"OUR CHAPTER, OUR COMMUNITY"

Introduction

The Dominican Order is a family, composed of faith-filled men and women in a multitude of circumstances and geographical locations throughout the world. All are called to serve the Lord in a special way, following the path of our Father, St. Dominic. Each member is a contributor to the overall work of the Order and lives according to the Rule for their particular branch. Critical to the Rule of the Order is the concept of "community," the foundation of the unity upon which the work depends.

Religious members of the Dominican Order - friars, brothers, nuns and sisters - live in physical community and share all things in common, as St. Dominic set forth from the beginning of the Order. This is not practical for members of the Fraternities of St. Dominic who live in the world in the lay state. For us in the Dominican laity, the chapter to which we belong is our local community, and all the chapters together form the larger community of lay Dominicans in the Province. Understanding the nature of this community and its importance in our lives and our apostolate is the purpose of this module.

The Dominican Order as Community

The love between Christians in community serves as an earthly reminder of the ultimate communion between the three Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity. The primary end of human existence is participation in this union, the eternal dwelling with the Trinity to which we are all called. As imperfect creatures, we must constantly strive to be made ready for this lofty goal. Participation in chapter life brings us farther along in our pursuit of mature faith and spiritual "fitness" for life on high with the Eternal Godhead.

"The heart of the Dominican life is brotherly love…Everything about Dominican community life, when it is lived with fidelity and sincerity, enkindles love for God and neighbor. It was designed to do this; Dominic chose the common life as one of the principal means of achieving the ends of the Order: the sanctification of his children, and the salvation of souls through preaching." (Hinnebusch 119, 130)

Dominican life is modeled on the lives of the early Christians. Christ founded his Church on earth as a community of believers, beginning with the apostles and early disciples. Indeed, one quality that drew others to Christ after his ascension was the witness of charity and love among those who professed his Holy Name. We know this from Luke's historical detail of the primitive Church in the Acts of the Apostles:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

Called by the Holy Spirit

"God did not create man in isolation, but for the formation of social unity. From the beginning of salvation history…He has chosen men not just as individuals, but as members of a certain community" (*Gaudium et spes* 32).

For each of us, the Dominican charism is a gift from God, an invitation from the Holy Spirit to follow along a particular path. Our response to this invitation, a humble fiat, implies that we are willing to share this path of Christian service with others. Each member of our chapter possesses unique talents and gifts of their own; utilizing these gifts in harmony with each chapter member is a part of our continuing formation. The humility borne in our common call by the Holy Spirit and our common destination in Eternal Life inspires all chapter members to greater cooperation in works of the apostolate and fulfillment of chapter responsibilities. Because we are called by God to seek him in this humble manner, we can appreciate how those who lead and teach us as postulants are serving the Lord, not expressing personal power. Each person who contributes to our formation was at one time a postulant, a beginner in Dominican life as we are now.

IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY LIFE

Prayer and Liturgy

"Before the Order sends its children into the apostolate, it commits them to the worship of God, centering their lives around the liturgical hours of praise. The Order's spirit and apostolate become spiritually impoverished

when the liturgy recedes into the background of Dominican thinking," says William V. Hinnebush, OP.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, and members of a common group, a chapter of the Fraternities of St. Dominic, it is hoped that we will form long-lasting bonds of friendship and collegiality. We should never forget, however, that our unity of purpose is cemented by our participation in prayer and worship. Prior to joining a chapter of the Fraternities of St. Dominic, prayer has been a central element of our individual lives. Here, in community, it takes on a new and deeper meaning. Coming together as brothers and sisters to celebrate the Eucharist or to pray the Liturgy of the Hours or the rosary enriches chapter life and helps each member to become closer to Christ.

"The Dominican charism of preaching is continuously nourished by the Word shared in community. Thus, in the proclamation of the Word of God, the Dominican family expresses a unity centered on the Word of God and seeks to give a common witness to the good news." (*Bologna Document on the Dominican Family* 4.2)

The supreme act of prayer and worship is the Holy Mass. The celebration of the Liturgy of the Word and the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the cornerstone of our chapter gatherings, and should be the focus whenever possible. The Liturgy of the Word nourishes our hearts and minds, preparing us for our role as defenders of the faith in the secular world. Reception of the Body and Blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist is a fountain of grace to strengthen us, both as individual persons, and as a chapter for the important work of Dominican preaching and apostolate. Through this great Sacrament, we join with the entire Church in worship and praise.

"The liturgy is never a mere meeting of a group of people, who make up their own form of celebration and that, insofar as possible, celebrate it themselves. Instead of that, through our sharing in Jesus' appearing before the Father, we stand as members of the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of all saints. Yes, in a certain sense this is the liturgy of heaven. That is its true greatness, that heaven is torn open here, and we are incorporated in the great chorus of praise. And that is why the Preface ends with these words: With all the choirs of angels in heaven, we join in singing. We know what we are not alone, that we are joining in, that the barrier between earth and heaven has truly been torn open" (Ratzinger).

Study and Apostolate in Community

In addition to prayer and liturgy, it is part of community life to engage in study of Sacred Scripture, the *Catechism*, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, papal encyclicals, and documents of Vatican II and the magisterium. This enables each member to conform to Christ, and fulfills the ideal of St. Dominic that his followers would be educated in the faith. Most importantly, we must be prepared to give an accurate answer to those who question the faith and the teachings of the Church.

Dominic encouraged his followers to engage in study, allowing them sufficient time for reading and contemplation. The fruits of these quiet activities resulted in more effective preaching and evangelization. The path for members of Fraternities of St. Dominic is similar. Our chapter meetings are a time when we gather to allow God to nourish us. These meetings are also a period of renewal of our sense of purpose, which is facilitated by discussions of the materials we study as a community.

