

RECLAIMING THE DOMINICAN VISION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

PURSUING COMMUNION IN GOVERNMENT

fr Malachy O'Dwyer, OP

Introduction

At first sight one might wonder what might be the relationship between Dominican vision and communion in government. Surely, it will be said that the vision of the Dominican Family is to be found in the first section of the Book of Constitutions dealing with the life of the brothers and sisters; in those parts dealing with religious consecration, prayer, study, ministry or work, formation, rather than in the second section dealing specifically with government. At least it is not likely that one who sets out to capture the spirit, the charism, of the Dominican Order will begin with the section on government.

And yet, in the Constitutions of the Friars, far more space is given to the section on government as compared with the section on the life of the brethren. Of the 619 constitutions contained in LCO, 368 are found in the section on government while there are only 283 in the first section. Over 3/5 of LCO deals specifically with government. In fact, the percentage would be much greater if we extract from the first section all those constitutions dealing purely with legal requirements (eg for novitiate, profession, ordination, study). The difference in proportion is not quite as noticeable in the Constitution of the Nuns. Of a total of 283 constitutions, 113 (that is 2/5) are devoted specifically to government while there are 170 in the first section. Here again one would have to take into account the purely legal requirements of the first section.

But whatever the precise proportion might be, it must be admitted that we give a lot of space to matters dealing specifically with government, with how we organise ourselves.

Inspiration and Institution

I would argue that, unless we understand the laws, the norms, which govern our relationships within the family of Dominic and within each of its parts, it is very difficult to have a true understanding of the vision which Dominic had when he founded the Order. Dominic has not left us writings of substance but he has bequeathed to us institutions which embody his spirit and vision. Hence the importance for us to appreciate and to be a part of these living institutions.

Unfortunately for some time we have been caught up in a tide of anti-legalism that has swept through the Church. It was felt that an excessive emphasis on legal norms had blurred the basic vision of the Christian vocation and there was obviously much truth in this. But for us the vision and the spirit of Dominic are so interwoven into the fabric of the norms, the organisation, which rule our lives, that one cannot ignore the latter without running the risk of losing sight of the former.

“These (Constitutions) rule us and not the ideas of any individual or individuals. We are Dominicans and our life is only possible as long as we obey our laws.”¹

“We have learned, and paid the price to learn, that living and working together can be done in one way only –under law. There is no truer and simpler idea in the world today.

Unless it prevails, and unless by common struggle we are capable of new ways of thinking, mankind is doomed.”

(Quotation from a letter published in the *New York Times*, 1945, of which Einstein was one of the signatories, in Jonathan Schell, **The Abolition**, Picador, London, 1984, p 29)

If we are to recover or reclaim the Dominican Vision for the 21st century then we must look to the institutions that have been bequeathed to us. And it is only through living them in practice that we will regain that vision to which we all “subscribe thoughtlessly”. “... , but all subscribe thoughtlessly to many beliefs, the truth of which does not strike home to us until experience gives them reality. Wisdom may be rented, so to speak, on the experience of other people, but we buy it at an inordinate price before we make it our own forever.”²

Charism and Community

Marie-Humbert Vicarie is very explicit in affirming the connection between the charism of Dominic and the community which he founded. The thread of Dominic’s inspiration is finely woven into the fabric of the life of the community.

“The genius of the Father of the Friars Preachers was to have invented a community capable of inspiring, forming and making of such preachers, planting them on Christian soil as well as beyond it. No one in the West up till then succeeded in doing this. No evangelical preacher had succeeded in handing on his charism and his ministry by means of a community that was lasting and effective.”³

Vicaire also points out the principal method which Dominic used to ensure both the continuation and the development of his vision and inspiration.

“In 1220 a new factor came into play, one which was to bring to completion both the framework of the Order of Preacher and its inner strength, and which would direct the course of its evolution. This new element was the community of brethren assembled in General Chapter, for in 1220 Dominic arranged for representatives from the dozen priories which he had founded to meet at Pentecost. He summoned them to Bologna, home of the most dynamic of all his communities and centre of learning for both church and civil law. He expressly stated that in this major Chapter was vested the legislative authority of the Order, and that while in session it would have supreme powers of control and government, even over his own person. This decision profoundly shaped the outlook of the Friars Preachers and their institute.

