



Rome, 25/01/18, Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle

To the laity of the Order of Preachers

Prot. 73/17/810 ICLDF

Dear lay sisters and brothers of the Order of preachers,

It is in the momentum of the celebration of the Jubilee of the Order that I address you who, during these coming months, will prepare the International Assembly of the Dominican Laity. In all regions, this Assembly will be without doubt a very important event for the celebration of *the grace that is given to the Order, to have lay brothers and sisters as active members of its mission*. According to the specificity of each region, this will also be the opportunity to consider again the way in which today the lay vocation is more essential than ever if the Order is to inculcate better the proclamation of the good news of the coming of the Kingdom. For the entire Order, and in the perspective opened during the congress on the Mission of the Order that ended the celebration of the Jubilee in January 2017, I express the wish that this Assembly might be the occasion for a demanding call to an apostolic creativity that truly integrates the specific participation of the Laity of the Order. This is how the latter can best serve the world and the Church by preaching. Eight hundred years after the determination of Dominic to send his brothers to the four corners of the world, it seems to me that this sending must today find its actualization, not only keeping in mind the concerns of a « geographical » dispersion, but also in seeking to establish the preaching of the Order by making it rich from a diversity of cultures and of states of life. And discovering that it is through the richness of this diversity that the Order is today called to manifest its identity of being a single « preaching body », rooted in communion in one and the same call to « be totally devoted to the evangelization of the Word of God ».

We all know that the reality of the lay fraternities of the Order is very diverse according to the regions, their dynamism is very different here and there, and their full integration in the life of the Order is variable. We also know how we can take too much time and spend too much energy asking ourselves about the Dominican « identity » of the fraternities, without it always bringing the fruits of life for which we hope. But with many of you, I am convinced that the life of the Laity of the Order will not come from a focus on the formalities and structures, but from the audacity to hear the call made to the Order, because it is the Order of Preachers, to serve the mission of the Church which, People of God on pilgrimage in history (*Lumen Gentium*), continuously becomes what it is called to be in proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom. Is not this the path on which we are guided by so many lay Dominicans such as Pier Giorgio Frassati and Giorgio La Pira? Following the Second Vatican Council, it is essential to recall that the laity, by their Baptism, « are made participants in the sacerdotal, prophetic and royal functions of Christ » and « perform for their part, in the Church and in the world, the mission which is that of all the people of God » (*Lumen Gentium*, 31).

The sign of fraternity

The decision to designate the lay Members of the Order without mentioning anymore the «Third Order » but speaking instead of « Dominican Lay Fraternities », highlights a central aspect of the proclamation of the Kingdom that, with the Order as a whole, you are called to deploy. For Dominic, who from the beginning of his mission in Languedoc wanted to be called « brother Dominic », the Fraternity is intrinsically linked to the proclamation of the Kingdom. Brothers and sisters, who do not come together after choosing one another, but who receive each other as friends of God, learning from each other how to become members and actors of a family of sons and daughters of the same Father. To be a sign of fraternity, in the heart of secular life, is to be a sign that humans carry within them this ability to live as brothers, that is to say to establish relations which, even with all their diversity, they

are united in the same sonship, and in the same desire to be sent to this world as witnesses of the Word and of the life of the grace of God.

In my visits throughout the Order, I am more and more convinced that this is, for the whole Order, each branch in its own way, a means of responding to the call of Paul VI when, in *Evangelium nuntiandi*, he wrote: « Modern (woman or) man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if (she or) he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses » (EN, 41). As « preachers of grace », we are called to be such witnesses, « parables of communion », awakens in the world of all our human capacities for becoming brothers and sisters, at the heart of the concrete history of humanity which is thereby transformed. Writing this, I would also like to expand my remarks beyond a single « branch » of the Order to emphasize that, considered in this light, the Order's own charism of evangelization cannot be defined by the sum of the different « functions » of evangelists, but rather falls within this « almost sacramental » reality of the incessant becoming of human fraternity. It is also often the living experience of the fraternity which, in return, leads us to deepen our desire for the « Proclamation of the Kingdom ». It is also from the point of view of this sign of fraternity that, it seems to me, we can consider the diversity of the « secular » ways of being linked to the Order: not only as allies in the realization of a function, project or task, nor only as a bond of friendship with this or that individual or community, but as engaged in the adventure of a fraternity that aspires to speak in the world about that of which this world is, essentially, capable. In this sense, I think that we must, more than ever, consider together all the various ways in which the Laity wish to be « linked » to the Order of Dominic, that is to say both to make the experience of the Church that the Spirit establishes as a fraternity, and to invite others to find their joy in this same experience.

