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THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF FORMATION IN THE DOMINICAN ORDER

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INTRODUCTION

I am honoured to be invited to address the congress, I am very happy to be here, and I am happy also to share with you some thoughts about the different aspects of formation in the Dominican Order today.

As I am sure you know, a new *Ratio Formationis Generalis* for the friars was promulgated by the Master of the Order on 22 December 2016. This *Ratio* is a statute, or a set of norms and principles, which are given to the Order to guide the work of formation. For us that work is guided in the first place by the Constitutions and it is the Constitutions themselves that ask for a *Ratio Formationis Generalis*. They speak about it as follows (LCO 163):

There shall be a Ratio Formationis for the whole Order, approved by the general chapter or by the Master of the Order, and revised from time to time. It should lay down general spiritual principles and basic training norms for forming the brothers, leaving the provinces to develop their own norms as time and place demand.

It is to be revised from time to time, and because the previous version had been promulgated in 1987, the Jubilee Year of 2016 seemed like an appropriate time for a substantial revision of the *Ratio Formationis Generalis*.

I would like to speak about three things. In the first place I will say what is new about the *Ratio Formationis Generalis* of 2016 so as to see what are the aspects of formation that are given special emphasis today. Then I would like to say something about how the Dominican Laity might use the *Ratio* of the friars in thinking about their own formation. And finally I want to refer to two recent letters of the Master of the Order which speak about the priorities for our mission today and specifically the role of the Dominican Laity in that mission. Formation is always for the mission of the Order and so in any particular place and time our formation must get some of its character and content from the missionary emphasis of that place and time. Because these letters of brother Bruno give direction for the Dominican mission today they ought also to guide our thinking about Dominican formation today.

THE 2016 RFG

If asked to identify what is new in the revised *Ratio Formationis Generalis* I pick out three things in particular.

There is an emphasis on **the role of the community** in the work of formation which was not present in the old *ratio*. When the new document speaks about those responsible for formation it speaks firstly of the community itself. The individual brother has his own special responsibility to develop his vocation and to live it as well as possible. He is helped by masters or formators who have responsibility for the novitiates and studentates of the Order. They in turn are helped by councils and chapters of the brothers, especially by formation councils established in each community of initial formation and for the province as a whole. But a place of priority is given to the formation community itself, so that everybody who is part of it is asked to share the responsibility of providing the best possible context for forming new brothers in the life and mission of the Order. In a recent symposium at Oxford about vocational discernment, a symposium that involved Benedictines, Jesuits and Dominicans, it was striking to see how much responsibility is given by our tradition to the chapters and councils of the communities when it comes to discerning and forming the new friars.

A second thing that is new, and in this the Order is simply thinking with the Church, is to consider **four basic aspects of formation**, the aspects of human formation, religious or spiritual formation, intellectual formation, and apostolic or pastoral formation. This distinction is first found, to the best of my knowledge, in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the apostolic exhortation from John Paul II in 1992 following a synod of bishops dedicated to priestly formation. But it has become common as a way of thinking about formation and we find it again in the most recent church document dedicated to priestly training, the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, which was published in December 2016. One might debate some aspects of this distinction, and already I have been involved in a number of conversations in which certain aspects of it have been questioned. But it is a useful starting point, to consider formation in this holistic or integral way, involving these four aspects.

The third new element in our *Ratio Generalis* is that for the first time the Order has a *ratio* for **permanent formation** and not just for initial formation. This is another emphasis that is shared across the Church, a growing acceptance of the need for priests and religious – but we can add for all Christians too – to accept that discipleship means being forever in the school of Jesus. The Order was slow to accept this new emphasis. Earlier efforts at general chapters to give greater prominence to permanent formation were not successful. The chapters preferred to deal with it as a kind of appendix to initial formation. Many things have conspired to help us to change our minds about this, good things like a better understanding of human psychology and development, or a deeper appreciation of the challenges that come with the different stages and experiences of life, but also not so good things such as the sexual abuse crisis which is disturbing the Church so profoundly and which raises fundamental questions about human and spiritual maturity. So our recent general chapters have been happy to begin their consideration of formation by speaking about permanent formation and then seeing initial formation within that broader context. We are forever being formed in our following of Jesus and we are forever growing into our following of Dominic. It is not just aspects of our own nature and personality that require this. It is also the need to respond to changing situations and fresh challenges that come to anybody engaged in preaching the gospel today.

