

# *Patterns of Governance in the Dominican Tradition*

## **Dominican Education Council Symposium**

**13<sup>th</sup> August 2011**

INTO WHAT PATTERN....

Into what pattern, into what music have the spheres whirled us?  
Of travelling light upon spindles of the stars wound us,  
The great winds upon the hills and in hollows swirled us,  
Into what currents the hollow waves and crested waters,  
Molten veins of ancestral rock wrought us  
In the caves, in the graves entangled the deep roots of us.

Into what vesture of memories earth layer upon layer enswathed us  
Of the ever-changing faces and phases  
Of the moon to be born, reborn, upborn, of sun-spun days  
Our arrivals assigned us, our times and our places  
Sanctuaries for all love's meetings and partings, departings  
Healings and woundings and weepings and transfigurations?

Kathleen Raine

A poem by the Scottish poet, Kathleen Raine, may seem a very strange prefix to a session on Dominican Governance. But its energy, movement, embracing of chaos, seeking out, being taken on the tides of time and entering into it with the passion of our lives turned inside out – this is the dream of Dominic, over 800 years old, that we now put our energies into.

This is a poem of great itinerancy, to borrow Mary O'Driscoll's emphasis – and such are our lives, mobile in geographic, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual spheres.

### **Democracy**

It is strange to think that the realm of Governance can be the vehicle whereby we can create a sustainable world. We might mistakenly think of it as imposing rules and regulations for the sake of order. I am utterly astounded at the audacity and abiding wisdom of Dominic to

sweep away centuries of moribund medievalism, hierarchy and long-established traditions of monarchical governance, to open out a way of being, a democracy that demanded the participation of every single person for it to be effective. A way of innate freedom. Timothy Radcliffe quotes this freedom as being 'stupefying'.

Such was Dominic's intellectual coherence, his impulse for the whole, that now echoes down into our own age witnessed the astounding advances made in understanding of our universe, quantum physics, the dynamic patterns in nature, patterns in chaos theory, that keep propelling us to embrace the whole, even as we are humbled by it. It is all of a piece. I believe that Dominic's breadth of vision belongs in the corridors of the incredible intellectual advances we experience today.

In Dominic's era we see the rise of the merchant class, the city states, the emerging establishment of universities and the growing urbanized middle class. But the Church itself was still stuck within a climate of medievalism, factionalism and of absolute hierarchical control, reeling from corruption, dualistic heresies (which arose often as a reaction to the undisciplined and scandalous manner of life of clerics). The Church was devastated by inner politics and territorial division, whilst dealing outside itself with the real threat of Islam overshadowing Christianity. This could be our times now. Never have we needed so much as now the deeper tools of dialogue and thrust for common good that Dominic dreamt of.

We know Dominic to be a deeply committed ecclesial man – a man of the Church. I have a nagging suspicion that we may have domesticated Dominic. His stance was radical: one totally committed to apostolic poverty, a mind and heart in constant search for truth, a person radiating compassion (Gabriel Kelly spoke of him as a point of radiation) and untiring zeal for the lost - Dominic actually ran counter to much of the Church's witness in his time. The struggle to keep alive the dangerous memory of Jesus in our time may well find us running counter to some of the Church's witness today because we need to keep critiquing ourselves, and our Church, to remain faithful to this memory. This is a comfort for me, that Dominic's ecclesial stance was not a tame compliance but a counter witness to the prevailing spirit of the Church in his time. With integrity. Without aggression.

The system of Governance established by Dominic was the structure which underpinned the essence of the Order, making 'Holy Preaching' possible – the Mission of Jesus. It is

democratic in principle. So what is democracy? We know it comes from the Greek, '*demo*' = the people; '*cracy*' the voice.

Democracy was not the monopoly of the Dominicans, having been established by Pericles in Athens, 450 BC, as Bishop Anthony Fisher spoke of last year. However enlightened its appearance in Greece, it was essentially a protective bulwark against the domination of Sparta; creating two opposing forces. Dominican governance has always been a way of behaving and operating, always at the service of Mission, neither militaristic nor partisan, but is about **community and right relationship**, that is at its core, **spiritual**. Teilhard de Chardin said that we are not spiritual beings becoming human, but **human beings becoming spiritual**. It is about establishing right relations in our world within the framework of its hunger for God. The Word that now continues to be spilt through us. At least I hope so.

