

In Mission Together

Letter of the Master of the Order. November 1990

fr. Damian Byrne, OP

The Bologna Document of 1983 says that "the principle and sign of unity of the Dominican Family (L.C.O. 396) is the Master of the Order, the successor of St Dominic, the one who grants aggregation to the order, the one who outside the General Chapter guarantees and promotes fidelity to the spirit of St. Dominic" (Analecta 1983, pp. 95-971). In the light of this description of the role of the Master of the Order, I would like to share my vision for the Dominican Family. I shall begin with a comment on three aspects of the above statement, namely, unity, aggregation, and fidelity.

Unity

During the past seven years I have met many Dominicans, men and women, religious and laity, throughout the world. I have come to appreciate how real is the unity of the Dominican Family and how the Dominican Family looks to the Master of the Order as the principle of unity in striving to be faithful to Dominic's charism. Among the men, I have tried to make it my principal task to promote fidelity to the spirit of Dominic as it is formulated for us in the Acts of our General Chapters. I am aware that other branches of the family are sometimes more faithful to some aspects of Dominican Life than are the Brothers.

As "the one who grants aggregation to the Order" it is perhaps opportune at this point in my mandate as Master of the Order, to reflect on these matters with you.

The Letter on the Common Life had its origins in a visit to Sisters in Africa in 1984. I was deeply touched by their devotion to the essential elements of the common life in spite of heavy apostolic commitments. This a new approach to the essential values set me thinking about of the common life and about the need, in some situations, for new personal and community structures to preserve and promote these values. The fidelity to Dominic's vision is evident in the number of Dominican women who have taken one or other aspect of the Dominican charism and made it the central focus of the life of their community or Congregation. You have only to think of the Congregations dedicated to teaching, nursing, evangelization... In them, I see the three great concerns of Dominic; the poor, the unevangelized and sinners - being cared for by the sisters.

Sisters are the most numerous section of the Dominican Family, more numerous than the men in frontier apostolates, more sensitive to the needs of people, especially the poor and the oppressed and often more active in promoting human rights. In many ways the Sisters have taken the challenge of on-going formation more seriously than ourselves.

Aggregation to the Order

Congregations of sisters have their own proper juridical independence through the Holy See. Their link with the brothers is through our common profession as Dominican Religious.

In our case this can lead to a powerful bond based on a common love of St Dominic and an acceptance of his vision. This vision, I believe, has been experienced by the recent General Chapters, beginning at Quezon City in, 1977, in a very real way. It seems to me that membership in the Dominican Family, for Laity, Sisters, Nuns and Brothers demands an understanding of this in the tradition of the order and in the acceptance of its orientation in our apostolic lives. We no longer see ourselves as first, second or third Order. We are Dominicans.

Fidelity

I believe that this sense of the unity of the Dominican Family requires from me an explanation of how the Order sees its task today in the light of its tradition. An understanding of this will lead to an even greater unity and apostolic zeal among all the branches of the Dominican Family.

In 1968, fr. Aniceto Fernandez wrote to the Dominican Sisters throughout the world in response to enquiries concerning their place in the Order.

"The time has now come to examine our relationships carefully. In this modern world where our Saviour has put us together to carry on his great work of salvation, we are called to embrace together the spirit and tradition bequeathed to us by St Dominic, to search together and to build together our communities of brothers and sisters in the service of the Church."

Fr Aniceto speaks of the sisters as equals, and as equals invites them to search with the brothers for the best way of carrying out our preaching mission together. Are we faithful to this challenge?

General Chapters 1977-1989

Five General Chapters since 1977 state that preaching is the priority of priorities and that preaching today must include the Four Priorities - Theology, Evangelization, Justice and Communications. These are rooted in our tradition. Some Chapters, in addition, have developed one or other aspect of our preaching ministry. For example the Chapter at Avila in 1986 (No. 22) gave us the document on the Five Frontiers which is a development of two of the priorities - Justice and Mission. The recent Chapter at Oakland in 1989 (No. 68,4), calls our attention to the fact that while the Four Priorities are rooted in our tradition they are also inextricably interwoven. You cannot accept one and omit the others. They depend on each other and all must be present in the apostolate of every Dominican. There will be specialists in each field but the specialist in communications, for example, will need to be a theologian and also mindful of Justice and Mission issues. The non specialist will need to bring something of each priority to her/his work.

Preaching

The Preacher's Charter is outlined by Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. It seems to me that when Paul VI writes about "preaching by witness, by word and through individual communication of the Gospel from person to person" he describes Dominic's programme. St Dominic was aware of the need for witness; we see him, preaching in churches and on the road to the faithful and dissidents; he attention to contact with individuals as with first followers of Dominic paid as much groups. The preacher, were women. It is significant that the first brothers took as patrons of the Order, Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, and Catherine of Alexandria, the student and professor of philosophy. There are countless examples of great women preachers in our history, Catherine of Siena, Rose of Lima, Margaret Hallahan, and the many foundresses of the Sisters' Congregations.

