

“In Collaboration Together”

Letter from The M.O. On Collaboration In The Dominican Family. May 1991

fr. Damian Byrne, OP

This year's meeting of the M.O. with the Superiors General took place, as planned, on 17th May in Santa Sabina. Sixty superiors from all over the world took part in what was a friendly meeting. The most important event was the presentation by the Master of his Letter on Collaboration. Here is the text:

Welcome to Santa Sabina. You are our sisters, this is your home. Welcome. I would like to share a few thoughts on collaboration in the Dominican Family.

We Dominicans have a very precise identity. We are all preachers. This is our vocation. Everything in our lives is directed to this. We share this vocation and I believe that we must as groups (not always as individuals) pursue our vocation together.

The Dominican Order was born a family. This was Dominic's design. The first foundation at Prouille was a joint foundation with a prior and prioress!

If, indeed, we are a Family we should have much to share; insights, experience, a shared hope, we should inspire one another and dream a little together. There should be a cross fertilization of experience and insight, a sharing with one another that is creative. But more, I believe we should be collaborating in ministry. We have begun, but we have only scratched the surface.

A little history. In modern times a renewed interest in the Dominican Family was initiated by Hyacinth Cormier (1904-1916) and Bonaventure de Paredes (1926-1929). Paredes described the Order as: "a particular and intimate family of the great Christian family."

He urged a strong family spirit among all Dominicans and authorized Dominican Sisters to sign their names O.P. He also established a commission to provide "whatever can contribute to preserve the relations of the family and promote intimate union between the several branches."

An equally important moment in the realization of the Dominican Family took place in 1968. Fr Aniceto Fernandez received a number of queries from Sisters regarding their place in the number of queries from Sisters regarding their place in the Order. It was the occasion of his celebrated letter in which he wrote:

"In this modern world where our Saviour has put us 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 for the best means of carrying out our apostolate, and to build up together our communities in the service of the Church. Nowadays women are taking their rightful place in the work of the Church. So too, the sisters must have their proper place in the apostolate of the Order.

Equality in Collaboration

Fr Aniceto writes to the Sisters as equals and as equals invites them to search together, "with the Brothers for the best means of carrying out the ministry which we hold in common - preaching in all its forms."

I believe that it is only when we accept each other as equals that we can collaborate effectively together in ministry. This is the only basis for collaboration. Furthermore, we have to learn how to work with each other, to accept each other as women and as men, as brothers and sisters. This requires a level of sensitivity and understanding not found in everyone.

Recent Chapters and Congresses

Since 1968, we men have tried to do everything from a legislative point of view which would affirm this equality. The General Chapter in Tallaght, (1971) declared that the Dominican Family was equivalent to the universal order of Preachers. "The name universal Order of Preachers is the same as the term Dominican Family and is composed of clerical and cooperator brothers, nuns, sisters, ..." (no. 122)

The first international conference of Dominican men and women in the history of the Order was the Missionary Congress of 1973 (Madrid). It called for international missionary projects and the establishment of national associations of the Dominican Family. This Congress asked the Master of the Order to appoint a sister to promote collaboration in the Dominican Family. The spirit of the Congress deeply effected succeeding chapters.

Another significant international gathering was that of the Dominican Family in Bologna: It stated:

"Our apostolic way of life is continually renewed in dialogue with our brothers and sisters and challenged by the values of the Gospel. Dominic associated women with his mission, thus affirming their place in the Church and its mission. As their heirs we have the task of manifesting the equality and complementarity of men and women." (no. 2.2)

The Chapter of Madonna Dell'Arco (1974) abolished the terms "First, Second and Third" Order as terminology unsuited in contemporary society. (no. 234) There are no first and second class citizens. All are equal. We are all preachers.

In 1977, we had the excellent document on The Dominican Family from the General Chapter at Quezon City. It noted two great movements in the Church and in the World, the emergence of the laity and the liberation of women "as an indispensable element in establishing the kingdom of God and the more recent and constantly growing movement towards the liberation of 'women and the recognition of their equality with men.'"(no. 64)

St. Dominic created the Dominican Family, not for itself, but to be at the service of the Church in its mission to the World. It is a great source for the evangelization of the world but a potential that is not fully 'realized through lack of collaboration.

"The development of an authentic Dominican spirit and of Dominican formation have suffered because of the lack of closer bonds within the Dominican Family... Now is the acceptable time for the Dominican Family to achieve true equality and complementarity." (Quezon City no. 64)

The Chapter also firmly stated that non-clerical members of the order are not less Dominican, nor participate in a deficient way in the Dominican vocation.

