

The Laity and the Mission of the Order

Letter of the Master of the Order. November 1987

fr. Damian Byrne, OP

The General Chapter celebrated at Avila established a special commission to study the role of the laity in our apostolate. In this way the Chapter reflected on the increasing importance of the laity in the Church, particularly since the Second Vatican Council. This Capitular Commission commissioned the Master of the Order, "to write to the Friars and all the Dominican Family about the role of the laity in our apostolate and about the Dominican Laity in the world today." (n. 95).

This present letter responds to this commission of the Chapter. It is a tribute to all the Dominican Family for its achievements in this important ecclesial area, and, at the same time, a fraternal appeal to all the members of our family to intensify their concern and work in this new ecclesial area.

1. The Awakening of the Laity, a New Ecclesial Sign

The Second Vatican Council reflected on a new ecclesial sign - namely - the awakening of the laity to a new period of co-responsibility and sense of community. The words of the Council recognized this new period in the Church and at the same time invited the whole Church to continue along this way. The Synod of Bishops on the Laity has picked up again the authoritative voice of the Council and has pointed out new lines and goals to re-enforce the vocation and mission of the laity.

The awakening of the laity to ministry and ecclesial co-responsibility is a sign of the times with a deep theological significance. The declarations of the Council and Synod are only the reflection of an historical event while is taking place everywhere in all the local churches. It is an event of the universal church.

Review with me some facts present in this actual moment of the church:

(a) Conscious of their Christian mission and apostolic responsibility, the local churches, many of them young churches, are gaining special vitality due in great part to active co-responsibility of the laity, men and women. The efforts in re-vitalization, re-organization, inculturation, missionary renewal... are frequently urged and put into practice by laity in dialogue and in collaboration with their pastors.

(b) This fact of a progressive diversification of the ministries assumed by laity in their Christian communities is of singular importance. The number of lay people that discover and take up specific ministries (institutional and non-institutional) is greater everyday. In many cases their ministries are recognized and approved by their pastors. The number of laity dedicated to the work of catechesis and evangelization, to theological reflection and teaching, to the presidency and animation of the community, to administration and social services, to engagement in struggles for justice and peace in the world etc. is growing. These ministries are carried out not only with goodwill, but also those who are engaged in them assume responsibility for formation preparation and adequate training.

(c) From a theological, ecclesial and pastoral point of view, the fact that an increasing leadership is being assumed by the laity is extremely significant. It is not simply leadership that substitutes for the absence of a priest or pushes him aside, rather it is the leadership of lay people, who by special charism and grace feel themselves called to become the animators of their Christian communities in prayer, in the sharing of the Word, and in social and political engagements... In the works of charity and justice. These lay leaders point to a new period both in the conception and the function of authority in the Christian community.

(d) In the awakening of the laity to their role in the church and in society, the presence of women after centuries of silence and marginality, acquires singular importance and attention. The natural talents and special charism of women infuses a new vitality in the christian community and reveals a new face of christian experience. Their sense of the concrete, their feminine sensitivity, their motherhood, their persistence in facing difficultie... reveal hidden aspects of the Word of God, of Christian communion, of the experience of the Reign of God.

These phenomena present in the church today have produced an increasing collaboration between laity, religious and priests in different fields of ecclesial life. Increasingly the friars and sisters share their lived and apostolic projects with other religious and laity, men and women, married and single. The laity are not simple receivers of our mission; they share with us - and we with them - this very responsibility in the christian community.

Faced with this ecclesial reality it is necessary for us Dominicans to ask ourselves some questions: How do we feel and how do we react to this awakening of the laity? Do we assume willingly this fact? Do we ignore it with our own self-sufficiency? Do we reject it because of false fears? What are our attitudes and our actions in relationship to the laity? What place does the laity have in our apostolic ministry, in the elaboration and realization of our apostolic projects? To feel with the church today means, among other things, that we ask these questions and answer them sincerely.

2. Theological Keys for a Christian Reflection

Theological reflection has turned to the signs of the times in order to read, interpret and discern the demands of the Word of God and of christian experience. To do theology or to preach puts the Word of God in contact with the historical situations of people. The fidelity to our rich theological tradition requires us to listen attentively and discern this new ecclesial sign of the times. We cannot forget that it was our own brothers as theologians at Vatican II, who developed a new theology of laity and of ministry in the christian community.

(a) The first key to reflection on the laity and on their mission in the Church is given to us by Vatican II's ecclesiology. It changed the emphasis from a legal- institutional definition of the church towards a theological conception and definition. The critical category of this new definition is "the People of God": the church is the new people of God called by faith in the Risen Lord and sealed by baptism in Jesus Christ. At present there is a certain insistence that *communio*, and not *people of God*, better expresses the nature of the church. However, the Vatican Council and the much older Gaelic tradition are in favour of the 'People of God' definition. All baptized participate with full rights in this vocation and mission. All are people of God, active and responsible members of the church for its mission.

(b) This ecclesial conception of the Council leads us to a new conception of ministry and ministries in the church. All ministries and charisms are God's gifts through the community. Here we find the second important key for our theological reflection. The subject of ministry is the christian community. Each of the baptized shares this dimension of ministry. The diversification of ministries is the expression of the ministerial dimension in the community.

