Badin Course 2015

**Dominican Religious Life Today – Freedom and Government**

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The happy Dominican will be one flourishes in the identity or nature that is hers or his as a Dominican. So what characterizes that identity or nature? We will speak this morning about four themes: freedom, government, contemplation and apostolic life. We see in these some of the most characteristic aspects of Dominican life. I will say something about freedom and government, Sr Hedvig will speak about contemplation and apostolic life.

***Freedom***

In the English speaking corner of North-Western Europe the brothers are very familiar with an article by Vincent McNabb written just over a century ago and entitled ‘The Gyves of Freedom’. McNabb was an Irishman who joined the English province. ‘Gyves’ is an old English word, rarely used now, meaning shackles or fetters, the kind of metal restraints placed on prisoners which makes it difficult for them to move quickly. In his article McNabb regards freedom as the heart of Dominican government and common life. It is the shackle or restraint we place on ourselves so that we move as quickly or as slowly as the need to respect the freedom of each one allows us.

Vincent McNabb writes that

… the organization of the Order is so interwoven with principles of freedom that it seems to hold every element of destruction. Scarcely is there to be found any mathematical or mechanical force of cohesion; everywhere the elements of the Order seem loosely articulate with that most unaccountable factor, the human freewill; and that most unruly exercise of the human freewill, the free and secret ballot. *E pur si muove.* By ten thousand psychological laws, the Order founded by Dominic Guzman … ought to be dead or at least divided. But it is alive and one (McNabb, pp.6-7).

Sometimes, McNabb says, Dominicans become impatient with the freedom to which they have shackled themselves. The pace of the Order will be slow if we have agreed that we will respect the freedom of each one as we seek to move together. Here is another interesting quotation from him:

From time to time there arise in the Order, as a kind of reaction to their environment, a number of over-zealous and not over-wise people, who repent of the Order’s birthright of freedom, and look upon it as individuality run mad. Not unfrequently there is only too much to lend colour to their phrases and schemes. But abuses in administration are not cured by abuses in reconstruction. The Order will not begin to live, but will begin to die by such schemes as the appointment of all superiors, or the re-arrangement of our executive on lines of modern centralization (art.cit., p.8).

Instead we have laid upon ourselves what McNabb calls ‘the burdens of freedom’ and these burdens imply three things:

1. We must recognize that freedom is a burden, requiring knowledge and choice.
2. We must recognize that unless the gyves of freedom are freely accepted, the result is failure. A consequence of this is that the Order, if it is to remain this Order, can never be reformed from without, reform can only come from within. Referring to some recent papal action in relation to the Order, McNabb says that Pope Leo XIII ‘... by showing his confidence in us … gave us confidence in ourselves’ (art.cit., p.10).
3. The third burden of freedom is that ‘the Dominican Superior should … take it as his programme to rule over, and, if they do not exist, to create, a community of freemen. The guiding principle must be, that what we do by compulsion is done *in* us rather than *by* us’ (art.cit., p.10).

McNabb says that this freedom with its burdens freely embraced has assured the Order’s unity and its life. As the Dominican liturgy traditionally needed no master of ceremonies, so our apostolic life should be a matter of each one being the master of his own duties. ‘With the children of Dominic’, McNabb concludes, ‘what matters most is the character of the freemen who obey; for such as they are, such will be the leaders of their choice, and such will be their Order, which their freedom moulds for good or ill’ (art.cit., p.11).

***Government: Koinocracy or ‘Dominican Democracy’***

McNabb’s thoughts are developed further by Malachy O’Dwyer, an Irish brother and former procurator general of the Order. The freedom which McNabb praises is served by *complete* *respect for each individual brother*, a respect that is built in to the friars’ constitutions on government: this is the main point of Malachy O’Dwyer’s analysis. For him Dominican spirituality is found not just in the first part of the friars’ constitutions, on following Christ and on formation, our spirituality is found just as much, and even more so, in the second part, on government.

What I say now is well known to all of us but it is important to remind ourselves of how this freedom and respect are built in to our institutions. The Order governs itself in ***chapters*** of the brethren, local, provincial and general. It is the chapters who choose the superiors and make all the major decisions about our life and work. This is our freedom in action: Dominican government is in the first place, and always, communitarian or capitular. It is always, when done properly, self-government.

Each brother has ***voice*** – he may speak, be heard, and vote – at least in the conventual chapter. The provincial and general chapters are also constituted by representative groups of brothers who have voice and who define our legislation. Representation at provincial and general chapters is intended to be broad, and extended over time, to include whenever possible brothers who have not had a chance to speak at earlier chapters.

There is also what has been called ‘Dominican pluricameralism’, different ‘chambers’ or ‘houses’ through which decisions must pass. The existence of councils along with chapters assures this in each convent. At provincial chapters there are plenary sessions and there is a diffinitory, when a smaller group of the brothers, that will become the main part of the provincial council, review and decide on what the whole chapter has considered. This pluricameralism is spread over time in the general chapters which take three forms, the ***elective chapter*** that includes superiors and delegates, followed by the chapter of ***diffinitors***, and then by the chapter of ***superiors***, before the next elective chapter comes round.

