

LETTER TO THE ORDER'S CONTEMPLATIVE NUN MAY 1992

In my Relatio to the Mexico General Chapter I commented on the unity of the Dominican Family worldwide. It is a unity based on a common love and appreciation of St Dominic and our traditions, and has deepened greatly since the call of the Second Vatican Council to religious to be in touch with their roots.

In your case this unity is shown by the remarkable appreciation and acceptance of your new Constitutions — as expressed in the replies to the questionnaire sent out by the Commission of Nuns. It is also demonstrated by the place of the Master of the Order in your Constitutions. Accordingly, it is fitting that one of my last acts as Master of the Order is to write you this long-promised Letter.

There are three main reasons for writing this Letter. First, to express the gratitude of the Order to our nuns for their fidelity to the vision of St Dominic. You are indeed at the heart of our preaching family. Secondly, there is a need to address the universal desire for adequate formation at all stages, and to promote a more participative form of community life in accordance with our tradition. Thirdly, questions and queries with regard to the interpretation of the Constitutions and the Directories are often addressed to us here at the *Curia*.

In our preparation for the Oakland Chapter (1989) the General Council thought that the best way to address these and similar matters would be to have a special commission for the nuns at the Chapter. The commission, which included four nuns, decided rightly not to go into these issues but rather to highlight the place of the nuns within the Dominican Family and to give guidelines to a proposed promoter and commission.

These officials are now in place. I realize that some nuns would have preferred more consultation before the appointments were made but time was not on our side. The appointment of fr Viktor Hofstetter [of the Province of the Annunciation BVM, Switzerland] as Promoter could only be made after he finished his terms as Provincial and it was important to appoint a Commission quickly to begin its work. They have since met twice and have reported to all of you directly and in their meeting in Santa Sabina 2-6 March 1992 formulated a proposal for a representative commission, taking into account cultures, languages and mentalities.

UNITY AND RENEWAL

The compilation of and the universal acceptance of your new Constitutions is a notable chapter in the history of the Order. Your answer to the letter of the commission is an impressive sign of unity with the Order and among yourselves. This unity is a powerful platform for necessary renewal. What we share above all is the fact that we are community-orientated and that our tradition is collegial. We must try and get this right, if we are to be authentic Dominicans. This collegiality, this community-orientation and consensus must be the basis, not only of our government, but also in our approach to practical problems such as formation, isolation and independence, enclosure. In his recent encyclical on social concerns John Paul II stated that continuity and renewal are a proof of the perennial value of the teaching of the Church. The same can be applied to the Order. We cannot have continuity without renewal. We cannot have real renewal without fidelity to our tradition. In his letter to

you from the General Chapter in River Forest (1968) the Master of the Order fr. Aniceto Fernandez wrote:

The renewal of the whole Church needs especially the renewal of the religious orders and most particularly the contemplative ones. This was recognized by the Vatican Council in the Decree *Perfectae caritatis*. Although our own programme of renewal will obviously not be identical in every detail with yours, there are many elements we share.

DOMINICAN CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

The vocation of a contemplative nun is a very special one which 'holds a very honoured place in the mission of the Church, no matter how pressing may be the needs of the active ministry (*Mutuae relationes* 23,b; *Perfectae caritatis* 7), Pope John Paul II, speaking to nuns in Guadalajara on 30 January 1979, put it in these words: To be a contemplative does not mean to distance oneself radically, from the world and the apostolate. The contemplative has to find her specific way of extending the Kingdom of God, to collaborate in the construction of the terrestrial city, not only with her prayers and sacrifices, but with her silent testimony, so that people of good will with whom she is in contact can understand her witness. For this you must find your own style of life, which within a contemplative vision helps you to share with your brothers and sisters the free gift of God,

Each contemplative Order has its own particular identity and its own way to lead its members to God. The Dominican identity and the Dominican way are firmly based on the reading, meditation and proclamation of the word of God. This demands of every Dominican the ability to be able to do serious reading as our main route to God, but also as our principal asceticism. This contact with God in prayer and study leads to the proclamation of the word. In your case the Constitutions recall Dominic's vision for you.

Mindful of the first nuns whom the blessed Dominic established in the monastery of Prouilhe at the heart of the 'Holy Preaching' the nuns, while living together in harmony, follow Jesus as he withdraws into solitude to pray. In this way they are a sign of the blessed city Jerusalem which the brethren build up by their preaching. In the cloister the nuns devote themselves totally to God and perpetuate that singular gift which the blessed Father had of carrying sinners, the downtrodden and the afflicted in the inmost sanctuary of his compassion (LCM 35a). There is no doubt that Dominican contemplative life in this vision is intimately linked to the mission of the whole Order.