Did Dominic do this of his own initiative? He did indeed. It was he who decided to convoke the Chapter, and he made it abundantly clear that he regarded its authority as sovereign. Such authority could not be taken for granted. On Dominic’s part it implied a gesture of humility and of trust in his brethren which moved them so deeply that we hear echoes of it even in our own day. Dominic had both a sense of community and a love of community, something which found expression in the wider application of the dictum borrowed from Roman law: ‘Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet’ – ‘what is of concern to all must be dealt with and agreed by all.’ ”⁴

Dominic’s vision, his inspiration is communicated to his brethren in such a way that it becomes the creation of all. He inspired others by sharing his vision and allowing it to take root and

mature in them in such a manner that it seems to come as much from them as from him. He allows them to make it their own and give it a shape to their own liking.

“The care with which he sought to draw from a person the best effort he was capable of brings us to another characteristic of St Dominic; his desire for fraternal communion. ... But once it concerned the collective activity, whether of legislation or discipline, he gave precedence to the fraternal communion. ... His spontaneous confidence in the community of his brethren, his desire to give each one the maximum of initiative and commitment where our common work is concerned, his obvious joy at seeing the system work was seen most radiantly in the last days of his life at the convent of Bologna.”⁵

The mechanism by which this is achieved is very simple. He brings the brethren together and tells them that they must decide how they shall live and work together. This coming together, this sharing and deciding together is what we call “Chapter”.

Jean Vanier offers us the insight that any coming together and sharing is “a place of mediation”, a place of mediating something greater than what each individually has to offer.

“A place of mediation is that place of belonging where we find structures and discipline, where we can search for truth together, where we find healing for our hearts that are incapable of relating to others in a healthy way, where we can learn not to be locked up in our own needs and desires but to welcome others as they are, to accept that they have different gifts and capacities, that they are important and have value. The place of mediation helps us to discover that we are part of something much bigger, that together we can do something beautiful.”⁶

The Post Synodal Exhortation, **Vita Consecrata**, also reminds us of the community dimension to discovering the "Father's will", and that surely is “something much bigger” than what any one individual can offer to the group.

"This testimony of consecration takes on a special meaning in religious life because of the “community dimension“ which marks it. The fraternal life is the privileged place in which to discuss and accept God's will, and to walk together with one mind and one heart. Obedience, enlivened by charity, unites the members of an Institute in the same witness and the same mission, while respecting the diversity of gifts and individual personalities. In community life which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, each individual engages in a fruitful dialogue with others in order to discover the Father's will.”⁷

A respected commentator of political philosophy has pointed out that the real basis for true democracy lies with 'small communities'. "For democracy to work citizens need to develop an irrational pride in their own democratic institutions and must also develop what Tocqueville called the "art of associating", which rests on prideful attachment to small communities.”⁸

Elsewhere he notes - "Tocqueville argued that democracy works best when it proceeds not from the top down, but from the bottom up" (ibid p 218) In other words true democracy will only flourish where there is a conscious effort to promote real participation by all in the local group. Otherwise what takes its place is only a semblance of democracy.

Our Constitutions refer to the local community as the "cellula fundamentalis". This is where the brethren should gather to discuss their concerns and aspirations, which subsequently are brought by their representatives to the next level of communion in government, that is the

provincial chapter. 'Mass democracy', with its tendency towards centralization of power, rather than promote participation at the local level, prefers to by-pass if not suppress it. In the absence of participation "from the bottom up", special interests and groupings can easily have and exert undue influence at the level of central government. Hence the growth of "pressure groups", "caucuses", "lobbies" and such like in modern democracies. Of course these further marginalise and weaken the role of the local community.

