

..... BRIEF HISTORY  
OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL  
OF LAY DOMINICAN FRATERNITIES

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I am going to make a short presentation of the history of the European meetings of Lay Dominican Fraternities and also of the European Council (ECLDF).

This Council has a relatively short existence, just three years, but to talk about it, we need to go back to the beginnings of the Order, as the Council logically and necessarily results from the evolution of the Order and from political developments at European and world levels. The European Council of Lay Dominican Fraternities was not thought up by 2 or 3 people, nor created on the basis of a semi-lay, semi-religious hybrid experience.

We must be proud to take an active part in this historic development of the Lay Dominican Fraternities.

- I -

#### A FEW POINTS OF REFERENCE IN OVER 700 YEARS OF HISTORY

1221 - St. Dominic managed to have the Order of Preachers and its Constitutions approved by the Pope.

1285 - 64 years after the Order was approved, the Master of the Order Munio of Zamora promulgated the Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance of the Blessed Dominic (Regula Fratrum et Sororum Ordinis of Paenitentia Beati Dominici).

This signalled the birth of the third branch of the Order, which has now got to the respectable age of 716 years.

The Master of the Order Munio of Zamora wanted to draw up a rule of life for the "penitent" lay men and women that were linked to the Preachers.

The Master of the Order thus offered an opportunity to lay people, who had been independent until then, to adopt a rule of life and be placed under the jurisdiction of the Order of Preachers by making a promise of obedience to the Master General of the Order.

It is quite remarkable to note that just 64 years after the Order was founded, a lay branch was incorporated into it, although, by papal mandate, the Order had received the task of preaching faith, which was a traditional monopoly of clerics.

Paradoxically, lay people were incorporated into an Order of clerics, which is still done today. Lay people are not associated to the Order, but actually incorporated into it.

Incidentally, it is interesting to see that this paradoxical situation still has repercussions today, even at the level of the Dominican Curia. Lay people in Dominican Fraternities are not bound to the Dicastery for Lay People, but to that for Religious.

In its first chapter, the Rule of Munio of Zamora lays down as an essential requirement for being received into the Order of Penance of St. Dominic:

"They [lay people] must be filled with the utmost jealous, burning zeal, after their own fashion, for the truth of Catholic faith".

What is the specific fashion in which lay Dominicans are to proclaim evangelical truth? This is a very topical issue, which is still open today.

On the other hand, being placed under the jurisdiction of the Master of the Order and, through him, being incorporated into the Order enables lay people to take part in the mission of the Order, which is to preach faith.

In the 15th century, it was at the 1481 and 1484 General Chapters, i.e. 200 years after the Rule of Munio de Zamora was issued, that the phrase "Third Order of Penance of St. Dominic" was used for the first time.

As far as I know, the historians of the Order have not yet managed to find out the reasons for such a change. But it is definitely at that time that the word "penitent" was replaced by "tertiary".

It was not before the 20th century that changes were made to the original Rule of life.

In 1923, the Master of the Order Theissling promulgated the Rule of the Third Order of St. Dominic to update the Rule of lay Dominicans in accordance with the new Code of Canon Law of 1917.

It may be said that a crisis gradually developed as from the 1930's, calling the Rule into question as a life orientation for lay people. It was stressed how urgent it was to adapt the Secular Third Order to the 20th century.

Here are just two examples: Igino Giordani, a Dominican tertiary that was co-founder of the Focolarini, already denounced the under-valuing of lay people by the Church; Aldo Moro, in 1940, who was at the time the president of the F.U.C.I. (Federation of Italian

Catholic Academics), underlined how urgent it was to adapt the Dominican Third Order to the contemporary scene.

1953 - Fr. Yves Congar published his masterly work, *Jalons pour une Théologie du Laïcat*, a study which was to become a fundamental point of reference for the documents of the Vatican II Council on the vocation and mission of lay people in the Church and in the world. Yves Congar also helped lay people become better aware of their irreplaceable role and responsibilities in the fulfilment of the Church's mission.

