



LAITY IN THE CHURCH: OUR CALL TO ACTION

FRATERNITIES OF SAINT DOMINIC • PROVINCE OF SAINT JOSEPH

MODULE 2

Introduction

Have you ever wondered if we, lay persons in the Catholic Church, really have a voice and a place in the grand scheme of things? One of the great blessings of the Dominican Order is the knowledge that there really is a place for us to share our faith with those around us. Being involved gives us the opportunity to learn and grow into who we are as priest, prophets and kings. The Second Vatican Council reminded us that all members of the Church are called to personal holiness. The council felt so strongly that this call included the laity that it issued *The Decree on the Laity* to provide a guide to assist us in our sacred call to holiness and to the spreading of the Good News. In the Dominican Order, we learn that each person is unique, and has unique gifts to share for the building up of the Church and for the glory of God. As a member of the Dominic's family, we are encouraged to seek out these gifts and put them to use, no matter how unimportant they seem to be to us.

The Fraternities of Saint Dominic (also long-called the Third Order) form one branch of the Dominican family. The Fraternities includes persons who are married or single, parents, diocesan clergy, deacons, and congregations of sisters. Who can feel left out in such a family! The Code of Canon Law identifies the Fraternities as:

An association whose members lead an apostolic life and strive for Christian perfection while living in the world and who share the spirit of some religious institute under the higher direction of that same institute (canon 303).

How then do members of the Fraternities of St. Dominic differ from extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, CCD or Sunday school teachers? How do they differ from the Christian faithful who take part in the Cursillo or Charismatic movement? How does a chapter of the Fraternities of Saint Dominic differ from a sodality, confraternity, Rosary Guild, or association that performs works of charity and the spiritual works of mercy? Fraternity members are the faithful living under the direction of a religious order and according to its direction and its spirit. The Church understands that there really is a difference between lay members of religious orders and membership in those other organizations. It even distinguishes the order's fraternity members from other associations who are attached to Sisters' congregations within the order, associations who support that congregation with prayer and financial assistance, one year at a time. We, as members of the

Fraternities of St. Dominic, make lifelong promises to live according to the spirit and rule that is established for us in the Dominican Order. We bind ourselves in obedience to the Master of the Order of Preachers. We live the charism and the mission of the order *until death*. And in this, we become people of the Word, as exemplified in the four Pillars of the Dominican Order: prayer, study, community and apostolate.

The Four Pillars of the Dominican Order

1. Prayer: People of the Word in Prayer

Divine charity and love are the bonds between all Dominicans on earth, purgatory and in heaven. This is a manifestation of the communion of saints. Prayer is one of the pillars that keep us strong as a family. One good example of our unity is seen in our history. We have not had any schisms or breaks in our order since its beginning in 1216.

Prayer and contemplation are critical components of the Dominican vocation. It is not possible for anyone to be actively apostolic unless the union with God is close, constant and personal. Chapter life also helps one to achieve a closer union with God and grow in the spirit of prayer. From prayer springs an increase in the desire to take on apostolic work.

Prayer is an integral component of our chapter meetings. A chapter meeting will involve one or more of the traditional Dominican forms of prayer: the recitation of the rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours appropriate to the time of day, a Dominican Saint's day, or the celebration of the Eucharist. We pray for each other and for those who have gone before us. We pray for each other's apostolates and for those people who are affected by these apostolates. We pray for forgiveness and help when we are not living with each other and treating each other as Christ would have us do. We ask for the Holy Spirit to guide us in our affairs and chapter business, so that our goal to bring glory to him is successful. We praise Christ for his goodness to us; we petition him for those virtues we need to bring his kingdom to the world. We try to follow St. Paul's advice to the Corinthians when he said "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless, of course, you fail the test" (2 Cor 13:5).

2. Study: People of the Word in Study

The Church calls all lay persons to become informed and involved in Jesus' mission to make His love known to the world. In the Dominican Order, we have St. Dominic and many other saints and blessed, who have give us examples of how to live out this call. When we commit ourselves to this mission within the Order, we do so by making a "profession" to the Master of the Order through the person of the Chapter Moderator or Religious Promoter of the chapter.

Fraternity members share in the prayers, merits and graces of the whole order, and are given a mission from Christ to carry the faith in word and example, to be loyal to the teachings of the Church, to give help and encouragement to the weak and perhaps fallen-away Catholics. To those who criticize the changes in the ways our faith is expressed, lay Dominicans can be witnesses in faith that all changes are guided by the Holy Spirit even now, as shown in the history of the Church throughout the ages. To those who lack reverence for God, life and others, Fraternity members must be ready to defend the law of God and speak out against the lack of morality shown in the media and in other areas where morality is discouraged.

How can we do this if we have not prepared ourselves and studied the fundamentals of our faith to such an extent that we have become "preachers of the Word". St. Peter reminds us "Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, but speak gently and respectfully" (1Pet 3:15-16).

As you study this and all the other modules, it is important to be prepared to share your faith, but also to understand it for your own use and holiness. The modules are designed to cover the major aspects of the faith and of Dominican life. Studies are conducted at the chapter meetings where all participate and are reminded of our charisms.

As we mature in our faith and in our participation in the chapter, we progress through the postulancy modules, the novitiate, and finally the modules of ongoing formation. Although our study is not limited to these formal meetings in a chapter, they are designed to deliver an essential formation to all who desire to belong to the Fraternities of St. Dominic.