To foster the awareness of the genuine vocation and the special role of the nuns within the Order (LCM 181) means deepening our understanding of the intimate link between contemplation and mission in the Order as pointed out by recent General Chapters. If this awareness is lacking, it leads to an impoverishment of Dominic's vision - with consequent lessening of the effect and contribution which the Order is called on to make to the Church and the world. (Oakland 147.2). One of you wrote recently:

Our special Dominican character is found in our relationship to the Order's mission, preaching the 'gospel of mercy', but expressed through the quality of communion among us, a communion in Christ, sustained by the Spirit. The nuns' special place in the preaching mission falls precisely within this initial witness of preaching, the community. Our witness comes primarily from our communal existence. The community is the place where the Word is born and lives.

THE WORD OF GOD

Our spirituality is based on the word of God - hearing the word. Contemplating the word and preaching the word. The three are interconnected, and for that reason it may well be that the most effective preachers of the Order are the *moniales*. The Acts of the Oakland Chapter reminded the brothers that they 'have not always allowed [themselves] to be challenged by the contemplative side of Dominican life, so strikingly evidenced by the life of the nuns, with consequent loss to the effectiveness of (their) preaching' (147.4).

In order to hear the word of God we must become poor and humble in a number of senses. Let us look at *each* Third Mystery of the Rosary - the Birth of Christ, his crowning with thorns, the Coming of the Spirit in this light.

The first requirement to hear the Word of God is to be truly poor, In the Third Joyful Mystery the witnesses to Christ's birth were poor shepherds. Their hearts were ready and able to receive the message. Speaking to priests in Colombia on 5 July 1986 on 'service to the poor according to the gospel', John Paul II told them: 'You cannot go to the poor without having the heart of the poor person who knows how to hear and receive the word of God as it is; this demands apostles who follow and imitate Christ in his life of poverty.'

The Holy Father went on to tell the priests that this poverty includes the renunciation of personal ambitions. This idea comes to us in the Third Sorrowful Mystery, Christ is deprived of every material good, including honour. We have to learn to be able to let go of everything if we wish to hear the Word. Many things suggest themselves - persons, places, obsolete traditions, ostentatious practices, power.

The Third Glorious Mystery reminds us that we are helped in our listening in a variety of ways - by the Church, by the Order, by our sisters in community. It teaches us too that the Spirit dwells in each of us and we should be aware of the value of our own insights while accepting that they must be tested. 'Not every spirit is to be trusted, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God' (1 Jn 4:1).

In what areas would I wish the Order to challenge you today in your hearing of the word? First and foremost, I would say in the matter of isolationism from other Dominican monasteries. In an article on Dominican Life, Fr Thomas Rausch SJ states,

Founded as an apostolic community, the Dominicans combined elements of the monastic and canonical past with the new evangelical movement of the late twelfth century. The mission of the community determined its lifestyle and spirituality. But the process of institutionalization that the community went through in the several generations that followed Dominic's gave it an increasingly monastic character.

This is certainly true for the brothers and the nuns and it is only in the friars' new Constitutions that we cease to speak of 'monastic' observances and instead call them 'regular'. The situation of the nuns is not exactly the same. But while you call your houses 'monasteries', the superiors are 'prioresses' and not abbesses. I am not looking for a change in nomenclature — only trying to concentrate on the fact that we call the superior a prioress and the convent a monastery. This has consequences for your notion of internal government and also for your willingness not to remain aloof-like a great monastery or a great abbess - from other Prioresses and monasteries within our tradition. Pope Pius XII stated: 'Although

Federations of Monasteries are not imposed as a general rule, they are strongly recommended, not only to remove the harm and inconvenience which can arise from complete isolation, but also to promote regular observance and contemplative life' (*Sponsa Christi*, Art. VI,n°2-I).

You have a common Constitution, you have many federations but there is also much isolationism. To move out of an exaggerated independence and sometimes isolation into a situation of interdependence: this is one of the first challenges.

VALUES AND STRUCTURES

Many years ago after my first visitation of a monastery I felt the need for many changes. But I was unsure of myself and submitted the changes to another vicar of nuns with a much wider experience than my own. His reaction to each proposed change was 'Yes, it will help the nuns to pray better.'

Over the years I have come to appreciate the wisdom of his reply. Perhaps it helped me much later in my letter on *The Common Life* to be able to formulate my belief that structures, while necessary, are not the most important thing. Values are of greater importance. Values remain constant in so far as they are rooted in the Gospel.

In that letter I pointed out six values which are essential for Dominican life: prayer, faith-sharing, fraternal correction, the vows, decision-making and community-building. Obviously, we need to re-examine our lives from time to time and ask ourselves whether we live the values which the gospel and our Constitutions put forward for our Dominican life. We have to insist on common life and on contemplative life, but the structures of that life can change. Their purpose is to promote and protect the values of religious life. They are not an end in themselves.