These are what I would pick out as the key new emphases of the 2016 *Ratio Generalis*: a stress on the role of the community in formation, a recognition of formation as holistic or integral involving human, spiritual, intellectual and apostolic aspects, and a recognition of the permanence of formation within which the years of initial formation have a special character but do not exhaust all that we must now say about formation.

THE NEW RATIO AND THE DOMINICAN LAITY

I hope that the new *Ratio Generalis* will not only be of interest to the Dominican Laity but will also be of help when you are thinking about your own formation. Our work of drafting a new *Ratio* was greatly facilitated by a very simple and clear statement with which the acts of the general chapter of Rome in 2010 began its consideration of formation (n.185):

The aim of our formation is the making of a Dominican preacher. Distinctive Dominican preaching must be the creative reference point of all other aspects of formation, human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. The common zeal to share the fruits of contemplation of the Word of God provides the environment in which we all grow as preachers, a culture of mission.

So a first question, perhaps even a challenge, to yourselves is to ask how you would articulate the goal of your formation as Lay Dominicans? How would you express it? You might want to borrow from the sentences just quoted but you still need to qualify them in some way to bring out the specific character of your way of being Dominicans. What is the 'end product' that you wish, by God's grace, to be brought about through the work of formation? What kind of animal is the Lay Dominican? What are the characteristics of this animal when it is living well and flourishing as the kind of animal that it is? Your answers to those questions will already give you clear indications about what kind of formation you need to be thinking about.

When I quoted LCO 163 about the *Ratio Formationis Generalis* you will have noticed that it ends by saying that it is left to the provinces to develop their own norms as time and place demand. So in these years each province is engaged in producing a *Ratio Formationis Particularis* which adapts the general principles and fills out the basic structures of the *Ratio Generalis* for the context of each province.

Perhaps we could think of the Lay Dominicans doing something analogous to that. You could use the *Ratio Generalis* as a starting point but then adapt it, contextualise it and supplement it in accordance with your own particular way of living Dominican life and of participating in the Order's mission. An appendix to the *Ratio Generalis* gives guidelines for how a *ratio particularis* is to be drawn up. Decisions about certain matters are left to the discretion of each province. The general chapter of Bologna in 2016 also gave some guidelines for adapting the general principles and norms for formation to the needs of the individual provinces. It is interesting that these guidelines (AGC Bologna n.245) give special emphasis to the apostolic plan or 'community project' of each province. The process of formation needs to keep this provincial plan in mind and be established in such a way that the

brothers being formed are being formed for the mission of the Order as it is contextualised in this or that part of the world.

So to continue the analogy, we can imagine the Lay Dominicans using the *Ratio Generalis* of the friars but adapting it to the apostolic plan or 'community project' of the fraternities. It would mean putting a second set of questions to yourselves, questions such as: what are the apostolic priorities of the lay fraternities in your province? How are the Lay Dominicans engaged in the life and mission of your province? How do we begin to contextualise the formation offered here or there in order to prepare Dominican laity well for their participation in the life and mission of a particular province?

It will also mean carrying through this reflection and revision of your formation programmes guided by the new emphases which I spoke about under the first point: the place of the community in formation, the different aspects of formation if it is to be integral, and the fact that we are asked now to think always in terms of permanent formation and not just of initial formation.

PRIORITIES FOR MISSION AND FORMATION TODAY

So for what mission, for what project, are lay Dominicans being formed today? What are the current priorities and preoccupations of the Order for help with which it looks to its lay members? I suggest that we find a very good answer to these questions in two recent letters of the Master of the Order, his letter after the Mission Congress which brought the Jubilee celebrations to an end, and his letter to the Dominican laity in preparation for this congress in which we are now participating. The first letter is dated 25 March 2017 and the second is dated 25 January 2018. How are lay Dominicans to be formed today for the Order of Preachers whose mission is currently orientated in the ways indicated after the Mission Congress? How are lay Dominicans to be formed today so as to respond to the challenges shared with you by the Master in his letter in preparation for this Fatima Congress?

