

Lay Dominican Formation Program Province of Saint Joseph

Novitiate - Session 3 Dominican Rule and Statutes - Vehicles to Dominican Spirituality

Statement of Session Goals:

To give definitions for the terms "Rule" and "statutes", describe their scope and purpose, and explain the way Dominicans view them. To show that Dominican teachings and traditions about the Rule are an important aspect of Dominican spirituality, and that although the Rule is being rewritten, the fundamentals of the lay Dominican vocation remain clear.

I. Introduction of the Theme of This Session

The focus of this session is on the Dominican way of obedience and following the Rule, so that novices will experience the Rule as a helpful guide, not a legalistic burden. The Rule is currently in a process of change and adaptation. What is enduring are the principles.

The obedience we aim for is that of freely acting adults, who commit to live according to the Rule because we see it as a way to follow Christ more closely.

II. Definitions

- Rule (or Constitutions) - The authoritative guide that expresses the norms, principles, or standards for the members of the group.
- Statutes - A particular norm within the Rule or Constitutions that gives direction about a specific topic. For the Dominican Laity, the Rule and Statutes form the fundamental guide. They embody the principles, obligations, and ideals of our vocation.
- Ordinances - The application of the Rule and Statutes as adapted in a particular nation or province.

III. Stories of St. Dominic and the First Rule

Dominic went to Rome to get permission to establish his Order of Preachers. Rome did not want a new Rule and set of Constitutions; Dominic had to choose an existing one. He chose the Rule of St. Augustine, which exhorted to high ideals, rather than laying down legalistic regulations. For Constitutions, he based them on the Premonstratensian Constitutions. Again, the tone was to urge the members on to develop a love for prayer, study, the common life, and preaching, rather than laying down rules and punishments.

The story was told by a contemporary of St. Dominic that he once said, "If I thought the Rule would bind under sin, I would take my knife and go through all the houses, destroying it with my knife." Our membership is to strengthen us spiritually; it is not meant to burden us.

Another story is told that the Rule required the friars, like the apostles of old, to travel without purse or walking stick or food. But one young friar protested he could not travel that way, and Dominic let him have some coins for the journey, so as not to over-strain him.

This story highlights the Dominican innovation of "dispensation," being excused from the Rule when conditions warrant it. This concept was new to Dominic's group. This discretion allowed the prior to dispense the friars of his community from obligations of the Rule, for example if apostolic duties required it. By requiring dispensations, but making them relatively easy to obtain, Dominicans aimed to avoid both laxity and scrupulosity. Though, in practice, there have been abuses over the centuries, the ideals and the tradition shapes our attitudes today, attitudes that retain a sense of freedom in obedience, an attitude that good laws help, not hinder, people become mature and self-reliant, attitudes which help us obey God and the Rule as free adults.

Dominic wanted to go as a missionary to the Tartars, in eastern Europe. When the first Chapter voted that he should stay, he followed their-wishes. He acted upon the concept of equality among the brethren; he submitted to the wishes of the majority.

IV. Dominican Understanding of the Purpose for Rules

The Rule and Constitutions were not to be a burden on the member; they were to guide the individual member and the community into channels of deep water, deep grace. They were norms of actions, things that would benefit most people, most of the time. They were not rigid, legalistic, impersonal regulations that you followed blindly. No, Dominican obedience always retains the requirement of discernment, of intelligent choice. Dominic wrote into the Constitutions that they did not bind under sin (an innovative idea at the time). They were to be - and are - guideposts which have led many good people along a well-traveled road to sanctity.

The purpose for the Rule is:

- Evidenced in the early Constitutions and stories: The group gives support to the individual and strength to the apostolic efforts of the group. It gives guidance, freedom from material concerns, time and opportunity to pray and study. It shows the group's ideals and way of life already being lived.
- To provide an answer to the needs of people as much today as in the past.
- To define our way of life, yet also give opportunities for new and creative responses to the needs of our times.
- To create a domain, a "sphere of influence", a tiny kingdom where God is acknowledged as God, where God is given His due reverence and obedience, where people experience a foreshadowing of the joys and benefits of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven.

V. Rules and Statutes are based on Already-Lived ideals

When the first rules for the friars in St. Dominic's time were written, they already lived:

- A fraternal community

- Holding all goods in common
- Living a common life - in prayer, meals, recreation
- Following the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience

The friars shaped their Rule accordingly:

