

On Common Life

Letter of the Master of the Order. November 1988

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On my visits to the Order throughout the world, it has become evident to me that our greatest need at this time, is to intensify our understanding and compliance with the essential elements of our community life.

Our community life, no more than our study, is not an end in itself. The Fundamental Constitution (IV) reminds us that the order "is known from the beginning to have been instituted especially for preaching and the salvation of souls". It reminds us that "we also undertake... the life of the apostles" as a means towards this end for the salvation of souls, insisting that our preaching and teaching must proceed from an abundance of contemplation."

I wish to suggest two reasons for the present situation with regard to our community life:

1. With the insights of the Council and of the recent General Chapters of the order has come a questioning of some of the structures of the Church and the Order. This has included an examination of the structures of our community life.

As a consequence, some structures have been abolished or ignored because they no longer held any meaning for many of us. However, we sometimes lost sight of the underlying values of the Gospel and of regular life that these structures preserved and promoted in the past. It is not our task now to return to these old structures but rather to enunciate clearly the essential values of our life as found in the Constitutions and traditions and in the teachings of the Church.

It will also be necessary on a personal, community, provincial and on the level of the order as a whole to arrive at the necessary structures to enable us to maintain and live up to these essential values of community life.

2. A second factor which militates against community life is the great need of the Church in the directly pastoral field and the many calls that are made on us as individuals and communities to fill them.

We cannot solve all the pastoral problems of the Church and if we try to do so we will continue to seriously affect our dedication to community. Our best service to the Church is precisely as religious being faithful to our charism of preaching which proceeds from our community life. While we are not monks and our recent General Chapters have been careful to emphasize for example, regular observances rather than monastic observances, it is still true as Fr. Congar says. "that there is a marked trait of the monastic spirit in the Dominican vocation", (Called to Life, p. 3). We ignore this trait at our peril.

We are on a pilgrimage of faith. None of us has reached the end of that pilgrimage. Each can help the other on that journey we make together. Accordingly, with the consent of the General Council, I suggest six aspects of Dominican Community Life for your reflection and implementation.

1. Prayer

The renewal of community life means that above all else our communities must be communities of prayer. The life of prayer was an essential part of Dominic's life and the source of his passion for preaching and evangelization. Speaking to religious John Paul II said: "Prayer has a greater value and spiritual fruit than the most intense activity, even

apostolic activity itself. Prayer is the most urgent challenge that religious must make to a society in which efficiency has become an idol on whose altar human dignity itself is often sacrificed... your houses must be above all centres of prayer...

We need to renew our conviction of our own need and the need of others, of our prayer: It is ironic that we can become so busy doing the work of the Lord that we neglect the Lord of the work. How many can affirm this in their lives: The celebration of the liturgy must be the center and heart of our community life. In the spirit of St. Dominic the "common celebration of the liturgy must be maintained among the principal duties of our vocation", (LCO 57). In the daily celebration of the Eucharist the mystery of salvation is made present and is at work. Liturgical and personal prayer and the permanent evangelization of our lives is a consequence of our contemplation of the word of God. It makes us constantly aware of the truth contained in the words: "Without me you can do nothing, with me you can do all things." It is a life of prayer that enables us to preach to a secularized world to which the Gospel is foolishness.

The hectic pace of life in so many parts of the world seeps into our lives and makes it difficult to make time for prayer. There are some who can permeate their work with prayer. There are many others, who by temperament, need another climate in which to pray.

Fr. Congar has stated that the study of theology is inseparably linked with the celebration of the Liturgy. "The two are for me one single thing." Our fidelity to the Liturgy will express itself in the importance we give to the daily celebration or assistance at the Eucharist and to the Divine Office, "The Liturgical office consists essentially of the psalms: They play a major role in my life as they have always done... at one and the same time they express prayer and teach us to pray", (Called to Life p. 3).

Besides communal prayer each one of us needs the space to create that inner silence and aloneness to be with the Lord, to enable us to say for an extended period each day: "I want to be with you." Frequently Dominic would turn to his companion on the road and say: "You go ahead, let us think of the Saviour" and then fall behind to be alone. We must find a similar space for ourselves. It is more important than any apostolic activity.

