THE DOMINICAN FAMILY:
A CHRONICLE OF VISION AND ACTION IN RECENT GENERAL CHAPTERS OF THE BRETHREN

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The task of presenting to the International Symposium selected Chapter
documents relating to the Dominican Family proved to be a surprising and grati-
fying experience. It was surprising to discover how the capitulars took a deter-
mined stand concerning the Dominican Family, regularly and consistently, from
1968 to the present. It was gratifying to see how the chapters and the masters
supported one another in strengthening the family concept throughout the Order,
for the sake of the Church.

The Chapter of 1968

In the early fall of 1968 the friars of the Order of Preachers traveled from
the four corners of the earth, as they had done for centuries, to conduct that
pentecostal event which we call a General Chapter. They met at River Forest, in
the hemisphere still known to many as the New World. There, by two momentous
actions, they brought the Order officially into the new world of the Church which
followed the second Vatican Council. First they thoroughly rewrote the Constitu-
tions of the friars. Then they distilled the essentials of Dominican life into
a small but powerful document entitled the Fundamental Constitution.

The capitular Fathers were convinced that the vision of Dominic was never
static; that the Order of Preachers was always ready to embrace new developments
for the sake of its mission in the living Church. They also knew that the Order
of Preachers has never been monolithic. From the beginning, that gift of the
Spirit which we speak of with awe and gratitude as the charism of the Order was
meant to be shared with men and women of more than one vocation in the Church.
Dominic de Guzman allowed the Spirit to move where it would. So have the General
Chapters of his brothers and sisters. At River Forest the capitulars, open to
the same Spirit, recalled in official terms that the Order of Preachers is and
always has been a family in the Church. They placed in the Fundamental Consti-
tution this quiet definition of a given reality:

IX. The Dominican family is composed of clerical and cooperator
brothers, sisters, members of secular institutes, and lay
and priestly fraternities....

Then, lest the friars should recognize these groups only as separate com-
ponents with no ties to bind them together, the capitulars wrote into the new
Constitutions an entire chapter on "The Relationship of the Brethren to other
branches of the Order and to our Affiliates". The title and contents of this
Chapter V are significant. Its position in the Constitutions is equally so.
It is grouped with the first basic chapters on Dominican requirements for the
following of Christ: religious consecration, liturgy and prayer, study, and
ministry of the Word. Thus all those who share in the charism of Dominic are
invited to live in complementary relationship as Dominicans and to pursue in
different ways their common mission. The significant first sentence of
Chapter V makes this clear:

All the groups which compose the Dominican family share the same
common vocation and each, in its own special way, serves the mission
of the Order in the world.

The first public expression of this idea was directed to the Sisters of the
Order. At the close of the 1968 Chapter the capitulars asked the Master, Ani-
ceto Fernandez, to write to the Dominican Sisters of the world in response to
certain inquiries some had made concerning their place in the Order. Assuring
the sisters that they and the contemplative nuns were "as much a part of the
Order as the brethren", the Master wrote,

The time has now come to examine our relationships carefully. In this
modern world where our Savior has put us to carry on His great work of
salvation we are called to embrace together the spirit and tradition
bequeathed to us by Saint Dominic, to search together for the best means
of carrying out our apostolate, and to build up together our communities
of brothers and sisters in the service of the Church. Nowadays women
are taking their rightful place in the work of the Church. So too, the sisters must have their proper place in the apostolate of the Order.

The forceful words of Padre Fernandez manifested his own enthusiasm for the Dominican family as well as his support of the Chapter declarations.

With the River Forest Chapter there began a crescendo of study, proclamation, and action concerning the Dominican family which was stimulated by two powerful forces: the General Chapters and the Masters of the Order. Working together in a kind of "alternating current" they have brought us in the past fifteen years not only to this historic meeting in Bologna, but into a new vision of what the Order in its wholeness can be for the Church in the future.

A previous initiative

We must recognize, however, that the initiatives taken before 1968 promoted the later developments. For example, in 1927, more than fifty-five years ago, the newly-elected Master Bonaventura Garcia de Paredes devoted a whole section of his first circular letter to a description of the Order as "a particular and intimate family of the great Christian family", and called for a strong family spirit among all members. He authorized Dominican sisters to sign their names with the letters O.P., and instituted a commission to provide "whatever can contribute to preserve the relations of the family and promote intimate union between the several branches". 2

The Chapter at Tallaght, 1971

When the friars convened at Tallaght for the first General Chapter ever held in Ireland, they reviewed the Constitutions approved at River Forest and made extensive changes. However, they left intact the sections on the Domini-

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1 To the Sisters of the Order, River Forest, Illinois, USA, Oct. 24, 1968.