It is in this horizon that I would like to highlight some of the challenges that the Laity of the Order must help the Order to welcome and to highlight, for the good of the mission of preaching of all.

The gospel of the family

Like any Dominican reality, the lay fraternities and groups of the international movement of the Dominican Youth - according to their own way (that is to say in essence for a limited time, since youth passes!) - inscribe in the heart of their project conversion by, and to, the fraternity. In a certain way, these fraternal realities complement what the fraternal communities of consecrated persons are, precisely because they have made a choice that places them in a new way in relation to their own family, while the laity, by choosing to belong to the Order as lay, make the choice to bring this new belonging, this new way of realizing the charism of their baptism, as a fruitful gift in the very heart of their family life.

It seems to me that we have not yet, collectively, gathered all the richness of this choice. If the Church, in its desire to renew in depth and radically its mission of evangelization, now affirms the requirement of the « Gospel of the family » (*Amoris Laetitia*, 63), stressing that the family, as such (and, in saying this, it means the normal not the « ideal », family, with its joys and sorrows, its beautiful and joyful achievements as well as its painful (but sometimes fruitful dysfunctions), must be fully an « actor of evangelization », what does that mean for the preaching of the Word of truth? How, moreover, can we help to discover at the very heart of the history of the world that the family is, in itself, an evangelizer, a witness of the grace of Christ which is the « grace of fraternity » (IIaIIae 14, 2 ad 4)?

It is within families, and in the course of the history of each one marked by success and chaos, that the human learns what it means to become a father or mother, brother or sister, a son or daughter. These fundamental realities of human life are not first of all moral or virtuous categories about which the « Church » would have to make a theological and moral discourse that guides behaviour. They are the realities of human life through which each human being is called to recognize the grace of the revelation of the Name of God. Like many of you, I can attest to the fact that many fraternities are places where one and all can freely and confidently (and, of course, with measure and discretion) share their family experience, and find the support they expect. It seems to me that the religious men and

women of the Order, who of course have their own personal experience of family life but lead an atypical life in this regard, need to be educated by these experiences of their lay brothers and sisters. Thus the preaching of all benefits from the real diversity of believing experiences, which are places for understanding the work of grace. In this way I call the laity of the Order to contribute to the definition in the Order of the most appropriate way to integrate the « Gospel of the family » at the heart of their preaching and pastoral ministries.

At the heart of the Church

As for all the other branches of the Order, the community reality – « parable of communion », to recall again this beautiful expression of brother Roger de Taizé - is an integral part of the evangelization of the Word of God by which the Church is built. It obviously has specific forms in lay Dominican life, but is none the less essential. Its testimony is more powerful today when the Church, so it seems to me, is particularly sensitive to the community dimension of shared faith and of the search for truth. It is often said, among the laity of the Order, that the fraternity is a place of support and enrichment, from which each of the members of the fraternity draws to invigorate the commitments that many have in their own parish but also, more broadly, from their own experience and skills working at the borders and in those « fractured places » where justice, dignity and the right of individuals and peoples are challenged, where the proclamation of the Gospel is so important. It is a reason for thanksgiving to see realized, by the conjugation of various forms of belonging to the Order, the broad guidelines for the preaching of the Order so often recalled by our chapters.

But, in addition, at the heart of the ecclesial communities, the testimony and the experience of the fraternities must find their own role in the service of the deployment of the missionary dimension of the Church. This is the case in the parish communities, beyond a simple «pastoral functionalism», and without confusion with the many apostolic or spiritual movements that compose them. But it is also the testimony of many of the laity of the Order committed outside the usual ecclesial structures in many social and cultural realities, thereby demonstrating the aspiration of the Church continually to expand its tent to the dimensions of the worlds. which today are increasingly intertwined.

I add here that the demographic reality of the laity of the Order in some regions invites us to pay attention to the way in which we welcome, integrate and take care of the older people among us: every human group, I believe, shows something of its own humanity in the manner in which it cares for the oldest, with gratitude, responsibility and solidarity.