Your Constitutions are very clear on this:

Regular observance, adopted by St Dominic from tradition or newly created by him, fosters the way of life of the nuns by helping them in their determination to follow Christ more closely and enabling them to live more effectively their contemplative life in the Order of Preachers.' And: 'To regular observance belong all the elements that constitute our Dominican life and order it through a common discipline. Outstanding among these elements are common life, the celebration of the liturgy and private prayer, the observance of the vows and the study of sacred truth. To fulfil these faithfully, we are helped by enclosure, silence, the habit, work and penitential practices (LCM n° 35,1-II). There is a definite ordering in these values. Regular observances help the nuns in their determination to follow Christ more closely and enable them to live more effectively their contemplative life in the Order of Preachers. This is the first and most important level, the following of Christ in the contemplative life of the Order of Preachers. Regular observance is not a goal in itself, it is there to help and enable the nuns to live the contemplative life more effectively. But even among the elements of regular observance there is a certain ordering. Some of them are outstanding like common life, the celebration of the liturgy and private prayer, the observance of the vows and the study of sacred truth, because they constitute our Dominican life and order it through a common discipline. Others are to help us to fulfil these faithfully, like enclosure, silence, the habit, work and penitential practices. Again, the Constitutions do not say they are optional, but they say they all help towards the goal. The following of Christ

in Dominican contemplative life. I believe many problems in your communities stem from disregarding this clear hierarchy of values.

Some structures, obviously, can change. The Constitutions say St Dominic adopted some from tradition and created new ones. When we have strong values and good structures, then we have a coordinated life. When we have strong values and poor structures, then the life is unbalanced. On the other hand, when our values are weak and we have strong structures, then the whole edifice is fraudulent. When we have weak values and we have poor structures, then we are drifting. Clearly we are not saying we don't need structures; we do. But, first of all, we need real values, religious and Christian values, and then we need a structure to help us to have a really coordinated human, Christian and religious life.

DOMINICAN GOVERNMENT

The first and most important point to consider is that of the internal government of the monastery. When your Constitutions deal with government they legislate for a very special exercise of authority *viz.* the prioress, the chapter, the council (in that order). Each has its own role to play, and if one or the other 'authority' within the community does not function properly, in the long run, neither will the community.

This is what I wrote on obedience to the Mexican Federation after my recent visit:

The word obedience means to listen. In the Dominican tradition you have to listen in your monasteries to the prioress, the council and the chapter. Each has its own authority, which must take into account other legitimate authorities. No authority can dominate on its own. The example of St Dominic submitting his authority to his brethren is our great heritage. We must neither exaggerate nor underplay the role of prioress, council, *or* chapter, but must be faithful to the Constitutions which give each a specific competence. Only if we understand these roles, respect and observe them, will we have true Dominican obedience. This will require real, open discussion in chapter; but also acceptance by the council of its role in juridical matters and of the prioress in ensuring the observance of the Constitutions and the implementation of the general consensus of the community in matters that are open to it. Only in this fashion can it be true what the Constitutions say: Indeed, for a community to remain faithful to its spirit and mission it needs the principle of unity which obedience supplies (17.1).

According to LCM 201 the chapter of the monastery has the role of examining and deciding the most important matters concerning the life of the community. What is our difficulty in putting this into practice? As a Provincial, I had to deal from time to time with priors who did not hold community chapters (in the sense of discussions, not talks and chapters of faults). Usually, there was a problem with one or two brothers who continually brought up the same matters. I had three comments:

- 1) If you have a chapter only infrequently, brothers will bring up the same matters time and again
- 2) If you hold the chapter regularly the brothers' disc will soon wear out since it has been played a short time before.
- 3) The prior sets the agenda (after consultation with the community) so he can always declare that a topic is not to be discussed.

In the Friars' Constitutions there is the following: 'Before the chapter, capitulars can propose matters to be discussed to the chairman: if one third of the chapter proposes some business, the chairman is obliged to present it for discussion. During the Chapter, no business shall be proposed unless the chairman shall have given consent for it or shall have called for it' (LCO n° 312, § III).

There are many wise provisions in this Constitution — the 'right to propose to the president matters for discussion', 'during the chapter, no business may be proposed unless the president permits or invites it'... Perhaps, a similar Constitution can be included in your LCM in the future. Meanwhile it might serve as a guideline for the convocation of your community chapters.

Even though the use of one's authority may be legitimate, it will only bring results if the prior or prioress genuinely seeks constantly to arrive at a consensus within the community. I quote from fr Vincent de Couesnongle's own statement concerning Dominican obedience.

The fundamental law of democracy is majority rule, but it is not the same 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 which is as near unanimous as possible. This striving for unanimity —even if we do not always succeed in achieving it - is the sure guarantee of the presence of the Lord and his Spirit, and by that very fact, 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, But it is here that the precise point of what the friar preacher is trying to live and preach finds its realization. Lacking this, the complex life - so full of possibilities, which he is living - may just be an empty shell, while religious houses, instead of being fraternities of men who are living the faith, studying it and preaching it, can be just places where a group of people lead the same kind of life, a life which is vaguely religious (*Confidence for the Future*, pp no, f)-

It may be necessary to add that we will not always achieve this unanimity, no matter how hard we try. But if minority voices are really heard they will more readily accept the majority voice, and, indeed, their input will sometimes mean a change of direction for the community in particular matters. The important element of chapter discussion is listening, trying to understand the other's point of view and not being judgmental. The four conditions suggested by Paul VI in *Ecclesiam suam* are worthy of note:

- 1) *Clarity*. Dialogue presupposes and demands intelligibility. It is the interchange of thoughts.
- 2) *Gentleness*. Dialogue is not proud, it does not hurt, it is not offensive ... it is peaceful, it avoids violent methods, it is patient and generous.
- 3) *Confidence*. Paul VI points out that two things are necessary to ensure confidence in dialogue, namely, the care with which we choose our words and the basic disposition of good will necessary to enable us to listen to the other person.
- 4) *Prudence*. We need to keep in mind the psychological condition of those who listen (*cf Ecclesiam suam* n° 26).