(c) A third key for our reflection obliges us to revise our traditional theologies of ministry. I refer to criteria of validation and organization of them. The very sacred character of the liturgical actions and the strong association between priestly ministry and authority in the church have conditioned us to adapt a sacred and liturgical point of view to give preference to these ministries. In this way the functions and ministries associated with cult occupy the first place in our theological value system, while more secular ministries are relegated to a secondary place. This must change. Remembering St. Paul's advice to the Corinthians, it is necessary to recover the communitarian criteria to validate and give preference to charism and ministry. Charisms and ministries take on more importance for the christian in the measure that they build up the christian community.

This third theological key helps to overcome the traditional dualism and in many cases false oppositions between priesthood and the laity. It is worth recalling the words of Père Congar on this matter:

The church is not built up merely by acts of the official ministers of the presbytery but many kinds of services, more or less stable or occasional, more or less spontaneous or recognized, some consecrated by sacramental ordination. These services exist - they exist even if they are not called by their real name, ministries, even if they do not yet have their true place and status in ecclesiology... Eventually one sees that the decisive pair is not "priesthood-laity"... but much more that of ministries or services and community. [Ministères et communion ecclésiale. (Paris, 1971), pp. 9, 17, 19].

It also helps us to understand the diversification and the distributions of charisms and ministries among all the members of the community, ordained and lay, male and female. Finally and perhaps more importantly, it helps us to accept the deep Christian meaning of the ministries done by the baptized in the search of a more human, more loving and more just society: promotion, assistance, defense of human rights, etc.

These theological keys must stimulate reflection and theological discernment rooted in our apostolic and ecclesial practices.

Today theology offers us sure directions of reflection and also many questions which are difficult in relation to ministry. It is still the mission of Dominicans to offer the christian community the ministry and charism of theological discernment if we want to be faithful to our tradition. But our theological reflection will not be fruitful if it is separated from our christian, ecclesial and apostolic action.

3. Challenges and Engagements for the Dominican Family

The heart of the Dominican charism must be found in preaching, in the kerigma of the Word of God. To be a Dominican is to be a preacher. This is the primary concern of the Dominican project. Yet, this announcement is something more than a verbal discourse that passes through a catechesis, homily, or religious teaching. It takes shape in any word or in any historical action that manifests the salvific event in the midst of human history. The specific place of encounter between the Dominicans and the laity is exactly in the charism and ministry of preaching. The Dominican family is called to be a community of preaching in which its members are active and co-responsible - friars, sisters, and laity - with diversified ministries and charisms.

The Order was born at a historical moment of special ecclesial crisis and at the same time of extraordinary vitality. It was a moment of the awakening of lay movements and this influenced the foundational project of the mendicant Orders and created a new conception of the church, beyond the limits of parishes and dioceses. All through its history the Order has significant experiences which can help us to understand this new time for the laity: the incorporation of the Third Order into the Dominican project, the evolution of the functions and ministries of the Cooperator Brothers, the incorporation of numerous female congregations into its mission... The memory of these facts is a challenge for these new times.

Though this is sometimes difficult, here are some possibilities we could adapt. Today, I believe that our communities are called to inaugurate and re-enforce new ecclesial practices that channel the laity into collaboration in ministry of the church. The practice of sharing prayer with the laity offers them the richness of a prayer that has the strength of centuries, at the same time it receives from them the novelty and freshness of new christian experiences. Some of our communities could be revitalized by sharing responsibility for our prayer with the laity. In fact, we have some fine examples of this type of renewal already in the Order.

It is also necessary to begin and support new models in formation which are shared with the laity. This cannot be oriented in one direction, it has to be a communitarian reflection. God's

Word is not in chains: it is open to the intellect of all the believers who are attentive and listen. We can offer the richness of our own theological formation but we must learn to listen so that we can be enriched in dialogue with other believers.

Our apostolic work also must be revised and redirected in the light of these new perspectives of ministry to be able to respond adequately to a new ecclesial relationship with the laity. These works must animate new forms of exercising authority and leadership in a more collegial manner. We must find new ways of sharing the planning of apostolic projects, new ways to actualize them in co-responsibility, to diversify the functions and ministries in our apostolic work... The cause of the gospel must take priority over our routines, comforts, and our fears. A Dominican community in situations of mission and itinerancy is a community open to the present and the future of the church in society.

The Chapter of Avila (n. 85A) reflected on the restlessness which exists among our Dominican Laity. They are faced with a particular problem at the present time: in their fraternities there is a notable absence of younger persons, and hence a certain lack of vitality. Could this perhaps be at least in part a result of unawareness of the teaching of the Church since Vatican II on the subject, and hence a failure to put it into practice?

The same problem was analyzed in the Congress of the Dominican Laity, which took place in Montreal in 1985. Confronted with this situation we have to rethink and reorientate the Dominican Laity in relationship to the new ecclesial practices and new theological keys in reference to place and mission of the laity in the world and in the Church.

4. Pathways to the Future

Our brothers and sisters progressively are entering this new way of Dominican ministry which is in favour of a Church, which is constantly emerging. Many have already begun and are the stimulus for the Dominican Family. This new approach to ministry is making our Dominican vocation more credible today. It is an opportunity for renewing our Order, this awakening of the laity offers us a new frontier to cross. To make this crossing we must have courage. The future of the Church and of our Dominican Family demands much of us, the reasons not to act at times can offer us a false security but as John the Baptist the first preacher of Jesus Christ, reminds us that, "I must decrease so that He may increase." (John 3:30). As Jesus, the grace of God, lives in each of the faithful so he increases, when they proclaim Him until the end of time. May the memory of St. Dominic give us the courage to engage in this new ecclesial sign.