The General Chapters of Caleruega (1958) and Bologna (1961) began to address the issue of renewing the Rule.

1962-1965 - The Vatican II Council was a real "cultural revolution" for lay people in general, and the lay branch of the Order in particular. The Council offered theological bases and prospects for an active involvement of lay people in the mission of the Church.

1969 - The Master of the Order Aniceto Fernandez promulgated the Rule of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic, in which some of the orientations of the Vatican II Council on the life and mission of lay people were already present.

1972 & 1978 - The Holy See approved the new Rule *ad experimentum*. After the General Chapter of Quezon City (1977) made a number of amendments, the Holy See approved the Rule for a six-year period.

It was not enough to promulgate a Rule with a number of adaptations, as ancient practices were still maintained and the laity was getting older on average, with no significant revival.

1983 - The General Chapter of Rome asked the Master of the Order to convene an International Congress of the Dominican Laity to study how to adapt and renew the Rule of the Fraternities.

1985 - The first and only World Congress of Lay Dominican Fraternities took place in Montreal. It was at this congress that the basic elements for a New Rule of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic were drafted, discussed and voted. The new Rule was promulgated by the Master of the Order Damian Byrne, 700 years after the 1st Rule of Munio of Zamora.

Objectives: Issues linked to the adaptation and renewal of the Rule of Aniceto Fernandez.

Account had to be taken of the difference between:

- the Rule: fundamental legislation for all the fraternities;
- the Directories: suited to regional entities.

Participants: 56 Lay women: 26 (46%)

Lay men: 14 (25%)

Friars: 16 (26%)

Participating countries: 25 Europe: 10 countries (21 participants – 38%)

America: 9 (18 participants – 32%)

Asia: 3 (9 participants – 16 %)

Africa: 2 (4 participants – 7%)

Australia/New Zealand: 1 (1 participant – 2%)

Curia: 3 (Master of the Order, Promoter of the Dominican Laity and Secretary General of Dominican Fraternities – 5%)

Official languages: English, French, Spanish and Italian.

Person in charge of preparations for the Congress: Fr. Bernard Olivier, Promoter General of the Dominican Laity.

This congress was a decisive moment in the already long history of the Dominican laity.

To start with, it was the first congress of the lay branch of the Order that was organized at a world level. There were representatives from every continent.

Most importantly, in my opinion, it was the first time that lay Dominican themselves took an active part in the establishment of their own Rule of life. Only lay people voted on what concerned the drafting of the basic elements of the Rule.

The Master of the Order, Damian Byrne, who attended the whole congress, played a decisive role in order for lay people to take in hand the drafting of the new Rule.

1987 - The Holy See approved the Rule of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic.

1990 - The 1st European Meeting of Lay Dominican Fraternities took place in Prouille, near Toulouse.

1992 – The 2nd European Meeting of Lay Dominican Fraternities was held in Budapest.

1995 – The 3rd European Meeting of Lay Dominican Fraternities took place near Warsaw (in Kanié).

1998 - The 4th European Meeting of Lay Dominican Fraternities took place in Vienna.

Fr. Columba (England) and I are the only ones that have taken part in all those Meetings: we feel like some kind of historical figures!

2001 - This Fognano Meeting (Italy) is the 5th European Meeting of Lay Dominican Fraternities.

- II -

## ISSUES AT STAKE IN THE FIRST FOUR EUROPEAN MEETINGS

Information about the Prouille, Budapest and Warsaw Meetings was difficult to collect because of the lack of documents available, and particularly the fact that there were no Acts of these Meetings. What follows is essentially based on personal notes.

### 1989 - PROUILLE (TOULOUSE)

This Meeting was held at the initiative of the French Lay Fraternities.