The Constitutions of the brothers point out that the whole community constitutes a preaching group and that they "should discuss among themselves their apostolic experiences and difficulties so that they can submit them to common study and, with the combined resources in these special groups, they may be able to exercise their ministry more effectively" (LC0.100.4). Where the brothers and sisters are working together, then preaching can grow out of their common reflection on the gospel together.

The nuns also play their role. "Dominican contemplative life is colored by the orientation of the order to preaching the full Gospel. The nuns are part of the preaching Order, organically, and not only helping by their prayers, linked with the preachers, helping to create the Dominican consciousness of the reality of the truths that they preach... Dominican contemplation will be concerned to study and penetrate all the mysteries of the faith, the whole spectrum of Christian preaching" (Anselm Moynihan, O.P.).

The Chapters of Walberberg in 1980 and Rome in 1983 made significant contributions to the importance of preaching by sisters. Walberberg asks the brethren to form preaching teams with our sisters: "In this way our preaching will more easily and effectively reach the whole person" (No.77). We are challenged to form preaching teams, not just to help each other, but to make our preaching effective in peoples' lives.

The Chapter at Rome urges a wider and more frequent collaboration between brothers and sisters in apostolic work, especially in the office of preaching, teaching theology and in the development of new methods of preaching (No. 66). The following number states: "We especially exhort our sisters to use efficiently the preaching possibilities offered to them in spiritual exercises, in the renewal of parishes, in extra liturgical celebrations of the Word of God and in the visitation of families" (No.67). One other occasion suggests itself, namely, Morning and Evening prayer.

The sisters and brothers working together is itself a witness, a preaching. In the early days, a priory of the brethren was called a *sacra praedicatio*; today, this name describes the common apostolate of the entire Dominican Family.

We may talk of the dignity of women, but our words will have no weight unless we are seen to be an Order in which men and women work together with mutual respect and without fear.

That would indeed be "a word made flesh", the incarnation of a theology. I think it important to acknowledge that we have a long way to go and part of the problem is an exaggerated clericalism among some brothers who are not comfortable preaching with women.

According to Canon Law the homily at Mass is reserved to priests and deacons. This is a cause of irritation and sadness to some but there are many other places and opportunities to preach. We are called to be creative and flexible in preaching. If Catherine of Siena went to Raymond for spiritual direction, she in turn became his directress. A Dominican woman preaches the Word out of her experience of being a woman. In many ways, the priest may be seen in a sacral role which can diminish his effectiveness, whereas sisters are seen as fellow Christians who have nothing else to give but themselves and the Gospel.

The question of where we get our authority to preach is an important one. Obviously, today, both men and women need the permission of the local bishop. In earlier days it was the General Chapter, following Dominic's requirements, that decided "whether God" had given the grace for preaching. (Cf. Constitutions 1241, Dist. II, cap. XII) The American Sisters have published a very interesting study on this question.

The examples of preaching described in recent Chapters - sisters teaching in our universities, movements such... Parable in the United States; the preaching of peace by Dominican men and women, lay and religious in England are an inspiration for all.

Theological Reflection

"When Dominic wanted to form his brothers as preachers, he sent them to study." He recruited followers from the universities and sent them to the universities to prepare them for the preaching ministry. Dominic wanted his preachers to be both learned and competent. William of Montferrat tells that he and Dominic agreed to go to Northern Europe as missionaries when "Dominic had organized his Order and I had studied theology for two years...".

This tradition of study and theological reflection, not for its own end but for the salvation of oneself and others has been constant in the Order. It does not mean that a Dominican is necessarily more learned than other religious or that every Dominican must be a specialist theologian, but it does mean that the study of truth is an integral part of every Dominican man and woman. The Sisters are fully aware of this. The Oakland Chapter makes a further point.

"Listening in a Dominican way implies a community of brothers and sisters sharing in the communion of the same life project" (No. 43).

As we grow to a greater consciousness of the things we hold in common; devotion to St. Dominic and a clear understanding of our preaching mission within the Church - I believe that we must make a greater effort to have more of our institutional formation in common. (Cf. Q.C. No. 71, 79)

This applies to Provinces and Vicariates of the brothers, to Federations and Conferences of our nuns and to the Congregations of Sisters, where this is feasible. There are several examples: two Congregations of Sisters and the brothers in Bolivia, two Vicariates of brothers in Venezuela, the house of studies in Peru, the Inter-Congregational novitiate in St Louis, U.S.A., joint formation in the Solomon Islands, the Federations of nuns in Mexico, Argentina and Spain.

It seems to me that this is worthwhile in situations where we are expanding and vocations are plentiful as well as in situations where numbers are contracting.

Missionary Tradition

From the very beginning many Dominicans have heard a call like Abraham's: "Leave your country and your father's house for the land I will show you" (Gen. 12). Dominic himself had a great desire to go to the Cumans. Many of his followers shared his vision, some paid particular attention to the language and customs of those to whom they were sent. Dominicans were among the first to go to the New World and a missionary Province was formed in Spain in 1587 to respond to the call of the orient. Many Sister Congregations, were founded to fulfill this aspect of Dominic's charism.

In the past the role of the missionary was to establish the local Church. Today it is more to enrich the local Church with the particular charism of one's congregation. On a recent visit to Africa. I was surprised by the number of bishops who asked for our presence as preachers and theologians. In Kenya, one bishop promotes a Dominican preaching team of two sisters and a brother.