At each level, then, we find the same pattern of a ***chapter***, a ***superior***, and a ***council*** to advise the superior and in certain circumstances also to decide with him. This pattern is present from the beginning of the Order. Humbert of Romans, for example, says that small things can be decided by the superior alone, for big things he should take counsel of the chapter, and for things neither small nor big he should take counsel of some of the brothers. We might add that it is wiser that the ‘some’ whom the superior normally consults should also be chosen by the chapter to avoid favoritism and factionalism.

There is also a strong ***subsidiarity*** between the different levels of government, allowing earlier levels – the convent, the province – to make as many as possible of the decisions about their life and work. So we have chapters, votes, councils, subsidiarity – it is a kind of democracy.

O’Dwyer knew well from experience that our system is often unwieldy and ragged, that it generates diversity and can be slow. The tradition of the Order is that our communitarian form of government will be like this, as we seek to move together while respecting the views and freedom of each one for the sake of the communion and the common mission. The tradition of the Order is that these disadvantages are worth enduring for the sake of the values that are served by this form of self-government.

The Order is *accountable for its own* legislation: this is another fundamental aspect of our form of government. The acts of provincial chapters are approved by the Master of the Order but the acts of general chapters, including the election of the Master, are approved only by the chapter itself. Long before Leo XIII, it was Dominic himself who installed *confidence in the responsibility of the brothers* as a key value for Dominican spirituality and government. We see it in the tasks he entrusted to them, the way in which he sent them off very quickly to study, preach and establish convents, the way in which he participated in the first two general chapters. Even earlier, in 1216, Dominic is obedient in working with his companions to establish the Order’s institutions.

Dominic himself started the *evolution of the Order’s legislation* by introducing the general chapter which initially was an annual event. Our constitutions remain alive, always in evolution, following the circumstances where the Order is present and challenged. The life of the Order comes before its legislation, the latter seeking to serve that life so that fraternity and preaching are strengthened.

In intrducing his study of the friars’ constitutions, Mark De Caluwe, a brother of the province of Flanders, says that they express Dominic’s desire for an evangelical way of life, within the Church, and according to the Rule of St Augustine. The sources of our constitutions are the gospels, the Rule, and the legislation of the Church, as well as the example and inspiration of St Dominic which are explicitly referred to in our constitutions when they speak about the vows, regular observance, prayer, study and preaching. So all aspects of our spirituality are related to the example and inspiration of Dominic. It is not easy to say which among these fundamental values are ‘anthropological’ and which are ‘theological’. Some are expressed in explicitly theological language and all can be developed theologically. Perhaps it is better to say that they are all ‘Christological’, articulating a way of life in which Dominic sought to follow Christ.

In a paper prepared for the general chapter at Bologna in 1998, the African Dominican theologian Sidbé Semporé argued that the term ‘democracy’ is not adequate for describing the Dominican form of government, and that it should instead be called ‘koinocracy’, from the term *koinonia*, meaning participation or, more usually, communion.

On the one hand, says brother Sidbé, we are all proud of our ‘democratic’ tradition. On the other hand there are many concrete questions about the effective functioning of our institutions. In a list of eight such questions he mentions, for example, the tyranny and exclusion that can be exercised by a majority against a minority, or the work of lobbies or pressure groups in situations of paralysis or blockage. These characterize the workings of democracy in politics and are accepted in that world as part of the reality. Are we simply to accept that they will also characterize government in the Order because it too is ‘democratic’?

Brother Sidbé proposes instead that we return to the evangelical sources of our institutions and that we begin to think of ourselves not simply as democratic but as ***koinocratic***. He speaks first of the famous texts in Acts 2 and 4 about the first community of believers who were one in heart and soul, and were faithful to *koinonia*, to communion, who held all things in common, who prayed together, while preaching the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. In fact this is how our Constitutions begin their description of our common life (LCO 2-3).

In legislating at chapters, and although we try not to, we can forget some basic principles that establish our life together and that shape its governance: in the first place ***the Holy Spirit*** (always invoked at least before elections), in the second place the ***co-responsibility*** that supports koinonia, in the third place the ***collaboration and solidarity*** that koinonia ought to establish among us.

Democratic regimes must find some basis for what unites a particular people into one political society. The answer to that question for Dominicans has to be our shared call to preach the gospel of Christ in the way of St Dominic, a mission that then requires a particular way of living together as well as a particular formation that initiates us into that fraternal communion at the service of mission. As Mark De Caluwe says, for us communion, formation, and mission all hang together.

***Conclusion***

I take it that none of this is problematic, that we are all happy to be obedient to God, as we promised when we made profession, and to obey Christ even if it involves suffering. It is being obedient to other people that is problematic and how are we to understand that?

The vows free us to be *followers* of Christ, *servants* of Christ and his people, *lovers* of Christ and his people. We are to become *slaves* of Christ, Paul says, a glorious slavery that is true freedom, because Christ is truth and goodness and beauty, and we are now bound to him. Amor meus pondus meum, St Augustine says, ‘my love is my weight’; my love has a kind of gravity that pulls me and binds me to what it is I love. Fine when it is God or Christ or Mary or St Dominic. What about being obedient to one another, to a community, to a superior?

