

Novitiate Module

Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic

2012

Province of St. Joseph

Community – Part B

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1. *Who We Are*

When we speak about community in Dominican life, we need first to differentiate between how community is lived among Dominican religious and how it is lived among the lay Fraternities of St. Dominic. The religious of the Dominican Order--priests, brothers, deacons, nuns, and sisters--live in community and pray in common. Their home is a priory (priests, brothers, deacons); a monastery (nuns); or a convent (sisters). Since the structure of Dominican life calls for a democratic system of governance, the members of each of these religious bodies elect the leadership among themselves. Because St. Dominic created a mendicant order, Dominican religious provide for themselves through begging. They share all of the responsibilities of communal living, from housework to cooking, and they engage in their intellectual formation together, taking classes, attending lectures, and studying together.

All of these activities experienced in common are, of course, crowned by the most important events each day: coming together in the chapel for the Mass and praying aloud the Liturgy of the Hours. Most Dominican religious communities also allot time as a community for silent contemplation, spiritual reading, and the rosary. These communal times of prayer bind the community in Christ.

For most modern lay Dominicans, living one's vocation in the Order is much different from the way in which religious live. Most lay members work in the world and attend to their vocation of marriage and the responsibilities of family life or to the responsibilities specific to their single state of life. Therefore for most lay members, though not all, community life is most directly experienced in the family. Our parents, our spouse, and our children comprise that first community to whom we are accountable and to whom we daily minister. The positive effects of our prayer and study most directly affect this group. We are salt and light first of all to them.

In addition, however, we share with a group of fellow lay people a vocation to the Fraternities of St. Dominic. By virtue of this shared vocation, we also are in community with these people, and when we speak of Dominican "community," this is the community of which we speak.

2. *We Do Not Choose One Another*

In lay Dominican life, as in religious life, members do not choose each other. The Lord calls whom He wills to the Dominican vocation. Each lay Dominican chapter is a group that we may not necessarily have put together, should we have been in charge. Instead, we need to see that each chapter, like the group of first apostles, has been the Lord's arrangement and thus it has value and possibility.

It has been said that community may be the hardest "pillar" of Dominican life to live. Perhaps this is because community is a lot like family life. We speak of the Dominican "Fraternities"--and what does "fraternity" mean other than living as brothers? As in family life, sometimes relationships with others can be difficult. People have different personalities and temperaments, different expectations, different formation from one another. The main thing to emphasize in

community is what we all have in common and to rejoice in it! Every member of a chapter has been given different gifts and graces. Just as in religious life, Dominican tertiaries experience many opportunities for growing in love, patience, and understanding of their fellow Dominicans. Fr. George Schommer, O.P., speaking at a Dominican Fraternities retreat in 2010, said, "The virtues we desire only have a chance to grow in us when we can practice them." Every time a lay Dominican chapter meets, members of the group receive an opportunity to listen better, practice compassion, pray more fervently for the intentions of one another, and soften any intellectual pride in themselves.

Charity was a virtue of extreme importance to St. Dominic, and so it needs to be equally important to all of us. Bl. Jordan of Saxony speaks of St. Dominic's "limitless charity." During a general audience in 2010, Pope Benedict reminded the Dominican Fraternities of St. Dominic's lasting example: (again quoting from Bl. Jordan) "He received every man in the great bosom of charity and, because he loved everyone, everyone loved him. He made a personal law for himself of being joyful with happy persons and of weeping with those who wept." St. Dominic had such a zeal for souls! He knew that only the love of God changes people. And only love communicates fully the existence of God to another. In imitation of our founder, then, we are called to uphold charity both to our fellow Dominicans and to all others as the distinctive mark of the Fraternities of St. Dominic. By our charity and kindness, we build up one another and help to share with others the mercy and fullness of Christ's saving love.

3. *Building Community*

Each lay Dominican chapter typically gathers once a month for community time and for spiritual and intellectual formation. In most cases, final promised Lay Dominican or Dominican friar directs this formation. But these monthly meetings are just the minimal commitment. Let's turn now to a list of possible ways we can build community and support outside of the monthly meeting.