Once a consensus has been reached, the obligation of the whole community to accept and implement the decision is clear. The chapter will be responsible to ensure the implementation of decisions made. Again this is not only to exercise a right, but to work for the good of the whole community:

In order that their contemplative life and sisterly communion may be more abundantly fruitful, participation of all in the ordering of the life of the monastery is of great importance: a good which meets with general approval is quickly and easily achieved (Humbert of Romans) (LCM, n° y). While the role of the chapter is central in Dominican government, the council and the prioress have their own roles to play that are no less important. Decisions have to be arrived at and implemented. The council is there to give advice to the prioress on matters she refers to them, *h* also has a very definite role in specific matters (LCM, n° 210).

The role of the prioress is firstly a pastoral one towards her sisters and secondly, to ensure that the life is lived according to the Constitutions (LCM, n° 195). She is the ultimate authority in the community, but her authority must be exercised in the spirit of St Dominic who, according to the process of his canonization, was 'cheerful, pleasant, patient, compassionate and kind, and a comforter of the brethren.' But this same Dominic could be firm and resolute when the occasion arose. One has only to remember that he firmly corrected the faults of the brothers, or recall his unilateral decision on 15 August 1217 to send the brothers to the whole world. It is an almost impossible ideal to live up to, and, indeed, some believe it is made more difficult by the constant questioning that exists in society and in the Church. It is necessary to accept that there are persistent complainers and disruptive members in communities. A prioress has to be assisted by her community. And I make a plea that the mercy and consideration we should extend to each other should it not most of all be extended to our superiors?

The second point to consider concerns an external or structural 'weakness' from the very nature of a monastic community and from the input {or lack of it) from the Order.

It is clear that the monastic tradition with its emphasis on the abbot/abbess as father/mother of the community is very different from the Dominican approach of the prior/prioress being *primus/ prima inter pares*. Your Constitutions are clearly in the Dominican tradition, and therefore authority must be exercised in that tradition according to the Constitutions. Over the centuries, the only way to form a new community (and this was true for the Sisters of active life for a long time) was to do so as new, independent units. The role of the superior in founding and establishing the new entity was crucial. It seems to me that the role of one person within the community became over-emphasized. In fact in some monasteries, dynasties of prioresses and novice mistresses have developed. And yet the Constitutions are very clear on this:

The prioress continues in office for three full years. At their completion she may be elected for another three-year term, but not for a third consecutive term in the same monastery (LCM n° 196, §I).

Why is it that some so easily disregard this provision of the Constitutions?

What I said above about being willing to leave things, persons and places behind applies very much to ex-prioresses. They must begin, during their term of office, to prepare suitable sisters for added responsibilities within the community; they must avoid every temptation to form

dynasties of like-minded sisters; perhaps they should think of spending some time in another monastery when they finish their term(s) of office, for their own sakes and that of their successors.

Just as the authority of the prioress is not absolute in our tradition, so, too, I believe we are called today by the Church and the Order to realize that the autonomy of monasteries cannot be absolute — in the sense that they must be aware of trends elsewhere, and help and be helped, by other monasteries. In 1965 the Holy See, in the document on the renewal of religious life, pointed out the need for mutual help between monasteries of nuns:

For the appropriate renewal of convents of nuns suggestions and advice may be obtained from assemblies of federations or from other lawfully convened assemblies (*Perfectae caritatis* n° 4).

Where the Constitutions deal with federations (LCM 235 - 237), the independence of monasteries, as well as the right to belong to a federation is recognized. I believe we still have a long way to go before the federations (or conferences) fulfil their potential in the matter of renewal and mutual help, especially in the matter of formation and the occasional transfer of key personnel. Too much inbreeding is unhealthy from the point of view of genetics; too much isolation or independence is unhealthy from the point of view of *religious* life.

IN A SPIRIT OF FREEDOM

Great care is to be taken to safeguard the due freedom of the nuns as regards the sacrament of reconciliation and spiritual direction (LCM 85).

This is just one of the passages in our Constitutions where the spirit of freedom St Dominic wanted for his communities is expressed- Accordingly, I would like to draw your attention to some particular points. First, we must not look on the Constitutions as a weapon to judge or threaten others, or in order to appoint ourselves as vigilantes. The purpose of law is to protect the rights of individual and communities, not to enable us to crush others.

