo Pastoral Juvenil Vocacional, Dominicos de España y Portugal, with permission given “for private use of the Dominican Family.” Photographs are by Suzanne Noffke.

2 Jerome actually mistranslated the Hebrew, which has “faith,” not “truth.”
however, that the Dominican Order officially chose the Latin Veritas, “Truth,” as one of its mottos and that the motto began to appear with the order’s shield.³

**Contemplata aliis tradere**

Thomas Aquinas wrote that when “the work of the active life such as teaching and preaching proceeds from the fullness of contemplation, ... this work is more excellent than simple contemplation. For even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so too is it better to pass on to others what one is contemplating [contemplata aliis tradere] than merely to contemplate.”⁴ The Thomistic maxim has often been made to serve a

⁴ *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 188, a. 6.
dichotomy which both his language and his imagery belie. It has in fact sometimes even been cited as *contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere*, introducing a before-and-after sequence. But Thomas’ sense seems to be rather that the ideal is to pass on what one is contemplating even as one contemplates — as a flame enlightens even as it burns and shines, never shining in a vacuum. So, too, Dominicans are called to live and minister out of a constantly contemplative stance.

**Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare**

It is from Jordan of Saxony that we learn of the origins of the motto *Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare* (“to praise, to bless, to preach”).

Once, when the number of brothers at the convent of Bologna had become very large, a certain legate of the apostolic see, Conrad bishop of Prato, happened to come to Bologna. The brothers received him into their convent and treated him with all due honor, but his mind began to be plagued with a doubt concerning this order. He wondered what purpose this new and unusual sort of religious life might serve, whether it was of human or divine origin. As he was seated in the friars’ church on the chair provided for him, he
asked for a book. Being offered a missal, he made the sign of the cross and opened it [to the Preface for feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary]. At the top of the first page he read: “Laudare, benedicere, et praedicare.” Reassured by what seemed an answer from heaven, he set aside all his scruples and doubts and with certainty and all the fervor of his soul accepted the friars, saying, “Though externally I wear the habit of another profession, I wear yours internally in my soul. Be assured that I am entirely yours. I belong to your order, and I commend myself to you with all my affection.”

The brothers were apparently taken by the bishop’s reading and adopted the triple call as a summary of the order’s mission. It appears in Dominican literature as early as Humbert of Romans’ mid-thirteenth-century Commentary on the Constitution of the Order.

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5 Jordan of Saxony, Libellus, fol. 43.
The Shield

The story of the various versions of the Dominican shield is a bit more complex.

There is no documentation, either written or graphic, for any seal or shield proper to the Dominican Order before the fifteenth century. Not even in the great fresco of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (late fourteenth century), so rich in Dominican symbolism, or in the paintings of Fra Angelico (mid-fifteenth century) does a shield of any description appear. Nor does one find anything of the sort on any Dominican tomb in these first centuries of the Order’s history.6

Dominic and his earliest preacher companions had used the seal of the “Preaching of Jesus Christ,” the papal mission in which they participated. That seal depicted the Lamb of God surrounded by rays of light, as seen

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still in the surviving keystone of the monastery church of Prouilhe.

Once the Order of Preachers had been founded, Innocent III had decreed that it should have no seal (as used for stamping documents and letters) other than that of the master of the order, whose seal should bear only an image of the crucifix, a provision affirmed by the General Chapter of 1240.  

Though a shield is not quite the same as a seal, Paul Hinnebusch surmises that the friars' assumption in the late fifteenth century of a "coat of arms" may perhaps signify a new self-awareness or even "a growing pretension."  

At any rate, in 1494 one sees for apparently the first time a version of what we now know as the "mantle shield," symbolically featuring the order's habit with parted black mantle and white tunic. It appears in an edition of the *Catena aurea* of Thomas Aquinas, bearing the abbreviation for *Ordo Praedi-

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7 Cited in Féret, p. 223, in whose work the early shields appear.
catorum (“Order of Preachers”). The frontispiece of a 1508 Venetian Dominican processional features a similar shield, but with the addition of the lily of purity and the palm of martyrdom as well as the abbreviation for just Praedicatorum (“Preachers”) and a book. This shield would eventually assume the form with which we are familiar today.

A very different shield appears, apparently for the first time, as “the insignia of the Order of Preachers” on the sixteenth-century tombs of the Dominican cardinals Nikolaus von Schönberg and Tommaso de Vio Cajetan in the Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome. This shield features a lilied cross divided horizontally and vertically into black and white (or silver) on a background divided in eighths, also alternating black and white (or silver).

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9 Edited by Pietro da Vicenza (Venice: Johannis Rubeus, 1494).
There are differing interpretations of this shield’s origins. Féret notes a black and white cross very like the one on this shield had been worn as a pectoral cross by medieval inquisitors (right).

There is, however, an even earlier and more probable source for the shield which was first addressed in the sixteenth century.

Key elements of the shield are found already on the family crests of Dominic’s parents, shown here as emblazoned on the torreón (the family tower) in Caleruega. The crest of Dominic’s mother Juana, the

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10 Féret, pp. 225–229. Some have traced this cross to the foundation of the “Militia of Jesus Christ,” established in the Diocese of Riga in 1205, claiming that the Militia was given as its insignia by Honorius III “a black and white lilied cross.” Féret, however, demonstrates that this is not true.