The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, in their Pastoral Letter **The Common Good**, point out - "Democracy, if it is to be healthy, requires more than universal suffrage: it requires the presence of a system of common values." (n 34) A system of common values requires shared reflection and discussion and consensus as to what those values might be. A true democracy, then, must promote such reflection and discussion among all the members of society.

Or we might listen to a more poetic but no less perceptive exhortation of the need for a coming together and sharing by all if we are if we are to achieve "any common taste and fellowship".

"Now it appears to me that almost any Man may like the spider spin from its own inwards his own airy Citadel - the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few, and she fills the air with a beautiful circuiting. Man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Web of his Soul, and weave a tapestry empyrean - full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wanderings, of distinctness for his luxury. But the minds of mortals are so different and bend on such diverse journeys that it may at first appear impossible for any common taste and fellowship to exist between two or three under these suppositions. It is however quite the contrary. Minds would leave each other in contrary directions, traverse each other in numberless points, and at last greet each other at the journey's end. An old man and a child would talk together and the old man be led on his path and the child left thinking. Man should not dispute or assert, but whisper results to his Neighbour, and thus by every germ of spirit sucking the sap from mould ethereal every human might become great, and humanity instead of being a wide heath of furze and briars, with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a great democracy of forest trees." ⁹

Person and Project

The shape, which Dominic gave to his Order, seems very simple. But it is important to understand the implication, the unspoken and unwritten values which lie beneath the fabric of our way of life. We can begin by asking ourselves; why did Dominic place so much trust and confidence in his companions? The answer is a simple one. He was profoundly a man of God, convinced that the hand of God lay upon everything and everyone. His own vocation as a preacher was not one that came to him in a sudden illumination, but rather one which emerged slowly from the circumstances of his life and especially from being attentive to the needs of others. The lesson he learned from this was that he must be attentive to the voices of others, to listen to God speaking to him through the lives of others. If he was convinced that God was indeed speaking to him through voices other than his own, then he had to organise his family in such a way that all within the family could be heard. He had to create a space in which all would feel free to contribute. I like to think that Dominic saw his relation with his brothers as similar to that between the priest Eli and his disciple Samuel. (Cf I Samuel 3). Dominic knew that those who came to join him were called by the Lord and that the Lord was speaking to them. Like Eli, he knew that if he were to discover what it was the Lord was saying to them, he would have to

listen to them. And he also knew that it might be something over and above what he understood the Lord had said to him personally. There was no question of having a ready-made model carefully prepared and maintained into which his companions would have to fit and by which they would be formed. He was well aware that their vocation was not of his making but a free gift of God, which he should accept humbly and cherish.

“In the case of the Dominicans it is rather Dominic’s role as ‘founder’ which is in question. It was Dominic’s bishop, Diego, whose vision initiated the style of apostolate which led to the founding of the order, and it was Diego again who first conceived the idea of an ‘Order of Preachers’. It was Innocent III who suggested turning them into a respectable religious order, and it was Dominic *with his brethren* who accepted and implemented this suggestion. It was the General Chapter of 1220 which established the basic structure which united the order and secured its future as a coherent institution, and it is known that on various points the Chapter did not accept Dominic’s own wishes. The order would certainly not have come into being, or it would have been significantly different, with the particular contribution of Dominic; nevertheless it was created and shaped by the interaction of many people and many circumstantial factors.

It is perhaps too facile to look for some basic inspiration which gives each order its particular physiognomy; indeed such a notion could easily generate largely fanciful justification for almost any kind of ‘reform’ in the name of a return to ‘the founder’s charisma’. The apparently simple quest for the ‘inspired holy founder’, if conducted with historical honesty, may well lead in fact to a whole concatenation of people and circumstances, in which the divine element is to be seen, not just in the inspiration of a few holy people, but also and perhaps more importantly in the way in which God’s providence brought something into being by means of all sorts of people (not all of them holy or inspired) and all sorts of ‘accidental’ events. It is perhaps, after all, the accidents which cumulatively do most to define the specificity of a religious order.”¹⁰

If others were called to join Dominic in his project then some system had to be devised which respected both the freedom of God to speak as He wished and the freedom of each to express their understanding of what God was saying to each personally.