More and more communities are beginning to celebrate common prayer with the faithful. Celebrated with the faithful it is truly the prayer of the Church. Each community must adapt its prayer to its environment.

2. Common Life and Faith Sharing

Christ is the center of our community life but this is not always explicit among us. Too often we seem able to share our ideas, the things of the mind, but unable to share our faith, the things of the heart. Today, as we face many challenges, it is not enough that we assume faith among us. We must make Jesus Christ explicit.

To overcome certain blocks to this faith sharing in community, it is important for each of us to recall that none of us has a monopoly on the truth. we must learn from one another (LCO 100) and preach to one another. Our Constitutions speak of the obligation of the prior to preach to their communities (LCO 300) but should not all of our members be encouraged to preach in community. Should we not insist on developing occasions when preaching in the context of community is more frequent. Even our young brothers could share their faith during the Liturgy of the Hours or during special celebrations of our Dominican feasts.

Well-planned meetings to prepare the Sunday homily, study of a specific theme, or to let our community know what we are doing in the ministry are occasions for faith sharing. The last point, sharing our work experiences, is even more critical today when so many of us work outside our houses. It is an act of charity to share one's faith but should not this charity begin at home?

I cannot exhort you too much to take this aspect of common life more seriously. Many of the brethren, especially among the young desire this type of sharing. Did we not enter the Order to be with men of faith? It is urgent that we enrich one another through sharing of our life in Christ.

Community Life and Study

One of the great advantages of a House of Studies is the many opportunities it affords teachers and students to share common life in the context of study. Through formal and informal contacts they are able to explain and question aspects of the faith. For many it is a time of mutual integration where we become one through study.

In the pastoral formation of students this is even more evident because we are brought closer to the life of the people of God through ministry. In our present formation process this pastoral activity is not only encouraged but required. But it is not insisted upon simply to give some type of change from study. It is provided for ,the purpose of helping us to be able to bring together study and ministry.

The method of reflection as an integral process of ministry is not something which is learnt easily. There should be a progression of exposure to the ministry which is accompanied with a sound theological course of study. All ministry should have planning and evaluation as part of its progression. It is tragic that this helpful insight into the relationship between study, ministry and community is often lost on those of us who are older in community we cannot limit our permanent formation to workshops or private reading, they must be communitarian in nature.

To gather as a community to share some experiences of the apostolate and to reflect together on their meaning in faith could be a start. Readings on a common theme discussed as a community could be another approach.

Our community libraries are another source of renewal of common life through study. A well maintained library is a necessary part of every community. It is frightening to visit some of our community libraries and to see so few new books.

3. Fraternal Correction

Our legislation has always given importance to fraternal correction, which was once a part of the 'regular house chapter. Though the form of the house chapter has changed the Constitutions retain the need for fraternal correction.

The Chapter of Bogota introduced the option of having a talk/dialogue which would promote the way in which we live our community and apostolic life. The Constitutions of 1968 confirm this orientation, (LCO 7.1), and go on to state that "several times during the year a regular chapter shall be held, in which, in a form determined by the conventual chapter, the brethren shall examine their fidelity towards the apostolic mission of the convent and the regular life and shall undertake some penance. On this occasion the superior can give an exhortation on the spiritual and religious life and opportune admonitions and corrections" (LCO 7.II).

In many places the regular monthly chapter LCO 7.1 is no longer practiced. Yet the experience of recent years suggests the need to strengthen the practice of fraternal dialogue regarding a community's fidelity to its apostolic commitments and community observance.

Today it is important that community meetings recover some of the values which have been lost. Such meetings should be an occasion for examining the quality of our religious life and apostolic activity in an atmosphere of sincere dialogue, in such a way that we can share our problems and hopes together in the light of faith and so help each other through advice and encouragement.