The topics dealt with covered three main themes:

1. Lay Dominicans in the life of the Order at a national and European level.
2. Lay Dominicans in the past, present and future.
3. Lay Dominicans and the new evangelization of Europe.

Most of the topics were discussed within working groups, as we needed to know one another and share experiences. The primary objective of the Prouille Meeting was indeed to get to know one another and to make ourselves known.

The topics addressed concerned the changes in the Rule of life of Montreal, the specific features of the mission of lay people and the role they could play in the mission of the Order.

We already started to talk about the new Europe and the major changes occurring in Europe. We also wondered about the type of lay Dominicans required for this new evangelization and what spiritual and intellectual formation lay people should have to meet this new need.

The setting-up of an International Council of Lay Dominican Fraternities – as provided for in the Montreal Rule under Article 22.b – was deemed neither necessary nor opportune. Generally speaking, it was feared that such a Council might become yet

another body, which would bring its weight to bear on the Fraternities and have a heavy structure.

We stayed at the Prouille convent.

Number of participants: 23 lay people and 11 friars

Participating countries: 14 (Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Northern Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland).

Curia: Fr. Damian Meyer, Assistant for Northwest Europe, delegated by the Master of the Order, who also sent a letter.

1992 - BUDAPEST

The Dominican laity in Hungary is made up of lay people with remarkable capacities for getting things done. They organized the 2nd European Meeting. Recently, they set up a Catholic secondary school with international financial support. For many years, they have been translating into Hungarian a number of works that are regarded as important for Christian and Dominican formation and culture.

Theme of the Budapest Meeting: "Sects in Europe".

This was one of the concerns expressed at the Prouille Meeting and a major worry for Central Europe: to know more about the increasing development of sects.

The topic was dealt with by experts.

It was still not the right time to set up a Council of Lay Fraternities, even at a European level.

There was an important debate about the next European Meeting and how to make it possible for lay Dominicans from Eastern Europe to take part in it.

The Meeting was well-balanced in all respects, with a very lay atmosphere.

I did not manage to get detailed figures about attendance, but I remember that the participating countries were more or less the same as in Prouille. I think that neither Spain nor Denmark took part and that Norway sent a lay Dominican woman.

The Russian lay Dominican that came to Budapest was a scientist of less than 40 years of age. He had travelled over a week by train to reach Budapest, bringing with him the food he needed for the trip, and he had almost no money with him. All this moved us a great deal.

It must be stressed that Russia sent representatives to the 4 Meetings reviewed here.

In Budapest and the Meetings that followed, we also noted that a number of lay Dominicans from Eastern European countries, Russia in particular, were closer to lay Dominicans from Western countries as regards theological issues and Christian and liturgical practices than other lay Dominicans from Eastern Europe, although these may have been geographically and culturally closer.

1995 - WARSAW

The theme of the Warsaw Meeting was: "The Dominican Third Order: a consecration of life for a consecration of the world".

The sub-themes were the following:

The calls and needs of today's world.

The Dominican Third Order: a meeting place for the calls of the world and proposal of the Gospel.

Formation of the Third Order: a preparation for the mission to be undertaken in the Church and in the world.

This Meeting was the first time that there was a significant attendance by lay people and friar assistants from Eastern European countries.

It was very important and interesting to hear reports by representatives from Eastern Europe about the history of Christianity and Dominicans in those countries, either during the period of persecution, or in the context of a minority situation vis-a-vis the Orthodox Church.

There was a remarkable presence of lay Dominicans among the speakers. Half the presentations, out of a total of 9, were made by lay people, which was also significant.

It was clear, during that Meeting, that Polish people believed themselves to be endowed with a mission of "salvation" of the contemporary world, especially with regard to moral values and faithfulness to the Church. This reminded me of what my father used to say about what he had been taught when he was young in Portugal in relation to the apparitions of Our Lady in Fatima, the "messianic" role of the Portuguese people in the conversion of Russia and the world crusade against communism.

