



## General Secretariat For the Synod of Bishops



### Dominican Spirituality

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#### Characteristics

We will celebrate next month 800 years from the death of our founder St Dominic. As a theme for this jubilee we have taken the title “at table with St Dominic”, illustrated with one of the earliest images we have of the saint, the *Tavola della Mascarella* of the Church of Santa Maria e San Domenico della Mascarella, Bologna. The simple painting depicts St Dominic at table with his brothers, no doubt contemplating the word of God together; certainly they had little to eat until there was a miraculous multiplication of bread. I mention this commensality at the outset, because it is a theme to which I will return. Almost nothing survives of St Dominic’s writings, so a near-contemporary image such as this, together with the Constitutions of the Order expressing his project, is very important for our personal connection with our founder.

Before founding the Order of Preachers, St Dominic was an Augustinian canon. For that reason, and others besides, it was logical that his new Order should choose for itself the Rule of St Augustine. So we are Augustinians too, though of course we have developed our own distinctive spirituality expressed in our Constitutions, so I will not repeat everything that the previous speaker<sup>1</sup> has already said. But there are two principles which “top and tail” the Rule of St Augustine which I think are very important for a Dominican approach to the questions before us today.

The first is one which has already been mentioned. At the opening of the *Rule* the brothers are reminded, “The first reason for which you are gathered together as one is that you may dwell harmoniously [*unanimus*] in the house; and that you may have one soul and one heart in God.”<sup>2</sup> St Augustine goes on to present the way in which the brothers are to live, and then, in concluding, exhorts them to observe the precepts “as lovers of spiritual beauty... not like slaves under the law, but constituted free people [*liberi*] under grace.”<sup>3</sup>

So we come together for unanimity, to be of one mind; but we do so in freedom [*libertas*]. Of course Augustine is talking of the whole of our religious life here, but what is true for our life in general should be true also of our government in particular; especially for Dominicans, for we like to say that our government

<sup>1</sup> Fr Joseph Farrell OSA

<sup>2</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Rule*, 1: “Primum, propter quod in unum estis congregati, ut unanimes habitetis in domo; et sit vobis *anima una et cor unum* (Acts 4:32) in Deo.” Quotations from the Rule in this paper follow the *textus receptus* of the Order of Preachers in the 13th century prototype conserved in the General Archive of the Order. This version differs slightly from more recent critical editions.

<sup>3</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Rule*, 8: “tamquam spiritualis pulchritudinis amatores... non sicut servi sub lege, sed sicut liberi sub gratia constituti.” There is an allusion here to Rom 6:15–19.

is an expression of our spirituality. Thus in our chapters, in our “synods”, we come together for unanimity, but in freedom.

This might sound like a contradiction. After all, in those countries whose legislatures typically achieve unanimity, freedom tends to be somewhat lacking; and conversely in countries setting greater store on freedom, the legislature is likely to be more divided, perhaps even polarised. But neither of these is our model of governance in unanimity and freedom.

Dominicans don’t always agree with each other, of course. But in the tradition of St Thomas Aquinas we do share an understanding of what it means to be truly “free”. It’s not merely a question of being free from those constraints which prevent us choosing arbitrarily, what Servais Pinckaers OP calls a “freedom of indifference”;<sup>4</sup> rather our freedom is a “freedom for excellence”,<sup>5</sup> a freedom enabling perfection, directed towards the life of virtue. Ultimately we are constituted as free people under grace in order to love God and love our neighbour, and this is the freedom with which we come together seeking unanimity. I may not agree with my brother, but if I love him I will sit down and try to understand him, and, I suppose, help him to understand me; and if he loves me, then he will do the same. We will sit down together.

At the end of such a process of loving freedom, even if it isn’t possible to arrive at actual unanimity, at least there should be a consensus that there has been a proper loving engagement with the issue, and therefore a common ownership of a decision, even if occasionally I would have preferred a different outcome. At the end of the day, for all our “synodality”, the only vow Dominicans pronounce is that of obedience, and we are ultimately to conform our wills to what has been legitimately discerned in Chapter.

Some of my confrères in recent decades like to describe Dominican governance as “democratic”. It’s not a word which has ever been found in our Constitutions, and I prefer to avoid the term. This is partly because of the danger of falling into the vices of the political model of modern democratic states, but also because the very word “democracy” suggests that the “people” (δῆμος) are the origin of the “power” (κράτος). Clearly in the Church the governing authority comes from Christ; governance of the community which is the Church is but a participation in Christ’s kingly office. So I – in line with our Constitutions<sup>6</sup> – would prefer to say Dominican governance is characterised by the more theological concepts of communion and participation.

## Concrete practices of discernment

Given limits of time, when it comes to concrete practices of discernment I will focus on the General Chapter of the Order as being perhaps the most pertinent to the topic for today. But of course much of what is characteristic of these periodic gatherings at a global level happens also in provinces and individual convents, and in the day-to-day business of governance.