A lawyer then spoke up: 'Master, he said: when you speak like this you insult us too.' 'Alas for you lawyers also', he replied: 'because you load on people burdens that are unendurable, burdens that you yourselves do not move a finger to lift' (Luke 11:45-46). There are among us many 'lawyers' in this sense.

Secondly, every sister has a right to write regularly to her family. This cannot be less than monthly for novices and postulants. There must be great freedom about letters to other monasteries. I wish to draw your attention to what the Code of Canon Law states: Nobody is permitted to harm unjustly the good name of any person, nor to violate the right of every person to protect his/her privacy (CIC 220). Therefore, only for a truly grave cause can the exception mentioned in LCM n° 43 be invoked.

Thirdly, the importance of canonical visitation cannot be overemphasized. The Master of the Order has the authority to institute a visitation, but, in practice, this is not done except in consultation with the local Bishop. I ask the prioresses and councils to ensure that every monastery has a visitation at least every two years (LCM n° 227 § IIL3). Even in the monasteries directly subject to the bishop, there is nothing to prevent you reminding the bishop of the need for a visitation and even of suggesting names of visitors (LCM n° 228 §

II.5). I accept that some monasteries have had unhappy experiences of visitations made both by Dominicans and non-Dominicans, and sometimes communities have false expectations of a visitation. A few clarifications may be helpful:

r. The purpose of a visitation is not to interfere in the internal government but rather to help the community to function better in the three departments of authority - prioress, chapter, council.

2. I believe the main function of a visitor is to listen attentively to each person. The visitor will not have solutions to many problems - human and other - but it is important that each member of the community can talk to a visitor once every two years in great confidence.

3. Given the difficulties of getting visitors and the need for fairly common criteria, would it be possible to ask each provincial/ group of provincials to provide one visitor for all the monasteries in the province/region every two years?

In the revision of Canon Law the preparatory commission established the following principle: In the actual legislation (1917 CIC) the monasteries and the nuns are dependent in many things on the regular superior or the local Ordinary. This situation does certainly not favour the maturity of the nuns, nor does it increase their sense of responsibility. On the contrary, it is not seldom that it leads to improper intervention in the administration of their internal life and of their own government, disturbing the discipline and the serenity of the common life of the nuns.

All this cannot be permitted in the new Code, the more so since the principle established by the consultative commission was to avoid any discrimination between the institutes, especially between institutes of men and women. For this reason, the institutes and the autonomous *{sui iuris}* monasteries of nuns have the right to their one way of life and their own legislation, according to their own laws *{Communicationes}*, vol. VI, n° I, 1974, p 90).

In accordance with the above-noted principle, the present legislation of the Church with respect to the monasteries of nuns gives no authority to either the local ordinary or the regular superior to legislate or to govern. The relationship between monasteries and the local ordinary or the regular superior, with respect to the internal life and government of the monastery is determined by the *Constitutions* of the latter.

I know that only a minority of our monasteries has extern sisters. However, it is in the spirit of renewal that we recognize their contribution to Dominican contemplative life. The Constitutions (by means of the local directories) give you the means to have them participate in the life of your communities. They have a right to participate in the life of the community and not only in elections.

FORMATION

Another challenge lies in the area of formation. I constantly remind the brothers of two questions of fr Vincent de Couesnongle: Why do you want candidates? How are you going to form them?

The instinctive answer to the first question is that we want people to come after us, but to recruit people just to keep up our numbers or to prevent monasteries from closing, and not to

give them the necessary formation would be a mistake — if not, indeed, very serious neglect. The Pope, speaking to the bishops of Japan, asked them how they were going to use the talents of those who were giving themselves for the service of the Church. A bishop has many needs, many gaps to fill in a diocese. And yet the Pope was asking them to look a bit further to the proper use of the talents of young men to whom God gives a priestly vocation. Accordingly, our recruitment of young people must bear in mind what they bring with them in the matter of talents and experience, and we must give them an adequate formation for this life, so that they may live sane, happy, fruitful and holy lives. In this light the second question is fundamental. The Church has given much thought to the formation of religious. Formation cannot be looked on as an automatic process where goodwill on the part of formators and those in formation is sufficient. In its introduction to *Renovationis causam* in 1969 the Congregation for Religious acknowledged the need 'to make a better adaptation of the entire formation cycle to the mentality of younger generations and modern living conditions.' One of the great insights of this document is the need to pay special attention to the period of preparation prior to entering the novitiate.

Your situation is not the same as the apostolic communities to which *Renovationis causam* was principally addressed, but it is similar. You are dealing with young people with different mentalities, who come from a very different world. And the new directives of the Holy See (January 1990) explicitly mention the nuns in this context. In n°44, where it deals with forms of realization of the stage before entrance into the novitiate, it states: 'These can be diverse: reception into a community of the institute, without sharing all its life - with the exception of the novitiate community which is not recommended for this, except in the case of nuns; periods of contacts with the institute or with one of its representatives: common life in a house of reception for candidates.'