Liturgy was solely in Latin, although it was a lay Dominican meeting and this kind of things was no longer done, even in international meetings of Dominican friars.

In order to give an idea of the climate of rigidity which was imposed on us, here is what happened to me once: I arrived a little late into a room which had been turned into a chapel, which I had not been told in advance. As there was not the usual light indicative

of the presence of the Holy Sacrament, I sat down. Then I heard someone say loudly: "Here in Poland, we genuflect!" As the Prior Provincial was speaking, I did not understand to whom I should genuflect. . .

Another concern, which was very present among Polish lay Dominicans, was the spirituality of atonement as a way of taking part in the salvation of the world, especially because of the sins of the West, and the central place of penance in the Dominican lay vocation.

This climate led to some lay people and friars from both Western and Eastern countries expressing their disagreement.

I have very hazy memories of the pre-Vatican II Council liturgy, as I was a child at the time. But at the Warsaw Meeting, I really had the impression I had gone back in time.

We realized the depth of our divergences as regards theological notions, liturgical practices, the vocation of lay people, the role of individual conscience, the practice of obedience, etc.

On the eve of the last day, we were confronted with a reality which is very important in the Order and in civil society: the democratic voting procedure for the proposals to send to the General Chapter. We heard that the Polish group wanted to submit a document that included points which a great many participants were totally unable to accept. A small group of five people therefore decided to take action and spent half the night drafting up a second document to be put to the vote the next day.

At the time of voting, we used a large part of the morning to explain about the democratic voting procedure. One of the most difficult issues to settle was the fact that Polish people, who had a lot of representatives at the Meeting, wanted everyone to vote individually on the draft documents, not per national delegation.

Despite these difficulties, the Meeting was important in many respects:

First of all, it was European in a broader sense of the word.

For the first time, we voted together on a document addressed to the General Chapter of the Order.

It was also the first time that we agreed that the next European Meeting would be prepared and managed, not by the host Province, but by a group of 4 members: 3 lay people and 1 friar.

The "group of four" which was appointed was composed of Fr. Jean-Bernard Dousse (Switzerland), Svetlana (Ukraine), Michaly (Hungary) and me (Portugal).



For the first time, a very large majority of European lay Dominicans agreed (with 13 Provinces voting for and 2 against) that one of us may become Promoter General of the Dominican Laity. This was one of the requests submitted to the Chapter of the Order.

In Warsaw, a climate of empathy and sharing developed between four lay people and five friars from five different countries about issues that were close to our hearts and we realized that there were a lot of issues at stake as regards the future of the Dominican lay vocation.

This was how, after the Warsaw Meeting, an informal think tank came into being, called the French-speaking Group of European Lay Fraternities, as our language of communication was French. We decided to meet again, which we have now done 12 times since 1995 at the Annunciation Convent in Paris, where we have always had a very warm welcome.

Without false modesty (which is also a form of truth), this working group has made so far a rather significant contribution to opening ways forward for the Dominican fraternities in Europe.

The trust and support given by Fr. Yvon Pomerleau, since he was appointed Promoter General of the Dominican Family and until recently in his capacity as Promoter General of the Dominican Laity, have played a decisive role in achieving positive results in our work and collaboration with the structures of the Order and especially with the European fraternities.

It was also thanks to his intervention that the "Group of Four" appointed in Warsaw was invited to hold a dialogue with the Master of the Order and his Council in November 1998. It was the first time that a lay Dominican delegation attended one of the plenary sessions of the General Council of the Order.

#### 1998 - VIENNA

The organization of the Vienna Meeting was an exciting challenge. For the first time, a meeting of such scale was prepared by an international team of five people.

My family got used to seeing one of the rooms at home turned for almost two years into one of the sections of a "secretariat" extending from Porto to Fribourg (Switzerland) and Vienna, via Kiev and Budapest. I am sure that in Fribourg, the same could be said about the room of Fr. Jean-Bernard Dousse.