In order that this may take place it is necessary that such meetings have a truly religious character and avoid a routine formalism. This may be helped by the reflective use of the word of God and prayer to help us realize the presence of God in our midst. We should also respect the creativity of different communities without allowing such meetings to be reduced to total improvisation. The order as a whole might consider giving some guidelines to assist in the animation of such meetings.

For many fraternal correction may conjure up memories of the old chapter of faults. It requires great delicacy. It was said of Dominic that when he had to speak to someone "his words were so pleasant" that what he said was accepted with "patience and eagerness."

If we live together in community we share responsibility for one another. How many problems are allowed to develop to a critical point because of the neglect of fraternal help and how often is help offered too late? Yet, who among us, would neglect to offer, a brother or sister medical attention if urgently needed?

Another aspect of this is the need for canonical visitation. In many provinces this has become a formality. Its absence affects the quality of our life.

It is a mistake to omit it. There is great wisdom in the ordinations in our constitutions in this regard. The provinces where visitations have been faithfully carried out witness to it in the life of the brethren.

Frank Sheed, in his book *To Know Christ Jesus* writes "the ruler must serve, that is what he is there for. If one of those committed to his care is rebellious, every effort must be made to win him to a better mind by reasoning with him by himself, reasoning with him in the presence of others summoning him officially before the Church", (Mt. 18:15-17 .)

4. The Witness of our Lives - the Vows

We claim that our lives are a witness to the kingdom and that our vows are public acts of consecration. If our vows are public acts of consecration then our behaviour must witness to that consecration. People have definite expectations. Yet how often are these expectations realized in the way we live out our obedience, poverty and chastity? Here I would like to reflect on specific aspects of the vows.

Obedience: Obedience is a listening to God as he speaks in us and to us through others. Obedience also means listening to the community and fidelity to the community's way to holiness. This has particular application today. When we preach, it is the community that preaches. And so, for example, when we take a stand on issues concerning justice or morality, they should first be tested in community. How much pain and even scandal to the faithful might be avoided if we first tested our thoughts on vexed questions in our own communities. We Dominicans celebrate our prophets. The greatest of them have been those whose preaching and work have been born and supported from within their communities. I think of Antonio de Montesino and Las Casas. Even prophets are subject to obedience.

Another aspect of obedience that needs reflection today is our attitude to community observances. How easily we can drift, and dispense ourselves from community exercises so that imperceptibly we become marginalized within our own communities. Then whose will is served? God's or our own?

Poverty: We profess poverty but live with the paradox that most enjoy a security that the vast majority of the laity do not have. A preoccupation with security can, so easily, rob us of apostolic initiative. I see this in many places. I suspect that Dominic's insistence on living in dependence was intimately connected with his desire for apostolic freedom. Living in total dependence makes the unthinkable possible. For us Dominicans there is a connection between the vows and preaching. They give us freedom to preach - they authenticate our preaching.

In his address to the Extraordinary General Council in May 1970, Fr. Aniceto Fernandez said: "Poverty is a theme much under discussion but in practice, even in private life, there is no sign of poverty either in dress or food nor in the matter of sleep or in the use of motor cars or in taking trips or other entirely superfluous things." What change has taken place in the intervening years?

Today, we can so easily become the victims of the consumer mentality that is now a world-wide phenomenon. This imposes on us all the need for accountability.

Constantly, we need to question ourselves on the way in which we use material things - the witness we give in our buildings, our table, clothes, recreation and holidays. We also need to support those who administer the goods of the community and they, for their part, must be conscious that the money they administer is not their own but the communities and that they must be accountable to it.

Chastity: For many it is the most striking witness of our religious consecration. Again our behaviour must correspond to our consecration. Everything that is icit is not always opportune.

One aspect of this consecration I would like to touch upon is this. While the deepest sanctuary of our hearts is given to God - we have other needs. He has made us so that a large area of our life is accessible to others and is needed by others. Each one of us needs to experience the genuine interest, of the other members of the community, their affection, esteem and fellowship. Some may say that God is enough. But it has been well said, that God has made us so that we need more than prayer and renunciation. We need air, food, sleep, education... but above all love. At what point in our earthly pilgrimage do we cease to be human? Life together means breaking the bread of our minds and hearts with each other. If religious do not find this in their communities - then they will seek it elsewhere.