While certainly not exhaustive, the following list details some ways a lay Dominican chapter might share more community time:

- a) Set times with some members when you can meet for daily Mass. For example, in one chapter, three or four of the people in the chapter work downtown. Roughly once a month, they meet for daily Mass and then go out to lunch together.
- b) Schedule times with some members when you can meet in the church for evening prayer. Go out for coffee or dessert afterwards.
- c) Stay in touch by email.
- d) Make an effort to know each other's prayer intentions.
- e) Attend or start study circles even outside of your regular monthly meetings. For example, many members from one chapter attend regular adult faith formation classes together.
- f) Go on small pilgrimages together. For example, members from one chapter took a Saturday trip to see Somerset, Kentucky, where the roots of our Dominican foundation in the United States took hold.
- g) Host an annual retreat together. At least six months in advance, have members sign up for taking care of the details--registration, food, lodging, etc.--so that the retreat can be a real success. The more the chapter stresses that this retreat is important, the better the retreat will be. Pick your location wisely and other chapters from your region can easily get to you and participate as well.

- h) Host a dinner party or a picnic. If your house is not big enough, rent a picnic shelter at your local park. Any type of informal gathering allows members to get to know one another better.
- i) Take special note of members' feast days and wish them a happy feast day.
- j) When members take their temporary or solemn promises, have a special reception. Some of the members can make things to eat; maybe others can prepare tables and center pieces. Perhaps the president of the chapter can make some remarks to honor the newly professed. The point is to try to make the newly professed member feel special. Members of their families should also be invited to help celebrate.
- k) If a member is having difficulty or has fallen away from the regular chapter meetings, seek out the person to see if there is anything you can do to help. The members of the Fraternities of St. Dominic should be "first responders" in such cases.
- l) A significant way of deepening our community life is by thoroughly preparing before we come to our chapter meeting any study that has been assigned by our chapter. Being attentive to this detail is a gift that lay Dominicans give to their chapter members. When we show up unprepared, we do everyone in the chapter a disservice. In contrast, when we do well any reading that has been assigned, we have fruits of contemplation to share with our chapter. Equally important, then, is participating in every meeting. Our participation is an essential responsibility we owe to our chapter. No one is going to participate in our place. No one can substitute for us. Our participation, though sometimes our sacrifice, likewise becomes our joy.

When lived fully, the opportunities within Dominican chapter life refine the character of each Lay member. Accepting the community into which Christ has placed us humbles and purifies us. As St. Peter reminds us, "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pt 5: 5).

4. *Like the First Apostles*

At its heart, the Dominican community offers an answer to the basic human yearning each of us has for holy friendship. Praying in common unites us to the Lord and strengthens our union with our chapter. Studying increases our common desire for knowledge and wisdom. Doing an apostolate together affords us the opportunity to work for a common good, changing the culture around us by infusing it with Gospel truths. The more seriously we devote ourselves to each of these pillars of Dominican life, the more the life will change us and the more our friendships and support of one another will flourish.

As in the days when Christ was founding His Church, the Fraternities of St. Dominic can exist only if members daily put their shoulders to the plow as a sign that they embrace the life they have chosen. Let these be days of renewal in the Church and in lay Dominican life! Our present culture cries out for the nourishing food that Dominicans can provide to the world! Each Lay member's effort and commitment is needed in order to sustain, strengthen, and reinvigorate every chapter of the Fraternities of St. Dominic. Fully professed members need to recognize in a special way that they are responsible for the vitality of leadership in their chapter. As in the days of the first apostles, we will attract new members to lay Dominican life if all finally professed members give a joyful, exuberant witness that is vibrant, apostolic, charitable, strong in faith, and zealous for souls.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the differences between community life among Dominican religious and community life among promised lay Dominicans? Please discuss.
2. How can you practice charity within your chapter? Please discuss.
3. Are you seeking holy friendships in your Dominican vocation? Please discuss.
4. How do you see your Dominican community life influencing your relationships with your family? With your friends or co-workers? Please discuss.
5. How does the Community Pillar relate to and support the Pillars of Prayer, Study, and Apostolate in lay Dominican life? Please discuss.