“Also I would say that we had a good long tradition of community meetings, with everybody, students, novices, everybody, trying to discuss quietly, patiently, trying to reach a consensus. We didn’t always succeed. Looking back now I see we failed, but at the time I thought we did well. I think it went with a strong belief, for me at least, that the role of superior was going to be like the gardener. You didn’t come to bring your own vision; you didn’t come to impose your ideas; your bit is to cultivate what is there. That I think is the best bit about being a superior – to discover the richness in the brethren. The challenge is to believe in them more than they believe in themselves. You can only do that if they believe in you more than you do in yourself - so it is like mutuality of belief.”¹¹

“In healthy belonging, we have respect for one another. We work together, cooperate in a healthy way, listen to each other. We learn how to resolve the conflicts that arise when one person seeks to dominate another. In a true state of belonging, those who have less conventional knowledge, who are seemingly powerless, who have different capacities, are respected and listened to. In such a place of belonging, if it is a good place, power is not imposed from on high, but all members seek to work together as a body. The implication is that we see each other as persons and not just cogs in a machine. We open up and interact with each other so that all can participate in the making of decisions.”¹²

Nature and Nurture

The system devised by Dominic must have seemed to some a sure recipe for anarchy and disintegration. But, in fact, the miracle is that the family of Dominic has never in its 700 years lost its unity. If not a blueprint for self-destruction, it must have seemed to many a dream, an ideal, for a utopic society in which everyone had an equal right to say what they wished and the assurance that they would be heard respectfully.

The following quotation is part of the conclusion of a book entitled **Culture and Society**, written by Raymond Williams in which he proposes that the only way forward for modern society is through a system of mutual sharing and participation. When I first read this book a number of years ago, I reflected then that this, for a Dominican, was no dream for the future but a living reality – or, at least, that our system tried to make it a lived reality. But let Williams speak for himself.

“A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealised. The making of a community is always an exploration, for consciousness cannot precede creation, and there is no formula for unknown experience. A good community, a living culture, will, because of this, not only make room for but actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need. Wherever we have started from, we need to listen to others who started from a different position. We need to consider every attachment, every value, with our whole attention; for we do not know the future, we can never be certain of what may enrich it; we can only, now, listen to and consider whatever may be offered and take up what we can.

The practical liberty of thought and expression is less a natural right than a common necessity. The growth of understanding is so difficult that none of us can arrogate to himself, or to an institution or a class, the right to determine its channels of advance. ... To tolerate only this or that, according to some given formula, is to submit to the phantasy of having occupied the future and fenced it into fruitful or unfruitful ground.

We have to plan what can be planned, according to our common decision. But the emphasis of the idea of culture is right when it reminds us that a culture, essentially, is unplannable. We have to ensure the means of life, and the means of community. But what will then, by these means, be lived, we cannot know or say.”¹³

Raymond Williams is, of course, writing as a sociologist. He is not concerned, at least not directly, with the religious dimension of human experience. But if his analysis is correct from a natural point of view, then it is even more so when we take into account the factor of God’s influence in human affairs, in the life of each. It is not possible to say beforehand, to predetermine, what God will say to this or that person, what he may be asking of them. All that can be done is to create an environment, which will respect and facilitate vital forces that are not of our own making. Dominic knew this and he did create such an environment. He was careful to provide a space for individual freedom within the framework of the relationships necessary to ensure the survival of the group.

We are often tempted to think and behave otherwise. It is all too easy to think that we have fully grasped what we like to call the ‘Dominican Ideal’ and that we must hold on to it tightly and make sure that others understand it as we do. But that is to attempt to create something in our own image rather than respect the image, which God is gently and slowly bringing to fruition in each of his creatures. This is the danger, that, through excessive zeal or perhaps through fear of

losing something precious, we might distort if not destroy that which we claim to cherish. Here again, we might listen attentively to the word of Raymond Williams.