*Herbert McCabe’s analysis in 1983*

Almost exactly 25 years ago Herbert McCabe spoke here at Bushey about obedience. The talk was subsequently published and has become well known as a reflection on the Dominican understanding of religious obedience. In the intervening years one can say that there has been a growing interest in virtue theory, in efforts to understand the self in relation to the community, a theme he discussed in his talk. The ‘victory’ of capitalism with the collapse of communism in 1989 has reinforced some aspects of the idea of the human being as an ‘autonomous individual’, an idea severely criticized by Herbert in his talk. In some ways there is even more emphasis now on choice, on the exercise of will as, it seems, sheer will, arbitrary will, with communities as theatres in which wills clash, what we might call a ‘free market of wills’. Culture is more powerful than thought, Herbert argued, and this continues to be the case.

If we approach the question of obedience and community *expecting* conflict between the individual and the community, conflict between freedom and obedience, then we are ‘of the world’, Herbert argued. I heard a superior recently lamenting the fact that religious were thinking more and more in worldly ways when it comes to matters of authority and obedience. Well he would say that, wouldn’t he, I thought. Those of us who are ‘subjects’ are tempted to be suspicious of such comments from superiors and feel they are wanting to consolidate their position ‘over against us’. What Herbert was arguing was that this ‘over againstness’ – whether it is individual over against community, freedom over against obedience, ‘subject’ over against ‘superior’ – is all wrong. Even to set things up in these terms means something has gone wrong.

Herbert quoted with dismay a comment to the effect that human beings need to be ‘broken’ as horses do and we know that this is simply not the case. What picture of the human being does such a comment reveal? The point of understanding obedience is to see it as being about truth and love, about the good, rather than a pure submission that is regarded as somehow meritorious in itself. Obedience is not in the first place a matter of will, as other spiritualities and theological approaches might say, but is in the first place a matter of understanding. A disciple’s task is to believe (this is Aquinas, quoting Aristotle) and to ‘obey’ one’s teacher means one has come to learn something about how to live. Obedience is perfect not when the ‘subject’ jumps when the ‘superior’ says ‘jump’, but when superior and subject have come to share one mind.

In this Herbert is simply spelling out what the Rule of St Augustine already contains, that we learn to live with one heart and one mind, united in our understanding of truth and our commitment to the good. This is why we have come together, to eb of one heart and mind seeking God, to share a quest for truth and love. Many modern philosophers emphasise the will rather than the understanding and see human community as a struggle of wills. But the totally obedient community, Herbert suggests, would be one in which no one was ever compelled to do anything. The superior’s task is to play the central role in an educational process by which the good of the community becomes clear to everyone. The ‘good of the community’ in our case is the mission of the Order, the preaching of the gospel. The superior’s task is to lead the community in seeking to identify how the community can best move towards that goal.

Let me recall just a couple of final comments from Herbert’s talk. It is not the case, he says, that communities are made up of individuals; rather individuals are made up of communities. Communities are ‘forms of love’ which is why people are attracted to becoming part of them. But what happens – at least what ought to happen – is not that people then lose themselves in communities but that they *find* themselves there.

*McNabb’s article in 1913-14*

Vincent McNabb had said similar things many years earlier, almost 100 years ago now, in an article calld ‘The Gyves of Freedom’, written in 1913.

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McNabb is clear that this will only work where the burdens of freedom are freely accepted, where each one is prepared to shoulder them along with the others, where superiors see it as their primary task to create a community of free people.

He refers also to the ‘ten thousand psychological laws’ by which the Order ought to be either dead or divided and yet it is neither.

*Questions*

One can conclude by agreeing that the account of Dominican freedom given by McNabb, and the account of government given by O’Dwyer, De Caluwe and Semporé – that all of this is very fine and very nice. But is it only theoretical? Is it too optimistic, perhaps even a bit naïve? Fine for a talk such as this but what about the reality from day to day? We can imagine it working for a community of adults, McNabb’s free people. But not only are most of us not adults some of the time but one thing that happens when people gather into groups and communities is that some of us regress, i.e. we become childish or adolescent again. These brothers have written well about our constitutions, about the spirituality inherent in our institutions of government. Do we need to supplement what we receive from them with a reflection on those ‘ten thousand psychological laws’ to which McNabb referred and which ought to have divided the Order if not killed it? Do we need to supplement what we receive from these brothers with a reflection also on what it is that has prevented those realities – the ten thousand psychological laws, as well as sinful human nature – from either dividing or killing the Order?

***Sources***

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***Questions for groupwork***

1. According to Vincent McNabb it is a temptation for Dominicans to become impatient with the burdens of freedom and to try to become more efficient, for example by appointing superiors rather than electing them, and by other ways of ‘centralizing’. What would be lost in doing that? Would we gain something important by thinking of the Order as, for example, a business that needs effective management?

2. Dominican democracy is a way – a very good way – to organize a community of people and to help them in governing themselves. Are there some theological principles that have contributed to the success of Dominican self-government (success = the Order is still alive, and is still one)?