

My Life As a Novice

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[Br. Augustine wrote this article at the end of his novitiate year. He and his classmates currently resides at St. Dominic Priory and Studium while he continues his studies at the Aquinas Institute of Theology.]

Life in General

The novitiate has been the most unique environment I have ever experienced. This is the first time in my life when I have been given the opportunity to take a year away from work and school to focus on prayer, discernment, and non-academic study. Yet, the novitiate is much more than that. In addition to the prayer life and study, I have been immersed in the community life of the Southern Dominican Friars. What does the life of a friar entail? For our community, the regular life begins each morning at 7:00 AM, with Lauds (morning prayer) and Mass. Afterwards, members of the senior community (i.e., solemnly-professed Dominicans) depart for their ministries. For the novices, the day continues with classes in the morning and afternoons for study, prayer, and choir rehearsal. The whole community gathers together again for Vespers (evening prayer), community time, and evening dinner. After dinner, another activity, such as an additional class, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, or Scripture reflection normally takes place.

Classes range from Introductory Theology, History of the Order, Dominican Spirituality, Spanish, and studying the Constitutions of the Order. Special emphasis also is given to learning about the Saints of the Order and living a vowed Dominican life. In addition to these areas, friars from around the province come to offer workshops on various areas, including Preaching and living by the Rule of St. Augustine. Our Friday routine is different. The novices go to St. Paul Hospital in the morning where we visit patients of all ages and faiths. We are there to offer support to patients and to learn for ourselves what it means to aide the sick. We meet with a staff member at the end of the morning to discuss our experiences and how those experiences will help us in our future ministry.

Our Friday afternoon is open, leaving time for us to wrap up any studying or other projects. After Vespers and dinner on the weekend, we are free to do many things, such as playing board games or cards, watching television or movies, going out to the movies or some other event, or simply having some quiet time away from study and ministry. The weekends usually are free, with the exception of community prayer, Masses and maintaining the house. Of course, we are not surprised when some event pops up on the schedule, such as a youth group invitation or other special event.

Community Life

Despite the number of areas we study and the ministry we undertake, the greatest learning for me has been in the life of the community. This year has offered me the opportunity to live with other men who have heard the same call to discern that I have. While we are five different people, each with his own personal history and ideals, we share the same desire to serve God and His people. For someone who seriously is discerning, a weekend retreat or weekly discussion group is not enough to sustain interest in a vocation. There are some

areas in the discernment process that only long-term experience can satisfy. The novitiate offers daily opportunities for men to learn from each other and explore religious life together with “the insider’s view.”

Of course, novices are not the only people living in the priory. In this novitiate, we have the blessing of living with solemnly-professed Dominicans ranging from age 37 – 94. Each of these men contributes a different background and experiences to our formation, having lived in various generations of the Church. Some of them also embody the “living history” of the Order, and conversations with them offer insight that may not always be able attainable through reading texts.

Joys (and a Few Frustrations) of the Experience

The greatest joy of the Novitiate for me is in knowing that I am a part of a worldwide family with an 800-year history. During the Novitiate, I have had the chance to meet some of my Dominican brothers and sisters from around the world. The various personalities, personal histories, talents and ideals brought together in community truly display the worldwide nature of our Order.

Another great joy for me has been the prayer life of the community. While personal prayer is vital to any Christian, community prayer adds to the richness of the experience. Although I have only been in community for a few months, when I am away from the house, I miss praying with my brothers. Each day, that prayer life leads directly into our time together in community. Some of the most enjoyable moments in the Novitiate have occurred while we are sitting in the common room discussing our daily activities or at the breakfast table as we peruse the newspaper looking for some noteworthy topic of conversation.\

The fraternity of community time mixes with our love of family when we gather around the table for our evening meal or just to share a cup of coffee. Whether we are discussing Theology, current events, or simply laughing at the events of the day, we are always brothers in Dominic, spreading the joy that is a part of his (and our) charism.

The irony for me is that being a part of the Dominican family also is a struggle. Being a Novice in community life is much like growing up in any household. Your brothers in community all have different personalities, hopes, fears, ways of doing things, etc. Part of the process is learning to voice your own needs and expectations, while realizing that your brother has the right to do the same. The Novitiate, and thus Dominican life, is not all about “me.” We have to learn to love and (perhaps hardest of all) work with our brother even when we may not see eye to eye.

Another area of struggle for some people may be the novitiate’s weekly chapter. Chapter, which takes place at all levels of the Order, is a place for friars to discuss issues affecting the entire community and also how we will govern that community. While each friar is welcomed to bring ideas to chapter, the community as a whole bears the responsibility of making decisions. Whether we agree or disagree with one another, we learn to be unanimous in our decisions. This does not mean that we as individuals always like the outcome of our voting; what it does mean is that we are obedient to the needs of the entire community and always do our share to make the decisions of the chapter work.

The Sum of My Experience

This year has given me a great deal of time to think about my vocation. First and foremost, I realize that there is more to my personal discernment than exploring the life of the priesthood. I am also discovering what it is to be a Dominican. When I profess vows, I make a commitment to the Order, and the Order makes a commitment to me in receiving those vows. So, the senior community of the priory is discerning with me the entire time, as they ultimately will vote on whether I am ready to profess vows.

Discerning Dominican life means exploring all four pillars: prayer, community, study and preaching. Do these pillars reflect the life I want to live? Is this where God is calling me to serve? Am I happy in the life of a friar? These are all very important questions. They should be the focus of discernment in the Novitiate.

The more I ponder everything I have experienced, the more I realize that coming here has been the right decision. I thank God each day that He pushed me to say “yes” to giving the Order a chance, and that the Order has given me the opportunity to explore religious life under the patronage of St. Dominic. Whether I profess vows at the end of this year or not, I will still have a better understanding of my calling and where that call is leading me. If I had never come to the Novitiate, then I would still be where I was a year ago this time, wondering whether or not religious life is something I would like to experience.

If I can offer any advice to someone coming into the Novitiate or even considering it: suspend your expectations. Come into this life ready to experience it for what it is. After you have seen what Dominican life has to offer, decide whether or not you want to keep discerning your vocation with your Dominican brothers. Often, the worst thing we can do is assume we know what will be, and then not do anything based on our assumptions. If we fall into that trap, we deny God the chance to show us so many things.

My brothers and I pray daily for men to come to the Province of St. Martin de Porres. Hopefully, if you have inquired about us, and are reading this, then you are ready to say “yes” to the Novitiate. We look forward to welcoming you to our family. May God bless you in your discernment.

May 2008

For more information on life as a Southern Dominican Brother or Priest visit our website at: www.dominicanvocations.com.