The opposite of love (love being the heart of mission) is not hate, but indifference. Timothy Radcliffe says that the opposite of government is not freedom but paralysis. If we are to seek life in all its fullness for all God's people, for our planet earth, for our future sustainability, we need to be people who embody the Incarnation, Jesus among us in grace and truth. Unless this is our core value in mission, healing the fractures, soothing the wounded, critiquing the unjust systems that burden millions of life in order that social structures may become just and life-giving, we will not experience liberation. Until we run out of breath in this endeavour, we still need to preach the Good News. Preach that another way of life is possible.

The democracy Dominic established provided a unique range of checks and balances so that the balance of power, which is so often abused in our world, could itself be liberated by sound governance and freed for mission, using its full resources to do so. He did this in such a way that the dynamic of revision was set in place for all time as a necessary corrective, as a tool to provide the greatest possible integrity in continuing to summon all of us to walk in the way of discipleship. There have been religious movements down the ages that have emerged from a moment of radical insight and response, but all too often these movements ended up domesticated and trapped in a system of beliefs and regulations that ended up obscuring that vision. Holding mission as paramount and the litmus test of Dominican governance, he expected continual revision and owning of the Constitutions as a way of life, to keep alive the purpose of the Order. (For proposals to be passed at the Chapter they had to stand the test of time, wisdom and discernment – 3 Chapters had to approve them.)

Dominic initiated the most innovative clause of his time that provided the principle of dispensation for the sake of mission. The complexity and balance of this form of governance is typical of the Dominican tradition. Everything was ordered for the radical pursuit of bringing Good News to our world.

Dominic set up systems that demanded that every voice be heard, through engaging in debate, conversation, chapters that functioned at the three levels (local, Provincial and Order) and that would issue in votes and decisions that were grounded in discernment for the common good. Priors are elected for three years, Provincials for four, Masters are nine – so that the focus remains on the actual voice of the community, the chapter.

The Rule of St. Augustine –flexible, apostolic and communitarian - which Dominic adopted in order to provide Papal approval of his Order of Holy Preaching, was grounded in the spirit of the early Church – to share all things in common in the awareness of Christ’s call. We know well how often he traversed the roads, mountains and valleys en route to Rome to establish the Order outside the jurisdiction of the local Bishops. He wanted no hindrance to stop the work of preaching.

Dominic set this governance up with community in mind. Individualism, self-determination are anathema to this spirit, even as individual gifts for the sake of mission, are honoured and encouraged. Dominic envisaged that this task entrusted to him by God, was a task that would be shared in common by living in this spirit of dispossession and embracing the urgency of the Gospel call that demanded utter dependence upon God, vulnerability and trust that what was needed, would be provided. Trust and courage were gifts given for this task, without which democracy would fail. Martin Badenhorst, OP, wrote that, “This mutual trust is a powerful sign of the Kingdom of God, as being distinct from the power of political rule and leadership.”

One essential quality of good government is **awareness**, a mindfulness that hones our attentiveness to what the Word of God would do through us, for the needs of the world – as a community. A necessary prerequisite is opening our ears so our minds can absorb the Spirit at work through others and make adjustments. To live in reality. The Dominican men profess one vow - obedience, from the Latin, *Obediare* - to listen with the ears **and** the heart,

which demands attention, assent and the ability to shift viewpoints for the sake of the common good. It also challenges us to turn our lives upside down. This is an internal kind of spiritual itinerancy that marks our way of relating to others. It is not top down, it is inside out, as we allow Christ root-room in our lives, in the contemplation that is the root of mission. Timothy Radcliffe would say that without this contemplative component, what we practice is mere administration.

How could such qualities of governance transpose into our current-day reality?

Democracy/governance in this context demanded right relationship between power, authority and responsibility.

Power that is healing – power with, not power over.

Jesus, who spoke with the Power of the Spirit, was paradoxically the powerless one.

### **Authority**

#### **Personal / Communal / Leadership-Vision**

**The discernment and pursuit of the common good is the principal task of government, to free itself for the Gospel.**

“What touches all must be approved by all.” (Humbert of Romans)

Power not in the leader but the group

Authority is in the leader – able to recognize, affirm and tap the power of the group within the framework of the vision.

How authority is exercised depends on the depth of spirituality that undergirds it. In the Dominican tradition **everyone has authority**; everyone is called to be accountable and responsible in a democracy of constant dialogue: the Master of the Order, the sequence of General Chapters, of diffinitors, capitulars and provincials, of local Chapters made up of community members – all of these inter-related sectors provide a multifaceted link that enables each voice to be heard, without absolutising any particular section. The dynamic of this kind of governance is collegial. This makes for healthy and reciprocal governance and requires an enormous investment of trust among the members and leaders to function well.