5. Decision-Making

Our concern for one another leads us to accept responsibility for our community. Each one is responsible for the smooth running of the community and this sense of responsibility will be deepened the more we involve ourselves in the process of decision-making.

The Constitutions provide us with a number of structures designed to facilitate the process of decision making; the General and Provincial Chapters, the community council and chapter. But these will never lead to a common project or common mission unless they are used properly.

I cannot emphasize sufficiently the need to hold regular community meetings which help to foster the collective consciousness of a community leading to consensus. In is collective process the prior is the first among equals. Constantly we need to remind ourselves of the difference between civil democracy and our own. In civil democracies power rests in the vote of the absolute majority and one vote is sufficient to achieve a decision. In the Dominican democratic system our aim is to look for one mind and one heart, to achieve as great a consensus as possible which is a much more powerful witness than an absolute majority. "This striving for unanimity" Fr. Vincent de Couesnongle said, "even if we do not always achieve it - is the sure guarantee of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and by that fact, is a more certain way of discovering the will of God."

Dominic, had the capacity to disagree with others and allow others disagree with him.

Our house chapters will always be divisive and unproductive if we look upon them as purely legal gatherings or a place to debate. We can overcome this if we begin in a prayerful manner in a spirit of reflection and an openness to the Spirit. Secondly, as a part of this silent and prayerful reflection we might allow ourselves the time to recognise our own failings with regard to our community life.

A number of things can militate against this process. Chief among them is an exaggerated individualism, apathy and a fear which can accompany decision-making. On the other hand we must prepare for such meetings by providing information, and sufficient time to conduct them. Finally we must have the strength to accept the obedience which decision-making imposes on us.

One aspect of this is a willingness to accept responsibility within the community. There is a reluctance almost everywhere to accept positions of responsibility. Election to a particular office should not be refused unless there are serious reasons for doing so. For our part, if we elect someone we must support him.

6. Building Community

Each community must work out a rhythm of observance that takes into account the changing patterns of our ministries and our own needs, always keeping in mind that we have dedicated ourselves to the needs of others.

Unity of heart urges us to live together though we are people of different opinions and outlook. A community in which everyone agrees on everything does not exist. There is need for mutual understanding, tolerance and a willingness to bear each others burdens. There are some who are only disposed to live with their friends, communities which exclude people of a different mentality or outlook. How much of religious remains when we select those with whom we live? It is not even christian.

Then there is the question of recreation, personal and community. Speaking of the world of work John Paul II said: "the Sacred Scripture as well as teaching the need for work, also teach the need for rest." In a letter to the members of his province one provincial asks: "How does television affect the quality of the time we spend together and what would be the experience of fraternity without it... have we, perhaps, lost something of great importance during the period of renewal, namely, that too many of us find our experience of fraternity more outside than inside the community. Do we so emphasize the apostolic side of our lives at the expense of the fraternal side - and at what post to the apostolate?"

Finally, we must endeavour to build communities of hope. If we preach mercy, then we should be able to receive mercy and show mercy to one another and bear witness to the hope that is in us. The words of Paul VI in *Evangelica Testificatio* continue to be an inspiration for our lives. "Even if like every Christian - you are imperfect, you nevertheless intend to create surroundings which are favourable to the spiritual progress of each member of the community. How can this result be attained, unless you deepen in the Lord your relationships, even the most ordinary ones, with each of your brethren? Let us not forget that charity must be as it were an active hope for what others can become with the help of our fraternal support. The mark of its genuineness is found in a joyful simplicity, whereby all strive to understand what each one has at heart. If certain religious give the impression of having allowed themselves to be crushed by their community life, which ought to have made them expand and develop, does this happen perhaps because their community life lacks that understanding cordiality which nourishes hope? There is no doubt that community spirit, relationships of friendship. and fraternal cooperation in the apostolate, as well as mutual support in a shared life chosen for a better service of Christ, are so many valuable factors in this daily progress", (39).