

***St Dominic's Legacy: A Democratic Approach to Governance***  
**Opening Address at the Dominican Governance Symposium**  
**Rosary Lodge Strathfield, 13 August 2010**

I thank Sr Judith Lawson OP OAM, Sr Julianna Drobik OP, and the Dominican Education Council for the invitation to address you today, and I greet all of you who share governance of Dominican schools. I also acknowledge the Provincials of the North Adelaide sisters and the Dominican friars.

My topic today is *St Dominic's Legacy: A Democratic Approach to Governance* and since this symposium is held under the auspices of the Dominican Education Council I know it is intended that what I say may inform your later reflection and discussion on the Dominican charism and school governance.

The website of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and the Solomon Islands tells us that "since 1988 the Congregation has progressively entrusted the leadership and management of its Schools to the laity, through the establishment of Incorporated Boards and the appointment of lay Principals. The Congregation continues to exercise canonical stewardship and partnership in the governance of its Schools." I am presently on a working party of the Australian Catholic Bishops on public juridic persons, on another of Catholic Health Australia on governance principles for Catholic healthcare apostolates, and I chair the Catholic Education Commission of New South Wales at a time of transition for the governance and representation of congregational schools in this state. So I am at least a little aware of the new world of school governance that is evolving as religious orders pass ownership and/or governance and/or management on to others. I can only say that I am grateful that I've been given a more historical and spiritual topic today!

As you know, we are presently celebrating eight centuries of Dominican life. Someone recently said to me: "You know what I find extraordinary about the Dominicans? It's that after 800 years and spreading to most countries you still haven't split into several orders – reformed and unreformed, regular and discalced, regular and conventual of whatever – but are still one Order. That must have something to do with how your Order is run." Hmm, I thought, but how is our Order run? Does anyone really know? I'm sure the Masters of the Order, the Prioresses-General, Provincials and local superiors, let alone the average sister, friar or lay Dominican, would have some interesting answers to that question... Mine is that "it runs" precisely because of the 'democratic' or 'communitarian' legacy inherited from our founder.

### **Lessons from Classical Democracy**

Dominicans are known to make rather bloated claims at times and one that I've heard is that we invented Westminster and Washington democracy. In fact, of course, democracy did not originate with St Dominic nor is it even a specifically Christian invention. For the western foundations of democracy we look to Athens in the classical period, 450 years before the birth of Christ. The leader, Pericles, delivered a speech at the funeral of the men who had died in the war against Sparta. There he set out some of the principles of democracy.

Pericles stated that he wanted to discuss "our constitution and the way of life which has made us great" (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, II:36). He makes five points which are instantly recognisable to us as essential characteristics of democracy:

1. "Our Constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people" (*PW II:37*);
2. "We Athenians submit policy matters to proper discussion... for the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated" (*PW II:40*);
3. "We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority" (*PW II:37*);
4. "Just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other" (*PW II:37*);
5. "We don't say a man who takes no interest in politics is minding his own business; we say that he has no business being in this community at all" (*PW II:40*).

### **Application to the Order**

St Thomas Aquinas wrote a great deal about democracy (e.g. *Scriptum Super Sententiis II*; *De regimine principum (On the Governance of Rulers) or the Letter to the King of Cyprus*; *Summa Theologiæ I*, 96 (Government); Ia IIæ 90-97; IIa IIæ 10-12, 42, 57, 104). As a second generation Dominican he could not have avoided being influenced by the form of government in his own Order. Though Dominic and Thomas lived in a highly structured feudal society in which their own families were very much part of the establishment, it was also a time of emerging city-states, new urban middle classes and religious orders with new-fangled ideas which cut across hierarchy and stability. As the Dominican historian Fr William Hinnebusch OP has observed, this was a time of experimentation, with "the introduction of representative procedures into state and municipal governments and the proliferation of voluntary and local associations – guilds, charitable organizations, confraternities, and universities. All of them employed elective and representative methods of government." (WA Hinnebusch, *The Dominicans: A Short History*)

Generally speaking, however, the Church did not go in for such devolved governance. In his history Fr Pierre Mandonet OP highlighted the novelty of Dominic's system of governance. Whereas medieval monks and canons were governed by prelates who "assumed all authority and exercised it in perpetuity without control, and subjects never participated in its exercise", the Order of Preachers, being composed of educated men, "governed itself through members drawn temporarily from its ranks. Each friar was legally emancipated, and each individual possessed the plenitude of his rights: in the social structure of his Order, the Preacher was always an elector". (Pierre Mandonet, *St Dominic and His Work*)