The diversity of experiences of faith in dialogue, for a common proclamation

At the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* insisted that the Church has the opportunity to receive the experience of the commitment in the secular tasks of the world lived by the laity. This is not primarily a matter of reinforcing a distinction between « sacred » ministry and commitment « in the reality of the human dough ». Here once again it is a question of acknowledging with gratitude the diversity of believing experiences. The moral theologian who seeks to make intelligible the complexity of the current medicalization of procreation, for example, will not have the same experience of faith as the practitioner or researcher who, during the daily routine of his consultations and interventions, listens to the desires and sufferings of his patients. The man or woman of the « Church », fascinated by the amazing potential of new digital technologies and seeking to integrate him or herself into these new social networks for a more modern and efficient communication, certainly does not have the same questions of faith as the professional Christian laity who, on a daily basis, are challenged by the progress and powers of a technology that continues to exceed what they had not been allowed to imagine. In many of the countries where the Order is established, social, economic, and political realities, mark the life of the laity in a very different way from how they mark the institutions of consecrated life. The involvement in secular life as a professional and agent in the world of business, research and teaching, in commerce and

administration, in ecological concern or the leadership of human communities, gives a content to the experience of faith which must be integrated in the global dynamic of the proclamation of the Kingdom. Forced migration for economic, political or religious reasons, the consequences of globalization on the part of the population who are victims rather than the ones who reap the benefits, are leaving their mark on the lives of many lay sisters and brothers of the Order and their families, and our communion will not fully reach its truth if we forget this reality.

Similarly I think it is important to underline the specific experience of lay people in contemporary worlds in the field of religious pluralisms, which make up not only many societies, but also often their own family or professional realities. These realities confront the laity of the Order, often very directly, with atheism, agnosticism, religious indifference, scepticism or even hostility to Christianity and sometimes to any religion. In many places in the world, it is the laity of the Church who are most directly confronted with the emergence of new very intense evangelical churches which directly affect theirs. So it is often the laity, more than the clerics of the Church, who must discern and enter into dialogue in these contexts. In addition, now, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, the major religions of Asia, and the traditional religions of Africa, are intertwined in the same place and it is clear that they participate in the construction of relationships within the diversity of our societies and mark the lives of families through alliances and migrations. Thus, the laity are in the front line in seeing that ecumenical and interreligious dialogue are, today perhaps more than ever, a priority for the mission of the Order.

In this context of religious pluralism, but also in the face of ignorance, prejudice, fears and all forms of rejection that we see here or there in respect of the other major religions of the world, the tradition of friendship, of confidence in the capacity of human solidarity, of confidence in critical reflection conducted in dialogue with others in the search for a greater intelligibility of the truth, urges us to be more than ever men and women of dialogue between cultures and religions.

From all these points of view, lay Dominicans have a dual responsibility, *ad extra* and *ad intra*. *Ad extra*, that of taking part in placing human creativity, inspired by Gospel life and apostolic desire, at the service of constructing a world habitable by all. *Ad intra*, that of contributing to inscribing at the heart of the life of the entire Order a deep consciousness that a fraternity of preachers is called to be vulnerable to what hurts the world, and to learn, in solidarity with the victims and the forgotten of the world, to discern the signs of the times in dialogue with which the Order wishes to evangelize the Word. The recent general chapter of the brothers of the Order asked the latter to commit themselves, at least once a year, to study together the context of their preaching. It seems to me that to do this in dialogue with the laity of the Order would be mutually extremely fruitful. It is, I believe, a very specific service that the Order must make to the Church: to contribute to the experience of faith in conversation with contemporary knowledge and practices, participating in elaborating the theological intelligibility of God's conversation in the world.

The worlds of youth

At the heart of this reading of the context of evangelization, a privileged place must be reserved for attending to the realities experienced by young people. In all latitudes, young people represent both those who will open new paths for the future and those who are looking for the transmission of traditions and cultures that precede them. They are both the ones who learn the fastest to tame much of the progress of the modern world, as well as those whom this world is always likely to forget, marginalize, or exploit. They are the most exposed to the erosion of religious beliefs critically argued beyond emotional reactions, as well as those most deeply marked by the « interculturalization » that characterizes contemporary worlds. Pope Francis, in convening the next synod which will be devoted to young people, faith and vocational discernment, invites the whole Church to put this theme at the heart of its reflection. Because of their family and professional life, the laity of the Order are in the front line, it seems to me, to stimulate the entire Order to respond to this call of the Pope.

It is for this reason that, in a very special way, I wanted to invite the entire Order to play its part in the preparation of such a synod, from the many commitments of the brothers, sisters and laity in worlds, cultures, and activities of which young people are the heart. This is also the reason why it seems to me so essential, at this time, to promote the International Dominican Youth Movement (IDYM or MJD) which, within the Order, offers the possibility to young people to give to their vocation as a young Christian this particular tone of evangelization at the school of St. Dominic. While we have, in many ways, many beautiful experiences of « pastoral care of young people » this movement was founded to give young people the possibility of deploying pastoral initiatives, discerning them in the light of the structuring elements of evangelization according to the Dominican tradition. Once again, in this field, this tradition will deploy its great wealth to promote the autonomy and the specific creativity of each, and at the same time to affirm the great value of the intra- and inter-generational dialogue, for the greater service of the proclamation of the Kingdom.