2 Garcia de Paredes to "All of our Fathers, Brothers and Sisters of the Order of Preachers", Rome, 1927.
can family in that document and in the Fundamental Constitution. To support these they added a single legislative Act which stated unequivocally that

The name Order of Preachers in its universal character is the same as Dominican Family.... 1

A Family for Mission

The first world-wide assembly of family members for any purpose was the Missionary Congress of Dominican men and women which convened in Madrid in 1973. Under the active leadership of Padre Fernandez, the participants forged a very important link between past and future General Chapters. They proclaimed the vital connection between mission and Dominican life, and made strong recommendations concerning the quality of common life, evangelical poverty, and liturgical prayer. To these they added a section on "Bonds between Brothers and Sisters", calling for international mission projects and national associations of Dominicans. With the courage of their convictions they asked that the Master appoint a sister to help him to promote collaboration. (Although this shocked some of those present, the idea was not dismissed by Padre Fernandez, whose vision was never limited.) Most important, they encouraged missionaries to build up the local Church through collaboration of religious and laity. The participants in this historic Congress returned to their homes with a new sense of the charism, diversity, and unity of the Order founded by the missionary Dominic. 2 Their spirit was carried to the next General Chapter, as well as back to their own places of service.

1 Acts, Tallaght General Chapter, 1971. 122.
2 I.D.I., October 1, 1973 (73/182).
The Chapter of Madonna dell'Arco, 1974

In 1974 the General Chapter convened at Napoli under the patronage of the Madonna dell'Arco. At its opening the newly elected Master, Vincent de Couesnongle, in his response to the summons to leadership, revealed his sense of the Order as family. He said,

In facing such an immense task...no one should feel lonely. Brethren, sisters and friends of the Order, we are all one family. St. Dominic is with us, he is always present and always alive in his prayer: "Pro tuo coetu pauperum". ¹

The capitulars, assured of the presence of St. Dominic and their provincials, desired to bring in other members of the family as well. They sent a summons "subito" to certain nuns, sisters, and Dominican laity, who came with dispatch to the General Chapter. These took part in commission work and, along with a cooperator brother, briefly addressed the assembly. This was the first of several actions by which the capitulars at Madonna dell'Arco reinforced the concepts voiced at River Forest and Tallaght. They established a Commission on the Dominican Family and approved the Acts which the Commission proposed, including an eloquent Prologue. In the Prologue they urged Dominicans of all branches to cooperate so that, as they said,

the multiform riches of the same charism will turn to the good of the whole family, and our apostolate in the world today will be more efficacious.

Each branch, they said, should retain its autonomy; but by their supportive interaction all would "further the purpose of the Order in unity". ²

The Prologue introduced fourteen specific Acts of legislation, covering a range of family concerns: the role of pious unions, the Rule of lay frater-

¹ I D I, 15/ IX/ 74. p. 260.
nities, encouragement for nuns to engage in 'friendly dialogue' with sisters and brothers, a call for support of the laity by other branches, revision of the nuns' constitutions, and a proposal that nuns be represented in the Curia and in the General Chapters. Of these Chapter Acts I wish to speak here of three in particular:

1. The capitulars confirmed the Tallaght Chapter declaration that the title "Dominican Family" is equivalent to that of the universal Order of Preachers, which does not destroy the juridical autonomy of each branch, but unites all in moral and spiritual strength. (225)

2. They abolished the terms 'First, Second and Third' Order as unsuitable for contemporary society. (234)

3. They authorized the establishment of a General Secretariat for the Dominican Family (SGDF), and urged that national and regional secretariats be formed as soon as possible in the various countries. (238)

The Secretariat was formed with Father Brian Farrelly of Argentina as its first head and Sister Mary Jean Walsh of the United States as the first associate in that office.

The Chapter of Quezon City, 1977

The response of the leadership of the Order to the Holy Spirit has been manifest in the steady development, from chapter to chapter, of ideas and actions concerning the Dominican Family. In December, 1977 Quezon City of the Philippine Islands welcomed the first General Chapter ever to meet in the Orient; it became the locus of new initiatives by chapter and master alike, now joined by the untiring Secretariat. There was careful preparation for the Chapter of
Quezon City. Family members were invited once again to take part, and the International Dominican Information bulletin published a special issue on the Dominican Family. In this issue the Secretariat gave a full report of collaboration among Dominican men and women in such places of diverse cultures as Spain and South Africa, Japan and England, France and Argentina and the United States. The Secretariat staff, reminding leaders that "the Order was born as a family..." invited recent branches as well as earlier ones to community of life in the Order of Preachers.