I would challenge our nuns in the various federations to be as creative in looking at this stage of formation as many are in their novitiate and juniorate programmes. N° 43 of the directives is very explicit on the four conditions determined by the general law of the Church for entry into the Novitiate:

- a)that she have the necessary human and educational formation,
- b)that she have the necessary Christian formation,
- c)that she possess an affective maturity, and especially sexual balance,
- d)that she is able to live in community.

These must be present before a person enters the novitiate. Very few young women will be able to satisfy all four conditions when they *make* their first contact with the monastery. It seems to me that human education and Christian formation must be done outside the monastery. If younger women are interested in the monastic life they must be encouraged to do their studies, up to secondary level at least, in their own homes or, if this is not possible, by participating in the programmes of our active sisters. Experience has shown that a monastery is not the place to complete a candidate's education. A letter I received from one of our nuns, after the publication of my Letter on pre-novitiates, stated: 'even here in our own monastery, it has become increasingly clear that we, too, need some type of programme which will allow those who wish to join us to give the life a longer and very serious trial before really becoming part of our novitiate... Mother feels strongly about this, too; but we cannot see a way to work out something comparable for us nuns...'¹

Once you become convinced of the need, you will work out the programmes. Above all, be in no hurry to bring young women into the enclosure until they and you have attended to the four conditions mentioned by the Holy See.

To the two questions posed by fr Vincent de Couesnongle I believe we have to add a third: — How are we forming ourselves to receive those young people? This is a serious challenge to many of our communities, if initial formation is a problem for many, because of the lack of the necessary formators, how can we claim to be prepared to integrate into the life of the monastery young people who come from a world very different from ours? Again, let one of you speak:

I think we nuns as a whole need to do more serious reflection about the future. I personally feel that we will be fortunate if six or seven of the ten USA communities survive. There are many interim short-term needs that must be met. However, don't we have to make choices? Target some of them for future growth? We could possibly think of designating one monastery as a place of formation, two or three others places of care for our aged sisters, another to be a centre in the service of our communities in communication and publication. It seems to me that if you, our Dominican nuns, are serious about 'promoting Dominican contemplative life according to the conditions of each new age' (LCM, n° 181), you cannot avoid this third question.

NOVITIATE AND JUNIORATE

In my Report to the Oakland Chapter, I stated: The novitiate is a time which provides the novice with the necessary space and time to have a deep experience of God, It is a time to realize God's love and to accept that love and the fidelity which this implies. There is a value in the separation that novitiates have always had from the rest of the house. Particular care must be taken that the novices are not overburdened with tasks in the house... (*Acts of Oakland Chapter*, p 117), Some other questions that I asked the provinces in the same section could be adapted to yourselves, for example:

1. Has your monastery sufficient and suitable formators?
2. Is it putting the needs of those in formation in the first place?
3. Is there a solid study programme?
4. Is there sufficient appreciation of other monasteries, of what you can contribute to their wellbeing, of what you can receive from them?

While most monasteries will have difficulty in fulfilling the above-named requirements, federations or groups of monasteries could manage it. We cannot simply look on the young as 'necessary to keep the novitiate open, to maintain the choir and to do the work necessary for the upkeep of the community.' They need companions who are going through the same experience. The insistence I see on keeping one or a few novice(s) completely separate with the novice-mistress in the novitiate makes me question if we really understand what formation entails today.

In his introduction to the Book of the Constitutions of 1930, the Master of the Order, Martin Gillet, stresses the importance of formation and study as prerequisites for Dominican contemplative life:

It is not a matter of filling monasteries with intellectual religious, nor of holding that in the contemplative life knowledge prevails over love; that would be disastrous. No, it is not a question of intellectuals but of informed religious who wish to know God to the greatest possible degree in order to love him better, to love him better so as to know him more intimately,

How many individual monasteries can give this essential formation today?

PREACHERS OF HOPE

The Oakland General Chapter reminded us that we have no reason to preach if our preaching it not awakening hope or giving that hope new impetus (cf 43 IV). The great variety of saints of the Order of Preachers shows us that there are many ways of fulfilling our vocation as Preachers. In *Evangelii nuntiandi* Paul VI wrote that:

In the Church the witness given by a life truly and essentially Christian which is dedicated to God in an indissoluble union and which is likewise dedicated with the utmost fervor of soul to our neighbour is the primary organ of evangelization (n°4,i). This was the vision of St Dominic and of our many saints. The life of a contemplative nun is, above all, that of one who preaches by the witness of her life.

Preaching by word will also have a place when you share your faith with another sister or with the community, and also in the personal contacts you make through letters and with visitors {cf *Evangelii nuntiandi* in the section of the document on the means of Evangelization).

Fr Chenu once said: 'You can enter the Order of Preachers through two doors: the apostolic or the contemplative. I have entered through the contemplative door, and over the years have discovered the apostolic dimension of the Dominican charisma.'