- They created priors for short terms of office, not abbots ("fathers") who help office for life.
- They required General Chapters - composed of elected representatives from each Chapter to meet annually to conduct the affairs of the Order.
- Over the centuries, the Rule was modified by pressure from the popes. If they owned property, they would be a significant economic unit, and could pay tithes like other religious communities. Community life was modified also because of the disastrous Black Death that swept Europe in the 1300s.
- After the Council of Trent, the Church's concern for orthodoxy caused it to raise St. Thomas Aquinas to almost the sole official source of theology. As a result, original thinking was not welcome and little occurred! The charism of responding to the charisms God gives in the circumstances of the times was lost.
- The centuries following the Council saw the upheaval of society from medieval times through the Protestant revolt, the Age of Reason, and the anti-clericalism of the 18th and 19th centuries. Dominicans in these trying times stayed loyal to the Church, taught orthodox theology, and attempted some missionary work. Their lives, their Rule, were orthodox and gave nourishment to many saintly individuals, but it was not till the 19th century that Dominicans began to experience a much-needed revival, along with the Church as a whole.
- France especially was ready for a stirring of new faith, because Father Lacordaire had reestablished Dominicans in France following the Rule with an emphasis on action. The Order was orthodox, but free from moldy restrictions from the past. However, Father Jandal became Master-General and reimposed the monastic, contemplative aspect; for example, he required the friars to attend prayers at midnight and 3 AM, even if they had heavy teaching or missionary schedules.
- It was that contemplative, ascetic, monastic ideal that was in force when the Fathers wrote the Rule for the Third Order of St. Dominic in the 1923, to conform to the changes in Canon Law made in 1917.

I hope from this quick survey, you can see the attitudes that were guiding the lives lived by the laity in the past, and the attitudes that shaped the Dominican fathers who were the spiritual directors of the laity Chapters.

Not at all that the ideal is reached in each and every person or Chapter, but all members do agree on what is the ideal, and we "press on toward the goal" together.

VI. Recent Changes to the Rule

Since Vatican II, the laity is revising its own Rules and Statutes, and the Fathers are supporting and guiding their efforts. (In 1923, the Fathers wrote them for the laity.) The Fathers have brought the laity together from all the provinces in the world, and have allowed - indeed encouraged - experimentation in the period of transition, beginning in 1967.

The laity draws upon the graces of the times, the leadership of the Fathers, the guidelines of Vatican II, and their own lived experiences. The Rule is still undergoing change. (The current "Prologue to the Rule" is one of the handouts with this lesson, along with the session outline.)

VII. Summary

The rule will change, but the underlying Dominican charisms will not. Our commitments to prayer, study, community, and the apostolate will not. We are children of the Church and of St. Dominic. Following ideals that have led the way for centuries, we shape our lives and our Rule within the framework of our obedience, love for the Church and the pope, and devotion to our Lady. We respond to the times and the graces God gives us. We do not impose. We listen in prayer, consult in community, learn skills by study, and in the apostolate, we "give to others the fruits of our contemplation." - all as best we can, not blind to our faults and failings, but looking also to God's graces who can bring about what He wants us to accomplish.

This is the essence of our Rule. Regulations about who can be members of the Dominican family, what are the obligations of prayer and study, how we live out a Dominican community as lay people, how we serve our neighbor - these may change. look at the current Rule.

But to help you learn about the family you plan to join, think about the stories we tell, think about our history, about the people shaped into saints of the Church by their membership in this family. Then, if you find an attraction, the Rule "will be easy and the yoke will be light" because you will be where you want to be, freely choosing membership, with all the duties and obligations and benefits that go with it. Don't look to printed rules, look to the spirit and to your heart.

A Note about the Dominican Habit

Dominican tradition tells us that the distinctive Dominican habit was given by the Blessed Virgin Mary to Blessed Reginald, a contemporary of St. Dominic. The habit consisted of a tunic of unbleached wool (thus the distinctive white color of the Dominican habit), and a scapular. The scapular is the long, wide band of cloth worn front and back over the shoulders. As laity, we do not use clothes to distinguish us from other laity. But we do wear a miniature scapular under our clothing. Recently, since Vatican II, we can substitute a Dominican medal for the scapular, with permission.

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CANADA: FUNDAMENTAL CONSTITUTION FOR THE DOMINICAN -LAITY

(85/138) As we have already announced in the previous number of I.D.I. we now publish the "Prologue" to the Rule prepared at the Congress of the Dominican Laity in Canada. The "Prologue or Fundamental Constitution of the Dominican Laity" is as follows.

1. Among the followers of Christ, man and women who live in the world participate through their baptism and confirmation in the real, priestly and prophetic ministry of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Their vocation is to propagate the presence of Christ in the heart of humanity so that his divine message of salvation be known and accepted by all. Cf. Lumen Gentium, No.31).
2. Some of those, moved by the Holy Spirit to live according to the spirit and charism of St. Dominic incorporate themselves into the Order through a special commitment.
3. They form communities and constitute with the other branches of the Order one family.
4. They are characterized by a special spirituality and by commitment to the service of God and neighbor in the Church.

They belong to the order of Preachers and participate in its apostolic mission through prayer, study and preaching (Cf. Fundamental Constitution of the Order), in their role as laity and through special statutes (or of a particular Rule).

5. In the footsteps of St. Dominic, St. Catherine of Siena and of their followers who have marked the life of the order and of the Church, supported in fraternal communion they give testimony of their faith, look to the signs of the times and put themselves at the service of truth.

They are attentive to the principal objectives of the contemporary apostolate in the bosom of the Church, especially concerned with authentic mercy towards all forms of suffering, in defense of liberty, justice and peace.

6. Animated by the charism of the order they know that their apostolic work must flow from the abundance of their contemplation.

Note: The official latin title "Fraternitates laicales" can be translated according to the genuine expression of each language.