So St Thomas was immersed in a communitarian and layered polity in his order and to some extent in the surrounding society, at once authoritarian and yet remarkably 'liberal'. He was also immersed in the writings of the ancients and he inherited from them the idea that human beings are *zoon politikon*, i.e. social-political animals, with a natural inclination to relationships, including political ones. "Man is by nature a political and social animal. Even more than other animals he lives in groups." (*De regimine principum* 1) The thought here is that community is a fundamental good for human beings, an aspect of their flourishing. It is also a means to other goods such as life and security, health and sustenance, language and education, and so on. *But without authority community would break down*: we need someone to ensure harmonious collaboration, protect security, enable certain large-scale projects and give the group identity and direction. Augustine and the latter-day neo-conservatives

think governance is an evil, if a necessary one, reflecting the fact that we are fallen human beings in need of externally imposed discipline. Aquinas, on the other hand, thought governance was a positive good, required even were there no evildoers but simply people of different temperaments, projects and abilities who need to be coordinated (*Summa Theologiæ* I, 96, iv). So the early Dominicans were no hippies: they believed in authority, constitutions and obedience; but they saw them as *servicing human happiness rather than being constraints on it*.

### **What sort of governance?**

Well, it's all very well to say you favour governance of some sort: but which sort? "There are three requirements for the good life of a social group," St Thomas taught. "First, the society must be united in peace. Secondly, it must be directed towards acting well.... And thirdly, it must ensure that there is a sufficient supply of the necessities to live well." (*De regimine principum* 15) The function of the leader, on this early Dominican account, is to move people in appropriate ways towards their individual and common good. Government is the more successful the better it achieves this. The best government would be that kind which fosters the *virtue and opportunity of the members, their true happiness in this life and eternal happiness in the next*, rather than the private interests of the governor or some sub-group. So Aquinas was no supporter of the minimal state of the free-marketeters. Good governance, for him, was about much more than maintaining order while people prosecuted their private projects and partnership contracts; it was there to provide the conditions for the flourishing of all, including ensuring the basic necessities of physical, emotional, moral and spiritual flourishing.

Aquinas, like most mediævals, thought it obvious that this required that there be one person 'at the top', charged with governance. Such a person can better promote unity, peace and a sense of direction than can a committee. He noted that this was reflected in the natural order where, for instance, there is always a king bee in every hive. (Little did he know it was actually a queen bee!). While there have been many modern experiments in shared or rotating or dialogical or consensus or non-identified leadership – which often means government by an unappointed bully – Aquinas would doubt the usefulness of any forum of governance which involved process but no decision.

But just as single-minded governance is most effective at achieving the good, it is also most effective at achieving evil (what we call 'tyranny'). Likewise, Thomas observed, the more diffuse governments get, the less effective they are, whether for good or for ill. Those who think governance by weak human beings is likely to go wrong will focus on the perils of dictatorship and seek to diffuse power as broadly as possible; while those of more optimistic temper or more focussed on results will prefer the efficiency of hopefully benign dictatorship. Interestingly the Dominicans went for the more democratic diffusion of power, while the Jesuits and the congregations which imitated them, followed a more military model with much more centralized power. With Winston Churchill the Dominicans might have said democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others.

## Whigs?

So were they Whigs? Aquinas favoured a *constitutional government*, with the leader's power limited by divine and natural law, but also by advisers, councils and other checks and balances (e.g. *Summa Theologiæ* Ia IIæ 90, iii; 97, iii). This led Lord Acton famously to declare Aquinas and the Dominicans the first Whigs or liberals, which is true as far as it goes, but in fact there is much about Enlightenment liberalism that would dismay the mediævals. Governance for the early Dominicans was never about following fashions or the latest opinion polls, but rather seeking to follow Christ the Lord and his Holy Church and freeing and directing the members to embrace that apostolic mission. They vowed *to obey*, in imitation of Christ, "who always obeyed the Father, for the life of the world" (LCO 18.1). Their form of governance was *ecclesial* to its very core, always in obedience to and at the service of the Church. The only vow they took, in fact, was a vow of obedience, for in that vow, to obey Christ and his Blessed Mother, his Church and his Gospel, as well as Dominic and his successors and their rule, all else was thought to be captured. As vowed religious they obeyed their superiors. Their superiors, in turn, served the common good by their exercise of authority, guarding the religious and apostolic life of the community. *Without connection to the Church – to its ordinaries, whether bishops or provincials – their leaders would lose their identity and mission, and thus their authority, and their preaching would lose its fruitfulness.*