I think it is difficult to imagine the challenges we had to overcome.

I would like to mention a few of the problems we faced in terms of communications:

the lack of basic information, such as how to get the details of lay provincial presidents;

the means of communication and the places where to use them, as lay people do not live in convents and very few are able to have e-mail and fax at home;

the languages to be used to communicate, as most lay Dominican presidents can only express themselves in one – and sometimes none – of the four official languages used: French, English, German and Russian;

the time differences to take into account when trying to communicate (sometimes 3 or 4 hours' difference);

the difficulty in making sure the documents sent to certain countries arrived safely by post;

the expenses that stretched family budgets;

in a few Dominican priories, there seemed to be mice that were especially fond of eating away the letters of lay people;

etc.

In many situations and decisions, we realized that people from Central Europe showed a strong paternalistic attitude towards Eastern European countries. It looked as if they were feeling guilty towards these peoples and Churches. It is an issue which I believe requires a great deal of sensitivity and careful reading of history. Clearly, not all the people present at the Vienna Meeting had this attitude.

Theme of the Vienna Meeting: "Faith at the service of life. Who are our 'Cumans'?"

1st topic: Development and place of lay people in the Church and in the Order since Vatican II.

2nd topic: Situation regarding faith and unbelief in our countries: challenges and questions.

3rd topic: Charisma and mission of lay Dominicans in the world thus analyzed.

Participants: 38 lay people: 13 men (7 under 45)

25 women (11 under 45)

24 friars

2 sisters

Official languages: German, Russian, French, English.

Curia representatives: 3 (Promoter of Lay Fraternities and the Dominican Family, Assistant for the Fraternities of Central and Eastern Europe and Female Assistant for the Dominican Family)

Guests: the Director of IDI (International Dominican Information), who talked to us about the importance of the new means of social communication, and a member of the ESPACES team (Spiritualities, Cultures and Society in Europe), who made a presentation about the work of this centre.

At the end of this Meeting, a European Council of 7 members was elected for the first time. This Council appointed the representative of Lay Fraternities at the General Chapter of Bologna.

For the most part, the European Dominican laity has awakened rather late and slowly in the face of the major changes brought about by the Vatican II Council. In spite of this, it may be said that within the space of nine years, since the 1st European Meeting in Prouille, we have already gone quite a long way among ourselves and with Dominican friars.

We should be aware, however, that if we continue to chug along like a regional train, we shall not be able to jump on the "European high-speed train"...

- III -

THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL OF LAY DOMINICAN FRATERNITIES (ECLDF):

#### CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

It is only since the Montreal Congress in 1985 and the approval of the new Rule in 1987 that institutionally speaking, lay Dominicans have started to discover the meaning of taking on their own responsibilities in the life of fraternities at a local and national level and learning to experience autonomy with regard to their own affairs. Lay Dominicans and friar assistants have also had to learn to put into practice the new orientations of the Rule.

Nearly 16 years later, lay Dominicans are still making the first tentative steps in this learning process. The change in habits and attitudes is very slow.

There are still countries which do not know the new Rule and have no national Directory.

Despite an insistence on these matters in the writings of the recent Masters of the Order and in the documents of the General and Provincial Chapters, lay people still have to go through a whole process whereby they learn and get used to speaking in such a way as to

be listened to, while Dominican friars still have to go through a whole process whereby they learn and get used to listening to the voice of lay people in the Order.

Personally, I see a parallel with what I have experienced in my own country. I spent my childhood and part of my youth under an authoritarian political regime, devoid of any democratic institutions and practices. After the revolution of 25 April 1974, Portuguese people have undergone a long, complex process so as to be able to take on responsibilities in many fields and also to take an active part in the work of various social bodies.

As lay Dominicans, we must overcome a great deal of fear and suspicion. We must learn to speak up during meetings, to have a good knowledge of the topics we want to talk about. We must also learn how to take decisions together and also learn about voting procedures.