It made a number of practical suggestions: 1. A call for regional meetings of Dominican men and women. 2. A common course of basic formation for all members of the order, the purpose being to create a united spirit and understanding of our Dominican vocation.

Succeeding Chapters made further suggestions for collaboration in the ministry of the word in preaching retreats, involvement with youth, and catechesis in programmes of formation in promoting vocations in work for justice and peace.

Since 1968 we have endeavored to remove those obstacles which might impede collaboration. Chapters and Congresses have urged collaboration. There are fine examples of collaboration: joint novitiate formation in the Solomons, joint preaching teams in the United States, joint continuing formation and collaboration in justice issues, a joint news letter in Chile and joint collaboration in the running of retreat and conference centres.

Learning to Work Together

But we have only begun. Collaboration in ministry has not won wide acceptance among many brothers. You are better equipped to speak for the Sisters:

Collaboration is a whole new learning process. It requires a level of adaptation and acceptance that many are not able to cope with. I recall the advice of Sr Geraldine O'Driscoll. The first thing to remember on embarking on a team ministry is the importance of time. It takes time to become a team. When she began team ministry she says she wanted the priests to share their vision for the parish. They were unable to do this but "after four years they are now asking us to sit down with them and share our vision."

The second point she notes is that it is only in working together that you come face to face with the fact that "a man and a woman approach things differently and we have to be able to welcome that. This also means being sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of the brothers and of their being sensitive to what is important to us ... I have learned to appreciate the complementarity of working together and to beware of competition."

One of her priest colleagues said: "We priests have to forget that we are God and that God is male; and the sisters have to forget that they were school teachers."

Her final comment is particularly important : "The members of a team must develop the ability to listen to each other and to allow each other their own space and rhythm. Sharing ideas can be easy. The ways each one goes about implementing these ideas can be different and even surprising and we have to learn to respect each one's space and rhythm."

I would like to say this. We have programmed collaboration on the level of congresses and chapters but we have done almost nothing to address the human problems with which it confronts us as men and women. Geraldine's comments highlight this. It is not enough to want to work together we have to learn how to work together.

Areas of Needed Collaboration

I ask your help in three areas in which we need your collaboration at this time: Evangelization, Teaching, and the Central Administration of the Order.

Evangelization: I believe that the work of evangelization throughout the world is impoverished because of a lack of skills among evangelizers, skills which are essential to the success of evangelization today. Our great weakness in evangelization is our failure to adjust to the changed times in which we live and the absence of adaptation and inculturation. Today, we need the help of those trained in social psychology, cultural anthropology, comparative religions ... to help us devise new methods of evangelization for our time. I believe that we need sisters trained in these sciences to facilitate evangelization in a new era. A failure to equip ourselves with such skills will impoverish the work we do.

Teaching: The Chapter of Rome in 1983 recommended: "That the office of teaching in Dominican Institutes of study be exercised not just by the brothers but also by members of the other groups of the Dominican Family." (no. 278)

I would extend this to joint collaboration in formation. For how long have Dominican women been receiving the help of the men? We have not had the benefit of Dominican women preaching to us and helping us in our formation programmes. I think that in the past a

negative attitude to sexuality built walls, physical or psychological, around novitiates and houses of study and this harmed people rather than helped them. Contact with formators of the opposite sex is a healthy input in formation of male vocations.

I renew the invitation of the Bologna Symposium, which was a gathering of Brothers, Sisters and Dominican Laity to prepare those who have the desire and the, competence to teach in our different international institutions: I think in a particular way of the Angelicum here in Rome, but in other countries too. There is a serious need to incorporate the feminine insight into the teaching of theology and kindred sciences. We are impoverished because of its absence.

The Central Administration of the Order

First, I would like to express the gratitude of the order to those Congregations who so generously provided personnel for the secretariat in Santa Sabina over the past twenty years. This has been of immense help. The generosity and, dedication of the different sisters over the years has been marvelous.

The Mission Congress of 1973 made the following request:

"We ask that the Sisters be represented on the General Secretariat for the Missions, the General Secretariat for the Sisters and to the Master, General by a Sister with the title "Assistant to the Master General." In this way collaboration can be established at all levels of life in the order, for instance in reference to programmes of formation, interchange of lecturers and pastoral cooperation."

A very startling request, but in the right direction. In the January issue of I.D.I. there is a letter from Sister Veronica Rafferty in Argentina. She makes a plea for the establishment of a World Wide Union of Dominican Women. "Such an organization she suggests, would facilitate direct relationships between the Sisters and the Master of the Order, promote the life of the Dominican Family and facilitate joint planning for initial and permanent formation, "an organization that corresponds to our dignity, our aspirations and our needs." Is it time to move in this direction ?