The Order of Preachers has what is sometimes called a “bicameral” system of General Chapters. To start with we had General Chapters every year, which would hear details of visitations and make some quite detailed decisions about individual brothers. Every third year the Priors Provincial would gather with the Master of the Order in Chapter, but in the other two years it would be a Chapter of “Diffinitors”, that is, of representatives elected by each Province, gathering under the Master. But any change in the Constitutions requires approval by three successive General Chapters, meaning it is always approved both by the Priors Provincial *and* the Diffinitors. In the meantime the Provincials and the Diffinitors in Chapter have equal

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<sup>4</sup> S. PINCKAERS, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (T&T Clark, 1995), 354. Translated by Sr Mary Thomas Noble OP from *Les sources de la morale chrétienne*, 3rd ed. (Fribourg : University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 375.

<sup>6</sup> cf. *Liber Constitutionum et Ordinationum Fratrum Prædicatorum* (LCO), 1 §§ VI and VII.

authority, but are forbidden from doing anything which would prejudice the rights of the other group. The decision of any one chapter is always subject to review by subsequent chapters. Finally, when it is necessary to elect a new Master of the Order, the Priors Provincial and the Diffinitors meet together in an Elective Chapter.

These days the chapters are less frequent – every three years – and the Master of the Order has a fixed nine-year term. So the rhythm is now a nine-year cycle of a Chapter of Diffinitors, a Chapter of Priors Provincial and an Elective Chapter. The essential structure, however, remains the same, requiring the consent of brothers with those different perspectives, and over a period of time. It is perhaps noteworthy that constitutions “under construction” - that is, laws which have been approved by one or two chapters - are part of the published Acts of the Chapter, and therefore available for inspection by any of the brothers, who can of course make their views known to the Prior Provincial or Diffinitor going to the following Chapter. Indeed these days, they are on our website, so anyone who is interested can go and look at the state of the legislative process.

I turn more to the details of the celebration of the Chapter. As well as being an instance of governance, the Chapter is supposed to be an expression of the communion and community of the Order. So those things which characterise the common life of our convents – daily liturgy and prayer, study, commensality, recreation, preaching – are part of the life of a Chapter too. I mention this because it is part of the answer to the question “how do you deal with conflict or disagreement in the process?” We pray together, we reflect and study together, we eat together, we recreate together, we go for walks together, and together we end up talking through the issues – often with brothers we had never met before the Chapter – and giving space to listen to the promptings of the Spirit.

Of course, we also have formal procedural methods for dealing with conflict and disagreement. Clearly there is a limit to what can be done in the Chapter hall with perhaps a hundred participants talking at cross-purposes in different languages, but it is possible to defer contentious issues and return to them in calmer moments. We might set up commissions during the chapter, perhaps with contributions from brothers external to the disagreement, to see if a solution can be found. In this a prudent, efficient and charitable president and moderator both of plenary sessions and commissions is crucial.

Ultimately sometimes a Chapter has to have the humility to admit that it cannot solve all the problems before it. No Chapter has the last word, so it might be that a future Chapter will have more success, perhaps with careful preparatory work; or it might be that some other body can deal with a question more appropriately; or, indeed, it might be that the problem is actually insoluble.

## **Insights for developing the synodal process**

Drawing together some of these threads I suggest two ways in which our experience of capitular government over eight centuries might feed into the renewed interest in synodality in the Church.

### **1. Acknowledgement of different constituencies**

The Order of Preachers has recognised the value of hearing both from those charged with governance, and from those who are not currently so charged, both separately (in Chapters of Priors Provincial and Chapters of Diffinitors) and together (in Elective Chapters). Likewise, the 1983 Code of Canon Law recognises roles for laity, religious and clergy in Diocesan Synods, Provincial Councils and Plenary Councils; if synodality is to be promoted, we could start by actually using the synodal structures which in most places are dead letters.

At a universal level, while recognising the particular and indispensable role of the College of Bishops, perhaps there could be a more diverse participation not just in the preparatory phases of a Synod – as we are doing today – but even in Synodal gatherings themselves. Perhaps in years when the Synod of Bishops is not meeting the Holy Father could preside over a “Synod of Laity”, or “Synod of Clergy”, or “Synod of Consecrated Persons”? Or from time to time the Pope and Bishops could meet with others of the faithful in a “Pastoral Synod”,<sup>7</sup> or “Synod of the People of God”, rather than just augmenting the Synod of Bishops with a sprinkling of non-episcopal synod fathers, observers and guests.

## 2. Life of the synod

I have had the opportunity to speak to a number of Dominican confrères who have participated in Synods past, whether bishops, former Masters, or *periti*. Many of them miss the common life which would be a normal part of our Chapters. A minor hour and a coffee break don't really substitute for proper commensality, recreation and daily rhythm of Mass and Divine Office. The Jerusalem community which inspired St Augustine and St Dominic and inspires us had everything in common.<sup>8</sup> And thus the apostles, one in mind, soul and heart with the whole community, were able to give their testimony with great power.

It may sound trivial, but if in our synods it is considered exceptional to celebrate the Eucharist together and eat lunch together, it is going to be something of a challenge to be one in mind, soul and heart in grappling with the difficult issues that face the community of believers.

With that I thank His Eminence and the Secretariat of the Synod for the opportunity of sharing these few thoughts, and I thank them in particular for lunch, to which I look forward.

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<sup>7</sup> I suggest this name to reflect the role and composition of a Diocesan Pastoral Council.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Acts 4, 32.