Hierarchical and obedient they certainly were, but very democratic they also, by the standards of their day, with their secret ballots with black and white balls, their election of their own local superiors, who in turn elected their provincials, who in turn elected their Master General, all for a term, and all with chapters, councils, constitutions and a programme of legislation to guide them. Conventual fraternity was mirrored by "the communion of convents which constitutes a province" and "the communion of provinces which constitutes the Order" (*Liber Constitutionum et Ordinationum Fratrum Ordinis Praedicatorum* I.VII) Property and much decision-making was and is reserved to the local level, not centralised. The *Fundamental Constitution* of the Order explains that all this was to ensure "the organic and balanced participation of all the members for pursuing the special end of the Order" with autonomy and authority shared out. Chapters and commissions at each level would discuss matters – often interminably – before decisions were or persons charged with tasks. This tendency to talk and talk and talk things through increased people's ownership of decisions and often the prudence of those decisions. But as a former Master of the Order, Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP wrote in his 1997 letter on *Dominican Freedom and Responsibility: Towards a Spirituality of Government*, this communitarian form of government and endless consultation and debate means "we will never be one of the most efficient Orders in the Church".

But such inefficiency is an acceptable cost for the spirituality of Dominican government. And much of this structure of government was carried by the friars and sisters to places as far away as Westminster and Washington where it did, indeed, have its influence on the locals.

## Advice to those involved in governance

Why, apart from vicious ambition or naïve obedience would anyone accept a governance role? Aquinas suggested that governance was a noble activity that should appeal to or at least be accepted by persons with certain gifts. Those in governance,

he observes, are performing an eminently reasonable service (for all reasons set out above); if they govern well they will achieve an excellence of character, will win the love and respect of those they lead and be remembered gloriously on earth; and, as any true vocation, it will be their route to heaven. The bad leader attains the mundane honours of a fickle public, the perishable reward of passing pleasures, all with many anxieties in this life and much worse tortures in the next! Medieval religious art, such as that of the Dominican painter Blessed Fra Angelico, always included several crowned heads, as well as tonsured clerical ones, veiled nunish ones and mitred episcopal ones, amongst the heavenly host – but also in the cauldrons of hell!

So the Dominicans did not invent democratic governance but they did give it a particular shape and, dare I say, spirituality. Hinnebusch observed that the Order's government, from as early as 1221, embodied the principles of "collegiality, subsidiarity, representation and accountability", as well as a willingness to harness "the wisdom, experience and ideas of a wide spectrum of friars in providing for the good of the province, Order and Church."

So in Christ and Dominic democracy is transformed. Let me give an example. Right now our country and our Order are both preparing for that most democratic of events, an election. But the difference between a secular general election and Dominican general chapter is that Dominican democracy is not about one side winning and one side losing, much less about one person winning and another losing: Dominican democracy is about mission, the search for Truth and preaching of the Word. As Fr Timothy observed: "our democracy is only Dominican if our debating and voting is an attempt to hear the Word of God summoning us to walk in the way of discipleship" and attempting to hear each other as voices of even the smallest grain of truth. Governance of this communitarian form is supposed to unite us for mission, rather than make us rivals or prisoners. When the new Master for the worldwide order is elected next month it will be with a view to Dominican life and mission, rather than any voter's or province's sectional interests.

In 1963 a song written by a Belgian Dominican sister, Jeanne Deckers, 'Sister Sourire', was doing the rounds. A movie about her sad story has just appeared. Last Sunday, as I was celebrating St Dominic's Day with the friars and parishioners in the parish of Carina, I was delighted to hear *Dominique, nique, nique* sung. It was about St Dominic and reached number five in the Australian Singles Chart for 1963! An English translation of the chorus ran:

*Dominic went about simply,  
a poor singing traveller.  
On every road, in every place,  
he talked only of the Good Lord,  
he talked only of the Good Lord.*

The lyrics capture the freedom of Dominic and his single-minded sense of mission. For Pericles and his Athenians, democracy enabled them to remain *free from* the domination of Sparta; for us, baptised in Christ and joined in some way to the Dominican family, democracy gives us not merely freedom from but *freedom for* – the freedom to talk, on every road, in every place, of the Good Lord.

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