In the same issue the Master, Père de Couesnongle, described his experience of meeting a "tidal wave" of Dominican men and women around the world, "far more", he exclaimed, "than 7,000 strong". In fact, he said, Dominican lay persons and sisters brought the total for the family to more than 100,000 members. More important than the numbers, however, are the mutual relationships among us all. Therefore he called us to be Dominicans together in prayer and study, in the apostolate, and in ways of facing the problems of today. His message to the family closed with these words:

Could we not do and be much more, very much more, if we only reflected together more about the basis of our common vocation, and we shared in common all its riches, - in this corner of the missions, or this neighborhood of some large city, in this lecture hall of a university, or in this prayer group?

The Acts produced by the Quezon City capitulars brought to a new level the work of earlier General Chapters for Dominican collaboration and unity.

2 ibid., 159.
3 ibid., 156.
4 ibid., 156.
The Commission on the Dominican Family wrote into the Prologue of Chapter VI, "De Familia Dominicana," a trumpet call to united service. They sounded two new notes: 1) a warning that by going our separate ways we are neglecting potential resources in the Order, and 2) a summons to action concerning the ecclesial role of the laity, and equality for women. Let the capitulars speak for themselves in these excerpts from the Prologue:

The Dominican Order must at all times, both in its life and in its work, be alert to the great authentic movements of the age in which it finds itself. This contemporaneous quality was a special mark of the original vision of St. Dominic in founding the Order, and imparted to it its original force and freshness.

At this time, the Order is confronted with two great movements in the Church and in the world: the emergence of the laity as an indispensable element in the establishing of the Kingdom of God, and the more recent and constantly growing movement towards the liberation of women and the recognition of their equality with men.

St. Dominic created his family, not for itself, but to be at the service of the Church and its mission to the world. In terms of human potential there are vast resources within the Family. We must admit that through lack of cooperation this tremendous potential is not fully realized. The development of an authentic Dominican spirit and of Dominican formation have suffered because of the lack of closer bonds within the Dominican family. The mutual development of vocations which could have taken place has also suffered. Most seriously, there has been a diminished effectiveness in each branch of the family, due to a lack of mutual enrichment between them, leading to one-dimensional points of view.

This is indeed a great moment for the Dominican Order to fulfill the initial vision of St. Dominic, its founder. The two world-wide movements toward an emerging laity and full equality for women coincide in a singular manner with what St. Dominic has sown within the very idea of the Order. That seed and the season for its harvest have at this moment in history come together.

Now is the acceptable time for the Dominican Family to achieve true equality and complementarity among its different branches. If we believe that the Holy Spirit truly speaks to us in and through the signs of the times, we cannot ignore this call to develop among all the branches of the Order a greater collaboration in all our ministries, and we cannot neglect to undertake efforts to study and promote a greater
organic unity between these branches. What lies before us at this time is a challenge to become what St. Dominic had begun; a family joined in unity of life and complementarity of service to the Church and the world.

The eloquence of this Prologue approved by the capitulars at Quezon City was matched by the convictions found in their Acts. They described non-clerical members of the family as "not less Dominican, nor participating in a deficient way in the Dominican vocation". Thus they fulfill the mission of the Order not through inequality of members but through their collaboration in diverse and reciprocal ministries (65). The capitulars called for regional meetings of men and women of the universal Order to prepare for the worldwide assembly (66). They asked for a common course of basic formation for all members, in order to build a unified spirit and understanding of the Dominican vocation (71). And to pursue unity through common prayer, they urged Dominican sisters and brethren to invite the laity to participate with them in the Liturgy of the Hours (75). They also urged them to give wholehearted assistance to the lay fraternities (76).

The work at Quezon City anticipated by three years another event which was not unrelated to the vision of the capitulars. Early in 1981, in the same Philippine Islands, the Church proclaimed the holiness of sixteen members of the Dominican Family in the Orient. These were laity and religious, women and men, who lived and died in witness to their faith in Jesus Christ.

The Chapter of Walberberg, 1980

In August, 1980, when the Master of the Order gave his report to the General Chapter he spoke once more of the Dominican Family. From his experience of the Order around the globe Père de Couesnongle saw the family as,

1 Acts, Quezon City, 1977. Chapter VI, "De Familia Dominicana".
before all else,

a local reality which brings together the brothers, sisters and members of fraternities, as well as the nuns - each one living according to the needs of one's Dominican profession - for celebration, reflection, and the proclamation of the Word of God. 1

He added, "I do not know whether this has been always and everywhere clearly understood". There was a growing sensitivity to the meaning of Dominican family, but the response among the members was decidedly uneven. The sisters responded most fully, the laity less so, and the friars least of all. In some places he had found a fear that some branches of the Order might lose their juridical autonomy.