3. Community: People of the Word in Community

The chapter is an authentic Dominican community, drawn together by the love of St. Dominic and the spiritual life, under the direction of the Dominican friars. As a community, we work to bring the love of Jesus to all those around us through our various separate apostolates and through a chapter apostolate that we work in common. Can it be possible to bring true meaning to a

common apostolate if the group does not live in harmony? There are times when it seems that there is a lack of charity even among chapter members. Instead of bemoaning the fact, let us look to our own participation in the chapter. Am I part of the problem? Can I help to bring about a solution? As a member of a Dominican Chapter, how can I practice more intently the virtues of charity and generosity?

As people of the Word, we must turn to the Word. "Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope...persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality. Bless your persecutors...Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly...If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Rom 12:9-20).

What is the purpose of community? We turn again to the Word of God. "You men of Gentile stock—called 'uncircumcised' by those who, in virtue of a hand-exercised rite on their flesh, call themselves 'circumcised'—remember that, in former times, you had no part in Christ and were excluded from the community of Israel. You were strangers to the covenant and its promise; you were without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ... This means that you are strangers and aliens no longer. No, you are fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the capstone" (Eph 2:11-20).

Members of the Fraternities of St. Dominic share in the prayers, merits, and graces of the Order when they become full members of the Order. All the while living out their Dominican vocations and maintaining a normal secular life. A vocation to the order involves a deeper commitment to prayer and contemplation while living the Gospel and living in the spirit of the beatitudes.

4. Apostolate/Mission: People of the Word in Apostolic Mission

When we become Dominicans we become part of an apostolic order. This means that we have a mission to preach the Gospel. All lay people are asked to carry the truth of their faith to those around them and to their communities by word and example.

Lumen gentium 31 teaches that "by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will.... It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are closely associated that these

may always be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer.”

Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ in Baptism and anointed by the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, “are marvelously called and prepared so that even richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers, and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit – indeed even the hardships of life if they are patiently borne – all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (*Lumen gentium* 34).

As lay Dominicans we do all this with an added spiritual dimension, as exemplified by Dominican saints who have gone before us.

How is this done? Scripture says, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the favor bestowed on each of us. One gift...may be the gift of ministry; it should be used for service. One who is a teacher should use his gift for teaching” (Rom 12:4-7).

This Scripture surely speaks to the many and varied gifts and apostolates of the members of the Fraternities of St. Dominic: prison ministry, working with young pregnant women and helping them to choose life, helping families in dire straits, working with alcoholics and drug addicts to help them find hope in a newfound spiritual faith life, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, making clothes available for poor families, supporting missions at home and abroad, offering days of reflection and retreats in local parishes and dioceses, preaching teams, radio and television broadcasts, publishing books, papers and reflections to evangelize and catechize the public about the Church, her faith, and her social teachings, and much, much more.

All of the other aspects of Dominican life come together in the apostolate. As we pray and study, and come together in community, we share our hopes and dreams and what we sense the Lord is asking of us in regards to those in the world around us. Thomas Aquinas provided the definition of Dominican life: “To contemplate and give to others the fruits of our contemplation.” Not only do we live in the world, with our spouses and families, our occupations, our co-workers, our in-laws, and all the rest, but we also live uncompromisingly our Christian charge to bring Jesus to the world.

The very differences which the Lord has willed to put between the members of his body serve its unity and mission. “In the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanc-

tifying and governing in his name and by his power. But the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ; they have, therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God (*Apostolicam actuositatem* 2).

Summary

The Lord Jesus has a call for each and every one of us who are his followers. Each call is responded to in an individual way, as we use rightly the gifts and charisms that have been given to us. To be a lay member of the Dominican Order is one response to that call. It is a commitment to grow in grace and holiness through the examples of St. Dominic, Catherine of Siena, and other great Dominican saints and blessed. We commit ourselves to embracing truth through studying the Word of God and the teachings of the Church, which Jesus founded for, and in, us. We become empowered by the Holy Spirit to live in the spirit of generosity and fervor as exemplified by St. Dominic and others. We come to know Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

As Dominicans, we watch the world around us and become intimately involved in the needs of the people we meet every day. We become aware of the issues, the injustices, the unfairness, and, as Psalm 34:7 states, “the cry of the poor”, which includes our own cries and faults that need to be addressed. As Christians, our purpose is to become holy: “You have been told, oh man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do right and to love goodness, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Dominic’s final message to the members of his order is still fresh and true for Dominicans today: “Persevere in serving the Lord with fervor and apply yourselves to extend the order. Behold, my children, what I leave you as a heritage: have charity, guard humility, and make your treasure out of voluntary poverty.”

Works Cited and Selected Resources

Apostolicam actuositatem. Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity of the Second Vatican Council. November 18, 1965.

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John Paul II. Apostolic exhortation on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful (*Christifideles laici*). October 30, 1988.

Lumen gentium. Apostolic constitution on the Church of Second Vatican Council. November 21, 1964.

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Discussion Questions:

1. What are the four pillars of the Dominican Order?
2. The Church is called the "People of God." Notice that in each of the pillars there is the phrase "People of the Word." Discuss what this means to you.
3. Discuss why and how you as a lay Dominican are called to be a person of the Word?
4. Reviewing the four pillars of the Dominican Order, why is study such an integral part of our call to action?
5. Think of two ways you can integrate each of the pillars into your daily life.
6. Discuss how the four pillars are interrelated and how each one supports the other three.
7. How can your active participation in the chapter's group apostolate help to strengthen the chapter's community and aid in your spiritual development?

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