When the goal is clear it becomes easy to talk about the human, spiritual, intellectual and apostolic formation that is required to achieve it. This is what the general chapter of Rome helped us to do in relation to our formation as friars of the Order. My proposal, humbly submitted, is that the Laity should undertake a similar exercise. Your formation, both initial and permanent, should prepare you to take your place in the mission of the Order as it is conceived today. In order to do that your formation, both initial and permanent, needs to be guided by the goals and priorities outlined in these two letters from brother Bruno.

From the Mission Congress

The letter after the Mission Congress summarised all that had been presented during the days of the Congress and identified three main convictions that had emerged about the Order's mission today: a conviction about **preaching**, a conviction about **fraternity**, and a conviction about **encounter**. These are some central guiding realities to inform any fresh thinking about formation and they come not just from the Master of the Order but from the

more than six hundred members of the Dominican family who took part in the Mission Congress and whose work the Master summarised in his letter. Remember that the largest single group at the Congress were the lay members of the Order.

So preaching, fraternity and encounter. A focus on preaching is not a surprise for an Order whose heart is given to the loving service of the Word of God. But the Mission Congress did not wish simply to re-assert the Order's central mission but to identify those aspects of it that need renewal among us: a lifestyle that supports preaching, a generous, courageous and creative service of the Word, a concern for the different languages in which we are called to communicate about the Word (language meaning also things like music and art).

The focus on fraternity was particularly on the experience of friendship which we carry for the Church and for the world, a friendship being strengthened between us on the basis of the friendship of God that is the subject matter of our preaching: God's friendship towards us, God's call to us to share in the friendship that he is, the life we share together as friends of the Bridegroom, calling others to come and share in the joy of our Lord.

And encounter is the form our preaching must take, today more than ever, following the example of Jesus and Dominic as we see them meeting people, listening, questioning, giving time and attention, staying with people as they face their difficulties and as they search for truthful ways of living. One of the most powerful moments of the Mission Congress was that dedicated to reflecting on Jesus' conversations with the Samaritan woman in John 4 and with the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24.

Preaching, fraternity, encounter: we learn these things in the first place from God's way of communicating his Word to us, from God's way of bringing us into His friendship, from God's way of establishing and sustaining dialogue in His encounter with His people.

The Mission Congress also presented us with many experiences of restlessness, of communities, places and situations where people are restless and to which we are particularly called to speak a word of healing, reconciliation, peace and mercy, to be preachers of grace in all those ways. The world needs the Word that builds communion and the work of preaching the Word of God's grace is inseparable from the work of building communion. As his letter unfolds, the Master speaks about the importance for this of theology, the need for fresh study to which our preaching will inevitably send us and from which we are then sent back to preaching. He speaks of permanent formation, already mentioned. He speaks of the Order as a family in the heart of the Church, a point to which I shall return. He speaks of moving forward in the mission of the Order while doing so in the path of tradition, handing on to a new generation what we ourselves have received. And he speaks about the Salamanca process, an approach which asserts very clearly the human dignity of all persons and which works to defend and promote that dignity, and the rights that go with it, particularly in situations where these are under threat.

Finally the Master comes to some concrete priorities for the Order's mission today: the worlds of young people, digital culture, migration, and study as a mission of the Order.

It might seem as if I have asked the Master to write my talk for me! But what I want to stress is the importance of aligning our formation, both initial and permanent, with the apostolic concerns of the Order of Preachers today. The aspects of formation being underlined in the Church and in the Order are those I mentioned earlier – the role of the community or fraternity, the need for permanent formation considering our own development in response to the changing demands being made on us, and the need for a holistic or integral formation that will take account not just of religious and intellectual aspects but of the human and the apostolic aspects as well. The letter after the Mission Congress articulates the mission of the Order as it is understood by us today and the formation of all branches of the Order ought to be guided by that articulation.