A fraternity of discernment and mutual « accompaniment of life »

I would also like to raise a question here that is asked repeatedly in several fraternities, and in all cultures where the Order is present: the question of « irregular » conjugal situations. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis, emphasizing the discernment needed because of the great diversity of such situations, insists that: « It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an ‘unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous’ mercy. No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel! » (AL 297). He continued by referring to the general consensus reached by the Synod Fathers: « In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God’s plan for them » (AL 297). Speaking of the baptized who are divorced and civilly remarried, the Pope repeated the position expressed by many during the Synod, observing that they « need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal. The logic of integration is the key to their pastoral care, a care which would allow them not only to realize that they belong to the Church as the body of Christ, but also to know that they can have a joyful and fruitful experience in it. They are baptized; they are brothers and sisters; the Holy Spirit pours into their hearts gifts and talents for the good of all. Their participation can be expressed in different ecclesial services, which necessarily requires discerning which of the various forms of exclusion currently practised in the liturgical, pastoral, educational and institutional framework, can be surmounted. Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel. This integration is also needed in the care and Christian upbringing of their children, who ought to be considered most important ». (AL 299). Certainly, as the Pope writes, there is a great diversity of situations, evoked during the Synod, not to mention the situations experienced by baptized homosexuals, and it is important to promote « a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since ‘the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases’, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same » (AL 300).

It seems to me that these reflections are particularly relevant to help our fraternities to calmly deal with situations where it is a case of welcoming and integrating into the fraternities brothers or sisters living in these situations. The question should not be whether we should welcome or reject them, but rather to think about how their membership in a fraternity can be one of the ways in which the Church both accompanies them and will welcome the deployment of their own gifts received from the Spirit. It is certainly not the case that the lay fraternities of the Order are places where the rules of the Church would not be respected, nor even places where the « exceptional dispensation » of these rules could be easily granted. It is more a question of respecting a double commitment. On the one

hand, to be a place of welcome, discernment and accompaniment : « When a responsible and tactful person, who does not presume to put his or her own desires ahead of the common good of the Church, meets with a pastor capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the matter before him, there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard.» (AL 300). On the other hand, to make real the « sign of fraternity » that the lay fraternities of the Order have the mission to be in the Church and in the world, integrating the reality, always incomplete and imperfect, of human existence which commits itself to the path of conversion in response to the call to holiness. It would then be up to us, depending on the case, to know how to find together ways of living, celebrating and preaching in our fraternities, taking into account the situation of members bound by fraternal solidarity. It seems to me that there is here a particular issue for our Order, which every day gives thanks for having been called to preach grace and mercy « *verbo et exemplo* ». I therefore call on all the priors provincial and provincial officials of the Dominican laity to include this theme in the agenda of reflection in their province on the mission of the laity in the Order in order to define the concrete modalities of welcoming and accompanying brothers and sisters affected by these situations. I ask them to do so in dialogue with the local Ordinaries, and to make a report of their findings to the provincial chapters of the laity and of the brothers, and to bring a synthesis of it to the next General Chapter.

Some of you might have expected that this letter would address points that are more related to structural problems in our fraternities: necessary adaptations of the Rule, modalities of formation, structure of « government », modalities of the life of the laity in the « Province », the status and role of regional assemblies ... all of this is important and I encourage the regions which have addressed these points to share them before the Assembly, so that the latter can, where appropriate, discuss them and propose directions. Nevertheless, these issues must be addressed calmly and without tension, in order not to consider the fraternities as an end in themselves, but to consider them according to their proper end: to be at the service of the proclamation of the Word. That is why I insist that these necessary adjustments to our structures must always keep as their primary horizon, because that is the horizon of life, the challenges of evangelization that the Order would like to meet by reinforcing fraternal communion among all its branches. It is when they have as a source and as a horizon such a determination for evangelization that the structures really bear full fruit. It is also when this determination for evangelization is simple and robust that one can find how to adapt the structures in order to respond to new needs, new calls from the laity who want the charism of their baptism to unfold in the light of the evangelical and apostolic intuition of Dominic. Did Dominic himself not gradually deploy his desire to give the Church an Order of Preachers by welcoming those who, recognizing the pertinence of his intuition, asked him to welcome them?

Very fraternally,

f. Bruno Cadore, op
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