The Avila Chapter urges three aspects of Mission no matter where we find ourselves: the challenge of the great religions, the challenge of secular ideologies, and the challenge of the sects.

At the Second Congress of the Mission of the Order in Europe at L'Arbresle on new places of mission, someone remarked: "We do not have to found new places for preaching. They are there, but we are absent from them." ,The idea of the foreign missionary has changed, even the name has changed; but the need is still there. The idea of being an evangelizer, wherever we find ourselves, is the great challenge of our day. We must be as creative today as Dominic and the Foundresses of your Congregations were in theirs.

Justice and Peace

The example of our early missionaries in the New World can be our starting point. Within a year of the arrival of the first Dominicans in what is now the Island of Santo Domingo, they were proclaiming the dignity of the Indian. There are three elements of their approach that can instruct us even today.

1. When complaints were made to Prior Pedro de Cordoba about the content of Montesino's preaching he replied that it was not Montesino who preached but the whole community. It was a community decision to protest injustices. Montesino was the voice of the community.

2. Their impact was great because they were widely respected as theologians and exemplary Dominicans.

They looked for specialized help to their brothers at the University of Salamanca in Spain and as a result we have the first charter of human rights drawn up by Francis de Vitoria.

The lessons are clear - we must act as a community and not as individuals; as a community of Dominicans and not as isolated groups; we must realize that our significant contribution will normally be as theologians; we must know when we need outside help, for example in economics, social psychology... To speak on specialized topics or situations without real knowledge is a disservice to the Church and to the order.

In our day the Order has had two outstanding figures in the cause of Justice and Peace, Dominic Piere who received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work among refugees and Louis Lebret in his work and writing. I think too of Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and the young lay missionary Jean Donovan who gave their lives in the cause of justice in El Salvador.

Ecology is frequently mentioned as a part of justice. In our time, the Vatican Council has affirmed the value of creation. It asserts that our appreciation of the world is good, that the world is destined to be transfigured by the glory of God. Remember, the Dominican order was founded to defend this. Accordingly, it is not surprising to see the word ecology in the Acts of the 1983 Chapter, (No.33).

In the whole matter of justice we will preach more by the witness of our lives than with words. There isn't much point in being concerned about injustice if we are unjust in our dealings with employees, if we are careless about the environment or greedy in our use of our limited resources, if we fail to challenge the consumerism and the culture of our time.

We need not only to preach justice but to witness to it in our relationship with the Sisters. Often we, the brethren, presume upon the support of the sisters whether in the maintenance of our priories or in the pursuit of our apostolates, but we cannot be effective preachers of justice unless we are seen to deal justly with those closest to us.

Means of Communication

Tree Fourth Priority, although formulated in a modern way as tree means of communication, is deeply, rooted in our tradition. John Mills points out that two centuries before the print revolution Dominicans played an important role in making books a familiar communications media.

An enormous revolution has taken place in the means of communications in this century. We need to be familiar with the language of the media and to "use a language in preaching that is up-to-date, that is the language of the people, which enables us to be truly contemporary preachers" (Avila No 72).

The mass media are themselves an important means of discovering this language. They are also an important source of information about our world. But we must learn to evaluate them in a critical way, develop a healthy respect both for their power and their limitations together with an awareness of how they can be manipulated. We must also be conscious of the positive lessons of the media and the opportunities they afford us in preaching the word. Could we not do this more effectively together?

Dominican Government

One of the most distinctive features of the order is its system of government, the basis of which comes from Dominic himself. Although Congregations of Sisters founded in recent centuries may not have all the elements of our government, they nevertheless see the Dominican form of government as essential to their Dominican life.

Our Constitutions are the guarantors of the rights individuals and communities. The manner of arriving at decisions through the proper use of the Chapter, (the meeting of the professed) is necessary for successful Dominican Government and in no way takes away from the lawful authority of superiors and councils.

In his book Confidence for the Future, in the section on authority, Fr Vincent de Couesnongle wrote:

"The fundamental law of democracy is majority rule, but it is different with us, in spite of our frequent voting. Our law is unanimous rule. In the conventual chapter and it is, the same for provincial and general chapters, the prior should not look for a quick vote, but should try to have the question thrashed out, so that everyone has his say: and a common debate will lead to an agreement that is as near unanimous as possible. This striving for unanimity, even if we do not always succeed in doing it,' is the sure guarantee of the presence of the Lord and his spirit and by that very fact, it is a more certain way of discovering the will of God. It was thus that in Vatican II, Paul VI held up the taking of some votes to help people to understand the question better and prevent decisions being taken just by a majority vote.

There is no need to point out how much this seeking for unanimity demands from each religious and from the whole community."

Minority voices must be heard. They may have important things to say that may modify or change a position. If such voices are silenced by a quick majority vote our style of government is violated. Remember Dominican government is for mission, in the service of evangelization.

I share these thoughts with you. We are 40,000 Sisters, 4,000 Nuns, 6,900 Brothers, involved in diverse ministries. What can we not achieve if we work together?