In his old age he asked the question: Does the Order have a future? And with remarkable optimism he responded:

The future of the Order lies where the Church has to risk her life. in a world so rapidly and radically changing: there the Order finds its *raison d'etre*. The future of the Order lies in this relevance of the Church. We were born out of this encounter between the world and the Church, out of the confrontation of the Church with the world that is already 'modern'; this was the challenge Dominic and the first brothers and sisters were facing. They faced it happily in giving their lives. Let us be generous in giving of our own life!

I conclude with this fine description of your life by a contemplative sister who was once a member of one of our active Congregations:

To be aware of each other as Dominicans has become more meaningful to me since I have been in the monastery, because I know that I am here to offer my life in prayer for the world and in particular for my Dominican brothers and sisters. I am no longer a Dominican with a personal apostolate, but now I am part of the whole Dominican apostolate, and therefore I feel more keenly the pulses of suffering and joy within our Family.

APPENDIX

1. *RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MONASTERIES AND THE LOCAL ORDINARY/REGULAR SUPERIOR* according to the Book of Constitutions of the Nuns of the Order of Preachers (LCM).

It is obvious from these Constitutions that there is a very special and extensive relationship between all the monasteries (and nuns) and the Master of the Order, while the relationship with the local Ordinary is quite limited and only applies to some monasteries.

. THE MASTER OF THE ORDER:

- can make ordinations especially for the monasteries 180.4
- is authorized to oversee changes in the Book of Constitutions 182, 239
- can interpret and clarify the Constitutions 187
- can apply Acts of General Chapter to nuns 240
- can grant an habitual dispensation from the Constitutions to a monastery or to an individual nun 189.IV, 238
- can impose a formal precept in all monasteries 191.1.1
- can receive professions 156
- can make a visitation of all monasteries 228.III

- approves the local Directories for all monasteries 184 -approves the Federal Directories 185
- must give his permission for new foundations 229.2
- appoints the first prioress of a new monastery 233.II
- can appoint and depose prioresses and other officials in those monasteries under his special, jurisdiction 238.3

Furthermore:

- all the nuns profess obedience to the Master of the Order: 17,
- all the monasteries are under the power of the Master of the Order according to the norms of the Constitutions: 174

The Master of the Order is the proper and immediate regular superior of all the nuns and monasteries: 238.1, 227. The local Ordinary:

- is not the regular superior: 228
- cannot impose a formal precept: 191.II

In those monasteries, however, entrusted to his special vigilance: [174.HI](#):

- he can preside at the election of the prioress and he can announce (not confirm) the result: 228.II. 1
- in accordance with CIC 667.4 ^{he can grant} permission to enter or leave the enclosure: 228.II.2
- can grant permission to accept legacies: 228.II.3
- he approves the annual report of administration: 228.II.4, 280
- can make a canonical visitation: 228.II.5
- for a just cause, can postpone the election of a prioress: 255.1
- for a just cause, can allow a nun to abstain from voting: 246.II
- receives, the annual report of the prioress: 200.1

2. *CHANGES IN THE LCM*

The Constitutions, at n° 239 and n° 182, state that the Master of the Order, taking into consideration the requests of the monasteries, will obtain the approval of the Holy See for any changes in the Constitutions.

One of the purposes of the Commission of Nuns is to monitor any requests there may be for changes in the Constitutions. In due course these will be submitted to the vote of all the monasteries.

For the present no changes are envisaged. The first steps will have to come from yourselves.

Two matters to be considered when this process begins will be the following:

- a) It would be more in conformity with the basic principles of *LCM* with respect to the relative roles of Chapter/Council if;
- the deliberative vote for the appointment of the subprioress and mistress of novices were given to the Chapter rather than to the Council. *c/LCM 216.I.3*;
 - the deliberative vote for the appointment of a vicarress of a new foundation were given to the Chapter rather than to the Council *cf LCM 216,1.4*.

With regard to *LCM 203.II* This states: 'The deliberative vote of the chapter is required following the deliberative vote of the council' [concerning admissions to postulancy / novitiate / temporary profession / renewal of profession / solemn profession]: While at first sight this provision would seem to place the Chapter in a secondary role relative to the Council, *de facto* in those instances where the deliberative vote of both is required, the decisive *vote* rests with the second vote, namely that of the Chapter. On the other hand, in the case of those rejected by the Council the decisive vote

remains with the Council as a positive vote of the Chapter is of no avail where both votes must be positive. But rejections are the exception. Thus this number in effect gives preference to the Chapter.

- b) The following taken from a suggested Directory Provisions for Extern Sisters:

Directories may provide for active voice for extern sisters in certain areas; i.e. the election of the Prioress and Chapter matters that pertain to them (*cf LCM 242*). The Directory may also provide for passive voice for extern sisters in the election of the Monastery Council (*c/LCM 244*).

Two areas that would not seem open to further review are the Federations (nn. 235 - 237) and the Enclosure. A letter from the Congregation of Religious dated 18 February 1985 requested us:

- 1) to omit several articles dealing with Federations because they were not matter for the Constitutions;
- 2) to put all matters dealing with enclosure - apart from what is contained in the code of Canon Law - in an Appendix to the Constitutions, *e.g.* 7 and 8 of *Venite seorsum*.