“It is as if, in fear or vision, we are now all determined to lay our hands on life and force it into our own image, and that it is then no good to dispute on the merits of rival images. This is a real barrier in the mind, which at times it seems impossible to break down: a refusal to accept the creative capacities of life; a determination to limit and restrict the channels of growth; a habit of thinking, indeed, that the future has now to be determined by some ordinance in our own minds. We project our old images into the future, and take hold of ourselves and others to force energy towards that substantiation. We do this as conservatives, trying to prolong old forms; we do this as socialists, trying to prescribe the new man.”¹⁴

Unity and Diversity

Herein lies the genius of Dominic. He was able to create a system which would both confirm and respect the gifts, the talents, the graces of each and also confirm and strengthen the community, which is even larger than the individual gifts.

It is a system that is able to support and encourage diversity without creating separation. But it is not a simple system; it is a complex organization requiring constant attention, re-evaluation and adjustment. But this is the sign of true democracy, true freedom.

“I wonder whether there is not also a connection between true democracy, true freedom, and the impermanence of the models we revere. ... It is as though democracy can only thrive on the sharing – and then perhaps on the shearing – of illusion, and can flourish only on the ruins of permanence. ... A genuinely democratic culture, however, like the carefully balanced life of an individual human being, is a fragile thing, the more valuable for the built-in impermanence of everything it embodies.”¹⁵

The system of government, of living together, which Dominic has bequeathed to his family, is a texture which is loosely woven, leaving big enough gaps through which our own lives can send their threads and designs. And we must be careful to leave it so. Sometimes in the name of a false unity, we tend to tighten and tidy up that flexibility which is part of our heritage.

“The tendency of the mind is economical, it loves to form habits and move in grooves which save it the trouble of thinking anew at each of its steps. Ideas once formed make the mind lazy. It becomes afraid to risk its acquisitions behind fortifications of habits. But this is really shutting oneself up from the fullest enjoyment of one’s own possessions. It is miserliness. The living ideals must not lose touch with the growing and changing life. Their real freedom is not within the boundaries of security, but in the high-road of adventure, full of risk and new experience.”¹⁶

The Dominican way of living together requires much patience and perseverance, and the involvement of all in a common seeking and sharing. It is a way of life which seeks to elicit the best from each but which is, simultaneously, gentle with the shortcomings of each. And perhaps the latter is more important than the former.

“It is the imperfections, the roughage, the accommodation of inconsistency and of the eccentric, of the grand and the petty, the precise and the asymmetrical that is the touchstone of the mature political culture that we have developed.”¹⁷

Amos Oz makes the same point in his book **The Slopes of Lebanon**.

“One could fill volumes with description of the querulous Zionist family and its trends and nuances, the panoply of love-hate relationships, the competitiveness, the use of covert influence, and the overt rivalry between its various components. Thus a rich texture of contrasts, complex and compelling, not only characterizes contemporary Israel, but was inherent in its very foundation. It may, of course, atrophy because of a superficial desire to ‘lower the fences’ for the sake of unification around some trite common denominator. Or it may yet serve as a creative field of tension between various systems of values, as a sharp stimulus for cultural creativity through and intellectual and emotional struggle between different visions. This will come if all of us accept pluralism not as a transient illness that must be eliminated, but as a blessing, and that we remember there are moments of truth when even a divided society must make a clear-cut decision on values and priorities.”¹⁸

We too accept pluralism as a blessing, which enriches our common heritage. For us it is not divisive because the framework, which Dominic gave to his family, provided explicitly for such diversity. He did not wish the richness, which comes from God, to be suffocated by our human smallness. There is no human model, no human framework, which can adequately accommodate the presence of God. Hence the need to be forever re-evaluating and pondering upon the way we live our lives. This might seem precarious and adventurous. So be it! – it has served the Order well over the centuries.

A true living together, and the sharing of our riches must make provision for our differences. Let us read Amos Oz again writing in a different context.