Our chapters are not solely devotional or "prayer" groups. We have been called by the Church in the writings of the Second Vatican Council and the *Catechism* to be active participants in the sanctification of the world. This is our Dominican apostolate.

"In keeping with the social nature of man, the good of each individual is necessarily related to the common good, which in turn can be defined only in reference to the human person: "Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek the common good together.'" (*CCC* 1905)

Some members may elect to serve within their own parishes in addition to participation in a chapter apostolate. Others may be engaged in the critical work of raising faithful children. Some members may enjoy a career in ministry of some sort. It is important to remember, however, that the chapter members should be involved in some form of apostolate as a community, one based upon the talents and interests of all the individual members.

"Furthermore, the laity who have followed their vocation and have become members of one of the associations or institutes approved by the Church try faithfully to adopt the special characteristics of the spiritual life which are proper to them as well. They should also hold in high esteem professional skill, family and civic spirit, and the virtues relating to social customs, namely, honesty, justice, sincerity, kindness, and courage, without which no true Christian life can exist." (*Apostolicam actuositatem* 4)

The Dominican Community as a School of Charity

As followers of Christ, walking in the footsteps of St. Dominic, we seek the perfect Love, whose source is the life of the Trinity, three Divine ever-living, ever-loving Persons. Because we were created in God's image, this need for community is entrenched in our very nature. The expression of this love shown toward those in our chapter is a participation in God's will for us. Catherine

of Siena, the Patron Saint of lay Dominicans, embodied the self-emptying love and charity toward others, which we should strive to emulate.

She says, "You see then that in our love of God we conceive virtues, and in our love of neighbor they are brought to birth. Acting in this way - loving your neighbor sincerely without false love or pretense of heart, without any thought of your own profit, spiritual or temporal - you will be a true servant, and respond by means of your neighbor to the love which the Creator has for you" (O'Driscoll 27-28).

In the company of others, the spiritual qualities–submission to authority, humility, obedience, sacrifice of self will and acceptance of the faults of others in charity–toward which we aspire are refined. These qualities are deepened in a manner not possible outside of the community.

The Community as a Source of Strength for Our Work in the World

The manner in which lay Dominicans are present in the world is active and dynamic. Because we are called to teach others about the Truth of the Gospel, and Life in Christ, our actions often conflict with what is accepted by secular society. We seek to become consistent Christian witnesses in every way, including the choices we make in our daily lives. This governs how modestly we dress, our choice of entertainment and our respect for all people, and for the gifts of the earth. Thus, we work to become more detached from material goods and more focused on the things of God.

"Since in our times, variations of materialism are rampant everywhere even among Catholics, the laity should not only learn doctrine more carefully, especially those main points in which are the subjects of controversy, but all should also provide the witness of an evangelical life in contrast to all forms of materialism." (*Apostolicam actuositatem* 6, 31A)

The present day secular society presents disturbing challenges to Church teachings, especially with regard to the sanctity of human life, and the dignity of human beings, marriage and families. It can be difficult to keep one's own moral compass steady. We thank God for the gift of our chapter communities, where we can share our strength and seek advice. To join together with others who are knowledgeable in the faith, and experienced in Christian living, can prevent us from going astray. The chapter is our home, where we are nourished and encouraged on a regular basis as we face the challenges in the secular culture in which we live.

"The Faithful, more precisely the lay faithful, find themselves on the front lines of the Church's life; for them the Church is the animating principle for human society. Therefore, they in particular, ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the head of all, and of the Bishops in communion with him. These are the Church." (Pius XII 149)

Conclusion

"The Church's rich variety is manifested still further from within each state of life. Thus within the lay state diverse 'vocations' are given, that is, there are different paths in the spiritual life and the apostolate which are taken by individual members of the lay faithful. In the field of a 'commonly shared' lay vocation, 'special' lay vocations flourish. In this area we can also recall the spiritual experience of the flourishing of diverse forms of secular institutes that have developed recently in the Church. These offer the lay faithful, and even priests, the possibility of professing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience through vows or promises, while fully maintaining one's lay or clerical state." (*Christifideles laici* 56)

We know that the Holy Spirit bestows great graces on those who strive to serve God, and it is thus with our chapter communities. The Catholic Church has approved and blessed the work of the Fraternities of St. Dominic as we carry the Gospel into the workplace and the marketplace. We seek to sanctify the earth in the special circumstances of the laity. Indeed, we are often on the "front lines" in the defense of Christian culture. Such a difficult load is made lighter when shared with our brothers and sisters in St. Dominic. We can be assured of the Lord's blessing if we seek holiness in community with others in our chapter of the Fraternities of St. Dominic.

"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name–the name you gave me–so that they may be one as we are one." John 17:11

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Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how you can participate in the chapter community and how this may contribute to extending the community aspect of your Dominican life to other areas of your life such as family, workplace, local community, etc.
2. Have there been instances in your life that you were challenged on some issue of faith or morals? Were you knowledgeable about the Church's position on the issue? If you were unable to give an adequate response, would you have presented the topic to your chapter for study, discussion and meditation?
3. How does the prayer life of the chapter flow into your personal prayer life or vise versa?
4. Discuss the role of community in our present-day culture of individualism?
5. Discuss the contributions that a shared active chapter apostolate makes toward the spiritual and possibly physical growth of the chapter. If your chapter already has an apostolate, what from your experience or expertise can you offer to it? If there is not one, do you have some suggestions? What are they?

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