3. *FEDERATIONS*

Following the strong recommendation in *Sponsa Christi* in the matter of Federations we find in the documents of Vatican II: Institutes and independent monasteries should, as opportunity offers and with the approval of the Holy See, form federations, if they belong in some measure to the same religious family. Failing this, they should form unions, if they have almost identical constitutions and customs, have the same spirit, and especially if they are few in numbers. Or they should form associations if they have the same or similar active apostolates. (*Perfectae caritatis* n° 22). I see several areas where a good Federation could be of immense help to its monasteries:

- a) in the matter of common formation;
 - b) in ensuring that Visitations are made; (Perhaps, too, federal prioresses should make regular formal visits on the lines of a visitation to help the monasteries towards a more common vision and the necessary revision of their community life.)
 - c) in exchange of personnel;
 - d) in having the same criteria regarding enclosure;
 - e) to ensure that foundations are not made without all the necessary permissions;
- 0 to ensure that new buildings and major renovations fulfill the requirements of Civil Law and are within the financial possibilities of the community.

4. *ENCLOSURE*

The Enclosure is a necessary means for your life but is a means, not the purpose. The document *On the Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life* (January 1981) states: 'If separation from the world is of the essence of the contemplative life, this enclosure is an excellent sign and means of achieving that separation according to the spirit of the different institutions' (n° 29).

The spirit of our monasteries is found in your Constitutions where they place the enclosure in the context of the observances. It is one of the observances (Fundamental Constitution §V): it is the first of the observances which helps the essential elements of your life — common life, celebration of the Liturgy, private prayer, the practice of the vows and study (LCM 35.II).

Therefore it is important that the Prioress in consultation with the local Ordinary make the necessary regulations, not only from the perspective of law or norms, but based on the very purpose of your life. Papal enclosure is to be maintained for nuns whose life is wholly contemplative. However, it should be adjusted to suit the conditions of time and place, abolishing obsolete practices after consultation with the monasteries themselves (*Peifectae caritatis*, n° 16). i In the same way, the use of the media and the kind of reading material in the monastery should be determined. Does it foster your life, or does it lead to dissipation, or indeed harm community life ?

314

With this approach to enclosure, it is hard to understand how common formation, for example, can be seen as a hindrance. Surely well-prepared young religious will have an even greater appreciation of the place of the enclosure in their lives and not just accept it as an inflexible law with only a restrictive meaning for them!

5. *SECRECY OF BALLOTS*

The fact that a scrutator recognizes a person's handwriting does not mean that the secrecy of the ballot has been violated. The violation of secrecy would lie in communicating that fact. The electoral process of the Order has stood the test of time and we can safely follow it.

Another query I received was about a councillor wishing to abstain from a particular vote. The point made also seemed to indicate that the councillors went up to the urn in turn to vote. In case of doubt or necessity I declare that (a) you may use a third bean for abstention, and (b) the urn may be passed around the council table (usually done by the Secretary).

6. *REQUESTS FOR SISTERS*

We receive two kinds of requests for Sisters: (a) to open new monasteries, and (b) to reinforce monasteries that are in danger of daying out.

Most local Churches and bishops are anxious to have houses of contemplatives. A local Church lacks something until all forms of religious life are present, and our aim must be to bring this aspect of the Order to as many new places as possible.

When it comes to consider monasteries that are in danger of dying out there are many questions to consider:

a) If the monastery dies, will contemplative life die in that particular place?
b) What are the possibilities for recruiting young people and giving them the necessary formation? If the main effort is on keeping a house going then the question of closing or not is merely being postponed.

c) Are there other Dominican monasteries in the place/area? Could they amalgamate and go to a new place or choose one of the monasteries existing already as a 'new' foundation?

The norms of the Holy See in the Norms for Implementing the Decree *Perfectae caritatis* (n° 21) are very clear about the criteria that should guide us:

In attempting to reach a decision concerning the suppression of an institute or monastery, the following are the criteria which, taken together, one should retain, after one has taken all the circumstances into consideration: the number of members remains small, even though the

institute or monastery has been in existence for many years, candidates have not been forthcoming for a long time past and most members are advanced in years. If a suppression is finally decided upon, provision must be made that, if possible, (the institute) be amalgamated with more flourishing institutes whose aim and spirit are similar to their own. Each religious must be individually consulted beforehand, and all must be done with perfect charity. (*Instituta religiosa*¹, n° 41). Certainly we cannot believe that it is the Lord's will to use the talents of the young sisters that he sends us merely to keep every existing foundation going. What is important is that Dominican Contemplative Life flourish in as many places as possible — new and old — and not that it continues in every place if this means a diminished kind of existence for some and, especially, for young sisters. Sincerely yours in St Dominic,

fr Damian Byrne, OP Master of the Order

|. [This document is *also* called *Ecclesiam Sanctae II*, but for locating this final quotation it may be useful to note the specific title for the part of *ES* providing particular norms in relation to Religious Life. It was published on 6 August 1966.]