“Conflict, generally speaking, is not resolved, it gradually subsides, or it doesn’t, and you live with it, and the flesh that has been pierced by a painful splinter grows back over it and covers it up. This truth the kibbutz has begun to learn in recent years. It is becoming less fanatical, less dogmatic, it is society that is learning the wisdom, indulgence and patience of age. It is not that I am untroubled or happy at the sight of such developments, I am simply pleased to see how the kibbutz has learned to react calmly, patiently, almost shrewdly, to exceptions and oddities, to changing times and tastes, as if it has whispered to itself: ‘So be it for the time being; now let’s wait and see.’”¹⁹

“To be as different from one another as we wish, without oppressing or exploiting or humiliating one another, is an ideal formula which can be aimed for but never fully realised, I know. Whoever tries to apply formulas completely ends up manipulating people. Any socialist system needs to aim at the flexibility, complexity, plurality, paradox and humour which are characteristic of human life, even at the expense of consistency or ‘speed of execution’, or both.”²⁰

The family of Dominic has always had that patience, flexibility and forbearance which are needed to allow a true community to emerge from the complexity of its members. We are pilgrims with no fixed abode and for us “the making of a community is always an exploration...” ... “a community of those who seek the truth...”

“The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent that they desire to know. But in fact this includes

only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of good. Their common concern for the good linked them; their disagreement about it proved they needed one another to understand it.”²¹

“But these considerations do convey a warning for our democratic model: that we should be wary of striving for perfection. We must accept that democracy will always be something of a mess. Attempting to tidy up too much could mean subordinating diversity to universalism and the individual consciousness to the general will to such an extent that we may establish the preconditions not for freedom but for captivity. We must leave gaps between the building blocks, in case we accidentally build a wall.”

(George Monbiot, *The Age of Consent*, Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 2004, p. 115)

Freedom and Responsibility

As Dominicans we have never sought a contrived consensus as a way to building community. Nor have we ever considered those who differ from us as a threat. We have always allowed space for others to be themselves, and the freedom to communicate their uniqueness. For it is in the lonely mind of each that lies the preciousness, which is to be shared, and which, if not shared, is both an impoverishment of the whole community and a diminishment of the individual to whom the sharing is denied. It is a precious part of our heritage to have always respected that fundamental liberty which characterises the human person and which gives him/her, his/her dignity. Freedom is our birthright. To deny it to others is to deny them their vocation. Nor should we be tempted in times of stress or crisis to sacrifice or curtail this freedom for the sake of expediency or efficiency.

The following is from a pamphlet written many years ago by Vincent McNabb.

“Whereupon I entered a long alleyway of thought concerning the Friar Preacher’s birthright of freedom. So wide is this freedom that no other Order in the Church may be compared with it; and withal so subtle that it reaches to the fine divisions between soul and spirit. Indeed, at first sight, and perhaps at second and third sight, the organisation of the Order is so interwoven with principles of freedom that it seems to hold every element of destruction. Scarcely is there to be found any mathematical or mechanical force of cohesion; everywhere the elements of the Order seem loosely articulate with that most unaccountable factor, the human freewill; and the most unruly exercise of human freewill, the free and secret ballot. *E pur si muove*. By ten thousand psychological laws, the Order founded by Dominic Guzman, the friend of the Father of Parliaments, ought to be dead or at least divided. But it is alive and one.”

Later on he warns of the temptation to tamper with our birthright.

“No amount of freedom foiled or spoiled should wean us from loyalty to our unique profession. From time to time there arise in the Order, as a kind of reaction to their environment, a number of over-zealous and not over-wise people, who repent of the Order’s birthright of freedom, and look upon it as individuality run mad. Not infrequently there is only too much to lend colour to their phases and schemes. But

abuses in administration are not cured by abuses in reconstruction. The Order will not begin to live, but will begin to die by such schemes as the appointment of all superiors, or the re-arrangement of our executive on lines of central administration.”²²

Today, perhaps, we need to be on our guard against a more subtle and insidious attack on freedom, one which is all the more dangerous and destructive because very often it is hidden and practised unwittingly. Those who are called to join the Family of Dominic depend on those who are already members for much of their formation. They are in a position of dependence and can be easily manipulated. But such manipulation is altogether foreign to the spirit of Dominic.