11 The crests are described by E. Martínez in Colección Diplomatica del Real Convento de Santo Domingo de Caleruega, xxx (Barcelona, 1931).
Aza crest, features a red cross whose branches are divided down the center and at whose center and four tips rests the pilgrim shell of Santiago de Compostela. Near the tip of each branch is the *fleur de lis*. This cross may well have its roots in that used by the Order of Calatrava, knights who fought the Moors in seventh-century Castile. This lilied cross (minus the shells), its branches now divided into the black and white of the Dominican habit, would become the centerpiece of the sixteenth-century shield of the order.

The blue crest of Dominic’s father, Félix de Guzmán, is superimposed on the same lilied cross and features a diagonally divided field. This diagonal division would be incorporated into the order’s insignia, with black and white triangles alternating with the black and white of the cross.

If this hypothesis is correct, it remains to be discovered when the Dominicans first began to use the black and white lilied cross, and

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The cauldrons on each crest represent the number of local households for whose maintenance each of these noble families was responsible.
whether it was identified initially more specifically with the order or with the Inquisition.

At times, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, elements from both shields, the mantle and the lilied cross, have been combined, often with other Dominican symbols and mottos as well, such as the lily of purity, the palm of martyrdom, the rosary, and/or a crown (whether of glory or of royalty).

By the early twentieth century the Dominican General Curia was using as insignia in its official publications the shield with the lilied cross, surrounded by a banner bearing the words *Landare, Benedicere, Praedicare* and surmounted by Dominic’s star (as on p. 5). That design continued in more common use until recent years, when the “mantle shield” again became more popular.

**The Dog and Torch**

One of the earliest biographers of Saint Dominic, Jean de Mailly, who wrote about 1243, scarcely two decades after Dominic’s death, tells the following story:

Before conceiving him in the womb, his mother had a dream in which she saw a puppy emerge
from her womb carrying a blazing torch in its mouth; it appeared to be setting the whole world on fire. This dream signified what kind of man he was going to be: an outstanding preacher who would rekindle with the fiery word of his preaching the charity which was growing cold in many people, and chase the wolves away from the flocks with his timely barking and rouse to the watchfulness of virtue those who were asleep in their sins.¹³

Simon Tugwell notes, however: “Prophetic visions like these are too much part of the stock-in-trade of hagiography, Christian and pagan alike, for us to be very confident of their reliability here. ‘Setting the world on fire’ goes back to Hecuba, the mother of Hector of Troy (Apollodorus III 12:5). St. Bernard’s mother is supposed to have had a dream

about a dog (signifying a preacher) before Bernard was born (PL 185:470).”\(^{14}\)

Nevertheless, the image lent itself well to a popular tag for preachers, *Domini canes*, “the Lord’s dogs,” which conveniently coincided with referring to members of the new Order of Preachers as *Dominicani*, “Dominicans.”

The dog itself as emblem of the preacher appears already in the fourteenth-century frescos in the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, where a crowd of black and white dogs is depicted accompanying the preachers.

One sees the dog depicted with a torch in its mouth as early as 1494 — as the frontispiece of a Venetian Dominican processional. The dog with its torch is sometimes shown elsewhere on top of (or with its foot planted on) a globe.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 104, n. 2.
The Star

Dominic is often represented in art with a star on or above his forehead. This symbol, like that of the dog and torch, is based on the account of Jean de Mailly:

A certain lady who lifted him from the [baptismal] font dreamed that he carried a kind of star on his forehead, filling the whole world with its light.

However, there is also the testimony of Blessed Cecilia, who was a nun in the Roman monastery founded by Dominic and knew him personally:

There was a kind of radiance about his forehead and between his eyebrows, which attracted everyone to respect and love him.\(^\text{15}\)

The star is also often placed above the shield of the order.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 392.
The Holy Preaching (Praedicatio Sacra)

Pope Innocent III in his crusade against the Cathars wanted to provide for a preaching in which moral example would accompany what was being proclaimed in words. In his constitution of March 10, 1208, Innocent cited the example of the community of preachers just established by Dominic in the diocese of Toulouse, a community which was working for the "moral and intellectual formation of those dedicated to the holy preaching."\[16\]

The term "holy preaching" was, however, an invention neither of Dominic nor of Innocent but is first found in the writings of Gregory the Great. It is applied to Dominic’s efforts in and around Prouilhe as early as August 1207 — in a legal deed of gift, with the gift in question being made to "the Lord God and Blessed Mary and to all the Saints of God and to the Holy Preaching and to Lord Dominic of Osma and to all the brothers and sisters who are today and will be in the future."\[17\]

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The term has come into more common use in recent years as Dominicans of every branch of the Family have reclaimed their mission as preachers.
The “Dominican Blessing”

The “Dominican blessing” made popular through the music of James Marchionda, OP, comes originally from the pen of an anonymous thirteenth-century English Dominican:

May God the Father bless us,
May God the Son heal us,
May the Holy Spirit enlighten us and give us
  eyes to see with,
  ears to hear with,
  and hands to do the work of God with,
  feet to walk with and
  a mouth to preach the word of salvation with,
and the angel of peace to watch over us
and lead us at last,
by our Lord’s gift,
to the kingdom.
Amen.\(^{18}\)

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