While refuting this fear, the Master recognized that to promote the Dominican Family is a 'delicate affair' which we should study with serenity and with fidelity to our charism. This charism, he said, is the source of our Dominican identity which "should be defined before all in terms of relationship: to Dominic, to the Church, to our communities, to what the Church and the world of today expect of us". Not by looking into a mirror do we come to discover our identity, but only by viewing ourselves in relation to. 2

The capitulars at Walberberg maintained and strengthened the convictions of previous General Chapters in such Acts as these:

1. They exhorted all Dominicans to support spiritually those who have left the Order, and to help them relate in some way to the Family (95).

2. They repeated the urgent call for a Symposium of the Family - (which is now being realized) (96)

3. They recommended that the Master of the Order convene an International Congress of the laity (97).

4. They repeated the earlier recommendation that provincial and regional secretariats be established (99).

1 IDI, September 5, 1980, p.131.
2 ibid., p. 112.
5. They commissioned the Master of the Order to have prepared a Fundamental Charter which, in accord with the Quezon City recommendation, would express "the spirit, charism and purpose of the Order" for every group in the Family (100).

6. Finally, the capitulars commissioned the Master of the Order to establish committees for revision of the Rule of lay fraternities (101) and the Constitutions of the Nuns (102). 1

In connection with the Walberberg Chapter, the Secretariat published current statistics for all branches of the Dominican Family. 2

A Family of Cultural Riches

After Walberberg the Master of the Order convened the second Mission Congress of the Order at Madrid in the Fall of 1982. To this he invited especially Dominican men and women from the Third World. Their presence and their questions reminded Dominicans that we are a family of many cultures, languages, and customs. From the time of St. Dominic, students from every nation were called into the Order from the universities, and friars came from the far-flung missions of the medieval world. The cultural wealth with which our members today enrich and are enriched by the People of God is seen in every issue of the International Dominican Information Bulletin. Any cover page of the Bulletin may list communications from members of the Order in New Zealand, Canada and Rome, France and Puerto Rico, Italy and Nicaragua, Spain, Poland, Guatemala, India, Colombia, the United States, Nigeria and Japan.

1 Acts, Chapter of Walberberg, 1980.

This roll call of nations should never be our boast, but always be our challenge; a challenge well described by Father Liam Walsh O.P. in these words:

In our international community [of Dominicans] we can be saved from identifying the Gospel with any culture or civilization; in fact, this is one dimension that we have not yet, I think, exploited sufficiently. What a vast range of experience of reality is available to us through our brothers and sisters around the world! What contact with all that is happening! What a spectrum of sensibilities and insights! If every member and group of this family of ours were using his eyes and ears, his heart and mind, to observe and understand what is going on in the world he or she is experiencing, we could be a community that listens not only to the Word of God but also to the world of men. And if in our community fellowship we could talk together about these experiences and ideas we could surely develop a vision of the Gospel that would incarnate in contemporary flesh and blood the Word of God and let His Spirit bind people together in understanding and love.

This short chronicle of the idea, ideals, and reality of the Dominican family helps us realize that the time for its full development has come.

Since 1968 the Chapter Acts and messages of the Masters of the Order, supported by members of the Curia and Secretariat, have been prophetic in relation to the signs of the times and the needs of the People of God. They have shown us the multiple graces offered by us as a family by the Holy Spirit: the charism bequeathed to us by St. Dominic, the mission to which the Church continues to summons us, and the mystery of vocation by which each individual Dominican is called to give full service to the Church. Ours is indeed, in the words of Père de Couesnongle, the "pluralism of plenitude".  

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A Time for Questions

The messages of the Chapters and Masters are inspiring and provocative. From them we can know the reality and potential of the Dominican Family. But the clear light of their ideas casts a shadow over some of us as we ask, How many Dominicans share their understanding of the Family? How do these ideals accord with the experience of others in the Order, and our own?

From conversations with laity and sisters, priests and brothers, I bring you a few of their many questions, most of them verbatim:

1. Many people know Dominicans as a cluster of nouns: friars, sisters, laity and nuns. But "Love is an active verb" and we are called together to preach the love of Jesus Christ. Which verbs describe our common mission in the Church? By which verbs are Dominicans known to the people?

2. Why do some among us think that the invitation to be Family is a superficial gesture, a passing "fashion" in the Order that will soon go away? How can we become a family without the desire to be sisters and brothers?
3. When a child is born into a family, or a spouse comes into it, everyone has to adjust to new relationships. How do we welcome new groups – and yes, new forms – into the universal Order, as the Third Order was once welcomed and allowed to develop; as were the congregations of sisters in the 19th century, and the secular institutes of our own time. For whom are we ready to adjust our family relationships?

4. And the question I have heard most often: When lay men and women have a burning desire to live in the Dominican spirit, but are discouraged by conditions in certain chapters or by the apathy of provincial leaders, where can they go for assistance and leadership?

How soon can we taste and see what untapped life, grace, and service exist among us as Dominicans — that is, as sisters and brothers in the universal Order of Preachers?