“No oppression is more powerful and more destructive than that which dominates the religious and moral conscience of the human person. There is no greater manipulation than the manipulation of conscience, because through it one can obtain and legitimise all other manipulations of the human person. And there is no greater service to a person than to educate him/her to freedom. Fear of licentiousness frequently destroys faith in freedom and eliminates education to freedom. The fear of freedom can be rooted in the good will of those who feel responsible for others, and it can be legitimised by an appeal to realism. But this makes in no less a lack of faith in the vigour and force of the Christian experience. Fear and the lack of faith always go hand in hand.”²³

“..., and the task of forming consciences demands a superhuman responsibility, and the attempt to manipulate them is a sin without par.”²⁴

Dominic had a profound respect for his early companions and profound respect too for the work of the Spirit in their lives. In his dealings with them there is no taint of manipulation, no attempt to bend them to his will.

Vision versus coercion

If Dominic did not seek to impose his will on his brethren, and this is reflected in the way in which he organised them so that their way of life emerged from a consensus rather than being ruled by dictat, this means that he greatly respected the contribution of each to the common cause. In his family everyone becomes a builder, everyone must share in the task of construction, and is encouraged to offer his/her own personal contribution. This, of course, implies a view of morality different from “one where a detailed map is provided”; it is rather “one where a destination and a compass will prove more helpful and more realistic for individuals, ...” The quotation is from John Mahoney’s **The Making of Moral Theology**. But, let me quote further.

“Once one systematically allows, then, for error in good faith and even more for a variety of moral perceptions of reality by individuals, the road-map view of morality is seen as being of only limited value. An alternative view which exists in the moral tradition – particularly of Aquinas – but which the moral teaching of the Church or subsequent theologians has found less congenial, approaches morality from within the subject rather than presenting it to him from outside. It is a view of the moral development of the individual which is more organic than mechanical, and more cumulative than successive in its approach, exploiting now the theme and the language of self-realisation. Rather than view the moral agent like an arrow in flight and on course towards the centre of the target, it considers him more in terms of an acorn growing into an oak tree, and, what is more, of this acorn growing into a particular oak tree. For this way of viewing the moral life proceeds by a capitalising of personal resources, or in more Aristotelian terms, by the fulfilment of one’s human potentialities towards happiness, or Aquinas’ beatitude.”²⁵

We have inherited the mechanism, the framework, by which the project of Dominic can be lived and realised today. Perhaps what we need is to recover the vision which gave life to that project at the beginning. Or perhaps, what we need is the conviction that the practical realization of such a vision is possible.

The General Chapter of Oakland, 1989, exhorted the Nuns of the Order to see and to seek in their system and structures of government a way to renewal. The exhortation is valid for all who wish to follow in the footsteps of Dominic.

“Because the system and structure of government in the Dominican Family are a cherished part of our heritage, combining a deep respect for the individual person with a corresponding vision of shared responsibility for the building up of community and the exercise of authority, we encourage our sisters to continue their efforts to implement their Constitutions which faithfully reflect this vision of an organic and ordered participation of all in striving to achieve the aims of the Order.”²⁶

I suggest that the only way of reclaiming the Dominican vision for our times, and recovering too the conviction that the living of that vision is possible, is by living according to the system of government which has been bequeathed to us.

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1. Bede Jarrett, **Letter to George Bowring, 30 July 1929** in **Letters of Bede Jarrett**, Downside and Blackfriars Publications, 1989, p 148.
 2. Robertson Davies, **The Salterton Trilogy**, Penguin, 1986, p 428.
 3. Marie-Humbert Vicaire OP, **The Genius of St Dominic**, Dominican Publications, Nagpur, India, pp 77/78.
 4. Ibid, p 42.
 5. Ibid, pp 12/122.
 6. Jean Vanier, **Becoming Human**, St Paul's, Bangalore, 2000, pp 56/57
 7. **Vita Consecrata**, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996, n 91
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 9. John Keats - as quoted in **The Upanishads, Penguin Classics**, 1965, p 23 - introduction by Juan Mascaro
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