Towards the International Congress 2018

The letter of brother Bruno to the laity of the Order in preparation for this Congress makes concrete for the Dominican laity the challenges and priorities already identified for the whole Order. Not surprisingly the first place is given to **the sign of fraternity**. This is a first task for the mission and therefore for the formation of lay Dominicans also. You are to be a sign in the world that humans carry within them the ability to live as brothers and sisters. Within the fraternities you are called to establish relations which, even with all your diversity, unite you in the same relationship with God and in the same desire to be sent as witnesses of the Word of life and grace.

Another term we must use is the term **family**. We are accustomed to speaking of the Dominican family in order to include all the branches that belong in some way to the Order of Preachers. It is even more specific in your case because many, though not all, lay Dominicans live their vocation in the context of family life, as husbands or wives, as fathers or mothers. Pope Francis has spoken often about the gospel of the family and how the family is to be an agent of evangelization. This is something the Order looks to you to teach the rest of us, how the life of families can be supported and strengthened through your membership of the Order and how families in their ordinary reality can be bearers of the grace of the Lord and witnesses in the world to that grace.

Continuing the theme of preaching as **encounter and dialogue**, there are many places and situations other than family life itself, that are accessible to the lay brothers and sisters of the Order in ways that they are not accessible to the friars, nuns or sisters. Brother Bruno speaks about how the lay Dominicans are in the front line in many areas of professional life, where important issues of ethics, justice and meaning arise. In medicine and law, in communications and ecology, in education and business: in all cases there are encounters with people, there is working together, there is a shared search for meaning, truth and goodness. Some of the questions that arise in these areas will send us back to study, to learn more and to understand more about the many questions humanity is facing and about the light to be shed on these questions from the Word of God. From our tradition we can engage with these concerns and make a contribution to finding solutions for them.

Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is an area of particular importance which gets special mention in the Master's letter. Because of your immediate and daily contact and

interaction with people of other faiths and religious beliefs, lay Dominicans are on the front line in this matter also in ways that other members of the Dominican family are not.

The **worlds of youth** get special mention, a point that had already been emphasised in the Mission Congress. The Synod of Bishops devoted to this is just beginning in Rome and it is a moment to renew our commitment to promoting the participation of young people in the preaching mission of the Order. One particular issue that needs to be thought about is how to facilitate the transition of younger people from the various youth groups attached to the Order to a lifelong participation in the lay fraternities of the Order.

Returning at the end of his letter to the question of the family, brother Bruno speaks about the welcome, discernment and accompaniment needed where lay brothers and sisters are in irregular situations. It is a question that has exercised the whole Church since the last two synods on the family and it is one that arises in many of the lay fraternities. How are we to honour the reality of being signs of fraternity in a world and in a Church that are marked by brokenness and imperfection? How are we to be preachers of grace and mercy not just in word but also in practice? Brother Bruno made a specific request to all the provincial officials of the Dominican Laity about this. From the point of view of my theme, aspects of formation in the Dominican Order, you can see once again the need for permanent formation in order to understand well, to respond well and to continue building the signs of fraternity that we want to be.

CONCLUSION

To conclude: the formation of the Lay Dominican in the way of Saint Dominic needs to be integral, a formation in human, religious, intellectual and apostolic maturity. It needs to be permanent, a formation that builds constantly on what was received in the time of initial formation. And it needs to be undertaken in community since it is the community that confirms the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of each one.

I have stressed that it is a formation for the mission of the Order because the end of the Order is an apostolic one: we are all at the service of the proclamation of the Word of God, to evangelise in the world the name of Jesus Christ. Lay Dominicans have a particular role and contribution in this mission. They are formed by and for life in the family, in the Order, in the Church, and in the world. Having their own experience of these different circles of life – the family, the Order, the Church, the world – lay Dominicans are in a very good place from which to allow each of these circles to illuminate the others.

In this third part of my talk I have presented the main lines of the Order's understanding of its mission today. I have done so because our formation is always for our mission. So my final question to you is this: how can the Order best help and equip you, through the initial and permanent formation it offers you, to play your part in responding to these contemporary challenges?