Of course the opposite is true - if we do not dare to **ask the hard questions around mission** and our commitment to it, and choose to galvanise our strength around keeping the status quo because change is too difficult and asks too much of us, we end up minimizing the power of the Gospel by defeating the call to change, to *metanoia* and we silence the Word of Love and Hope we have been called to carry. We need to grasp our responsibility in order to live into freedom. Government is a shared responsibility, and needs all three aspects of it to function in grace and truth, in spirit and action. **If the burden is too heavily exercised in one of the three areas, we need to have the courage to address this imbalance.**

Compromise is co-existence, not graced life. It is a hard discipline to commit to governance – to continue to work together to discover the will of God. We need one another to remain honest in this task. Learning to listen, to adjust, to take in, to give, to unravel the truth, is a discipline in creativity and intelligence and generosity. We can expect others to disagree with us, but can we work at trying to understand them, and be ready to be shaped by them in ourselves? This is what truth-seeking is all about, and the exercise of personal authority within the communal domain. Power struggles, ideological differences, polarized groups –if these mark who we are, we have betrayed our profound responsibility of working for the common good and degenerated into a guarded partisanship that has nothing to do with mission, but our own aggrandizement and ego-driven needs.

Dominic took a huge innovative risk to entrust the process of simple majority rule (voting process) to guide the implementation of the Order's mission. This ran counter to how the other established monastic Orders governed. Such was his trust in his companions.

We demonstrate this same set of values in the way we are open to relationship with legitimate authority. Alas, it is not time-efficient! Dialogue, listening, adjusting, hearing, contributing, working towards consensus even as we may need to let go of our preferred option for the common good, is the dynamic of governance that Dominic envisaged for his Order. It is never about 'winning', which seems to be the tenor of politics in our era.

*Emaphetelweni* – this is the name of the Brethren's community in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, which means being at the frontier. The frontier - this the place of most potential in our times - daring to respond, being the voice and visibility in our emerging world of the radicality of Good News.

Dominic's foundation of the Order was an act of supreme institutional creativity. An introduction to dispossession.

A question in our time that needs to be worked on is the reason for our existence as Dominican Congregations, as schools, as Order. Do we truly exist for mission? Are we following in the footsteps of those who have gone before us, or are we guarding our resources and ideals so much so that our emphasis has shifted to the perpetuation of our establishments, over mission? Can we dare to be a small relevant voice preparing students for life within this legacy of Dominican spirituality, or are we wedded to number-crunching to justify our existence, which brings with it its own anxious marketing strategies to provide more or better than our neighbouring schools by way of extra curricula activities ? These are hard questions.

There is much we are up against and we have much to learn as we necessarily open ourselves to multiple cultures and build bridges of understanding between ourselves, without compromising our core values – being enriched by others' differences and wisdom.

- ❖ Western Culture – its strengths and weaknesses, its love of freedom and its temptation to consumerism privatization of life that destroys the common life
- ❖ African cultures: where debate, time and patience (*ubuntu*) are core values
- ❖ North America, respect for individuality but sometimes at what cost to the common good
- ❖ Eastern Europe, emerging from the confines of its past
- ❖ Latin America – reminding us that central to our preaching is a commitment to justice

Dominican tradition of government offers a challenge to every culture.

- Where would Dominic send us today? What would he have us do?
- Do our institutions serve the mission of the Order?
- How are they imbued with the Charism, Mission and Identity Dominic established?
- What supports would we need to enable this mission to come alive, or be reinvigorated again today?
- What ways can we strengthen the three basis of authority in our school structures, to enable all voices to be heard?

- Where would Dominic send us today?
- What is its mission today?
- What is freedom?
- How are we to deepen our participation in the common mission of the Order?
- How are we to sustain Dominican government in a society in which the very idea of truth is in crisis?

Dominic's foundation of the Order was an act of supreme institutional creativity embodied in enlightened governance structures – his was an act of supreme freedom and trust.

“He made his shop very spacious, gladsome, and fragrant in which the perfect and the not-so-perfect fare well”. **“Be up and doing for there is no cause so difficult, no stronghold so impregnable that it cannot be broken down – and built up, in love.”** (St. Catherine)

**“Go, the Lord is with you!”** (St. Dominic)

Sr Sheila Flynn OP

Oakford Dominican Sisters (South Africa)