To work on a project together, adapted to the context of the new Europe, that is to the cultural, political, economic and religious conditions in today's world, we need to talk to one another, to study in depth a number of fundamental notions which are both theoretical and practical, such as:

What would an adequate formation be for committed European lay Dominicans?

What forms of solidarity and sharing should we develop?

What does it mean to preach, as lay people and as lay Dominicans?

What are the specific places where we can preach?

The art of discerning the "signs of the times" is little practised. Why? How can we learn?

The role of lay people in the Church has been too much talked about already. I believe the time has come for us to ask ourselves another type of question: what do non-Christians expect from lay Christians?

The priority is not to find out what the role of lay people should be within the Church, but within the structures of society.

Our European Meetings of Lay Dominican Fraternities have helped us discover that when conviviality with those who are different goes beyond superficiality and clichés, it inevitably gives rise to confrontation. If there are essential points that we value and if we are looking for the truth in terms of faith and Christian practices, we must create a climate of trust and freedom that makes it possible to discuss issues with both passion and compassion. We are currently going through this learning process, among ourselves and in our relationship with Dominican friars.

We have also discovered that the situation of lay Dominicans in Europe may vary a great deal, even in neighbouring countries: this is the case for example between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Lithuania and Finland, Ireland and England, or Spain and Portugal. We must learn about political and social issues as well as about the history of the Catholic Church in the various countries concerned.

### Difficulties

Here are a number of practical difficulties which we have come across and which have a strong impact on our work:

There are big obstacles to knowing and drawing up the history of the Dominican laity in Europe. We do not have many reliable and clear data and they are very hard to get.

Languages in which to communicate with one another.

Means of communication and places to contact people.

Financial issues: if people at the grassroots do not understand the importance of the European Council, it will not have the financial means needed to operate.

Fraternity members receive very little information about what is being done at the level of the Order and the Dominican laity. Most of them do not know anything about what is happening beyond the borders of their own Province.

In a good many provinces, there is not yet any awareness about the issues relating to lay Dominicans at a European level and about the work of the European Council.

### Projects

Effecting a radical change in the area of formation: providing an interdisciplinary formation, with a strong "ad extra" focus, i.e. centred on people and everyday realities. What the Dominican laity lacks is not intellectual and cultural capabilities, but a formation that is not solely focused on spiritual life and personal sanctification.

Developing the website of the European lay Dominican Council ([www.laici.op.org/ecldf](http://www.laici.op.org/ecldf)), the first manager of which was Ian, who belonged to the first European Council elected in Vienna. The great challenge is to have a site that is not just another source of information, but a real area of dialogue on faith and life.

Boosting what has already been done for several years, i.e. twinings between fraternities from different countries.

As lay European Dominicans living in a period that is full of exciting challenges, we have been fortunate to journey with a number of friars who have displayed a remarkable sensitivity for a long time towards the lay people in the Order and the issues at stake as

regards their specific vocation and mission, particularly Fr. Jean-Bernard Dousse (Switzerland), Fr. Eugenio Boleo (Portugal), Fr. Bernard Olivier (French-speaking Belgium), Fr. Yvon Pomerleau (Curia) and, since last year, Fr. Jerry Stookey (Curia) – may the Lord keep him just as he is in his relationship with us!

One of the fruits of the evolution of the Dominican laity in Europe is the book that was recently published in French by Fr. Jean-Bernard Dousse: *Les Fraternités Laiques et la Mission de l'Ordre des Precheurs. Les Textes Officiels 1946-1998* (Lay Dominican Fraternities and the Mission of the Order of Preachers. Official Documents 1946-1998) (Pub. Cerf, 2000).

All those who have read the book are fully aware that it is an essential work for all lay Dominicans and also for Dominican promoters and priory libraries. A large chunk of the history of the Order during the past 50 years has thus been made available to us in a single volume. Thank you, Jean-Bernard!

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ECLDF member  
2004

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