

**Address to Siena College Board
on**

Dominican Charism, mission and governance

(Mark O'Brien OP, June 2nd, 2012)

In my judgement the Dominican form of government and decision making recognizes and tries to take account of two basic features of our human condition—creativity and limitation. There are two kinds of human limitation. One is simply that of being a creature and any sensible form of government and those governed by it will recognize this. The other is the one we inflict on ourselves through our sinfulness. Our sins of whatever kind demean and cripple us in various ways, and these exacerbate the other ‘normal’ limitation. Let me illustrate these points by turning to a familiar story with which the Bible begins—that of the first couple in the garden (Genesis 2–3). According to this story the couple are placed in a garden with God authorizing many things and prohibiting only one thing—they can eat from any tree they like except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Being in the image and likeness of God they are meant to be creative as God is creative, but in an appropriately human manner. After the flood story Noah plants a garden just like God, grows some grapes and makes wine. Given that the couple represents humanity—the modern take on this story—then the divine decrees establish the context in which we are meant to live. There are plenty of things that we can do (there are many accessible trees) but there are also boundaries that one should not cross, symbolized by the prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If we try and do so on our terms it is likely we will get into strife. In the case of Noah, he gets drunk and lies naked in his tent, exposed to the gaze of one of his sons, and trouble and strife follow.

Being made aware of limitations and boundaries makes us aware that there is something on the ‘other side’. Depending on how we ‘see’ our relationship to this ‘other side’ we can be tempted to cross the boundary. In the garden story the serpent presents a distorted perception of the ‘other side’, namely God and God’s realm, depicting it as something that God has deprived the couple of—it’s their right. Once we think—so much of life is about how we perceive things—we have a right to cross a boundary then we almost inevitably do so. But the story claims that the outcome of trying to have knowledge of good and evil on our terms is disorder and division. It’s the same couple and the same God as before the transgression but, whereas they were naked and not ashamed, now they hide from each other behind ridiculous clothes (a Jewish joke). Whereas before the transgression God was a trusted guide now they hide from God among the trees as someone to be feared. Sin marks our capitulation to a distorted perception of reality that is fueled by temptation. In the story, God has to intervene to bring some kind of order out of this disorder—via a set of new decrees about the relationship between the players in the story: God, the couple, and the serpent. Like all Bible stories it is limited but it makes some telling points about our creaturely situation and how what should be natural for us (our human limitations) can lead us to do what is unnatural—violate boundaries that should not be violated—and compound our limitations.

The rest of the Bible is basically an account of God's plan to enable us to overcome the damaging effects of sin so that we can once again have a true/undistorted notion of God and of ourselves—that we are creatures in the image and likeness of God. It's an ongoing story, implying that we are slow learners or that God is infinitely patient. Perhaps both. May I add that it is also a war story, the battle between good and evil that is fought not only 'out there' but above all 'within myself', as the Bible continually reminds its readers. It is one reason why the theme of and war stories are prominent in the Old Testament and New Testament (cf. Book of Revelation). We are perhaps shocked and dismayed by biblical war stories and their violence but the battle between good and evil is one of the most enduring and popular of all forms of storytelling. Just switch on the TV, open a book or pick up a newspaper.

In my view Dominic took this troubled situation of humanity into account when drawing up the governmental guidelines for what we now call the Dominican family. Any structure is a whole made up of parts; the parts need the larger whole to have a function and purpose while the whole can only function effectively through the appropriate participation of the parts. What we might call the creativity of the parts makes the whole thing function properly. Where structures differ is in the relationship between the parts and the whole and how this operates. Some are what we call more 'hierarchical' than others, although I would argue that none can operate without some kind of structured or tiered arrangement. This is because some are better at some things, others at other things. To put this another way, authority is natural and necessary for human beings in order to get the parts working properly. I am not my own origin or end and am always relying on another or others in some way just as they are relying on me. Authority can only be effectively exercised when there is obedience; but to obey means to make a free decision to accept and act on the word of the one or ones in authority, or not to do so. Effective authority recognizes and accepts the possibility that a subject may say no and that this can be a creative contribution, a responsible exercise of one's own authority. In short, authority can only be properly exercised between human beings where there is a real relationship; authority is mutual. I exercise authority in relation to others and they in relation to me. A totalitarian regime does not exercise authority because its subjects do not have freedom and the possibility of saying no. This leads to another common factor of any governmental system, that it is a combination of rights and responsibilities. The freedom to say no is a right but it also carries responsibilities. A negative answer must be made in truth and in love, that is, for the common good, otherwise it is irresponsible and an abuse of a right or privilege—of being in this or that relationship (a marriage, a society, a nation, etc).

One could say that the democratic form of government is especially sensitive to the relationship between the parts and the whole, between creativity and limitation, because it seeks to engage the resources and skills of as many people in the community or society as possible. They are all meant to exercise authority, that is, be creative, yet to respond to authority in the way that is appropriate to their place and limited role in the governmental structure. They are meant to respect the freedom of others, to exercise their rights but to be responsible in a way that recognizes they are parts of a larger whole and therefore to contribute to the welfare and growth of the whole. If not then there is no point being a part of it.

Another feature of the democratic form of government is that, although it is a carefully structured system with various authority figures, one does not assume a position of authority because of birth, as in monarchy, or by a sacred ritual, as in ordination, etc. Rather, one is elected to a position of authority by members of the community exercising their individual authority and right to vote as parts of the whole, and one is normally elected for a specified time. When a person's term is completed, he or she resumes their earlier role in the structure whatever that might be or perhaps some other role. This can also be seen as an awareness of creativity and limitation both at the individual and community levels. I am not implying that democracy is by definition a better system than monarchy, priesthood or the military. Advocates of these can argue that they provide more scope for the creativity and goals of the ruler, less restricted by the limitations imposed by democracy. This of course presumes the ruler is not a boundary violator. In seeking to strike a balance between creativity and limitation, the elective principle in democracy may sacrifice creativity, dynamism and purpose. It can turn into something like a game of musical chairs. Are we seeing something of this in western democracies today and is this due to the same thing that afflicts monarchy and indeed the whole of humanity—its flawed, sinful situation?

Whatever the case all forms of government profess commitment to the same basic goal, namely, to foster the overall good of the whole and its parts/members. Governments claim to be servants of a greater reality than themselves; their aim is to mediate the realization of this greater reality which will combine unity and diversity—the good of the whole as well as the varied goods and aspirations of the parts, the members. In proclaiming such a goal any government structure should nevertheless keep in mind the combination of, and relationship between, creativity and limitation. It aims to be creative but is limited because it serves a greater reality. It aims to foster the creativities of its members but these too are limited because one always remains a part and must tailor one's creativity, one's abilities and ambitions, to the good of the whole.

The Dominican form of government falls within this broad description of democracy that I have tried to sketch. But given that every version of a form or structure is somewhat unique what is unique about the Dominican of democracy? Some would argue that it is free of the party politics that drives modern western democracies. While we do not provide for party structures within our system, I can assure you that an informal party politics operates, sometimes quite intensely and with the accompanying lobbying. We are human beings after all and the exercise of power can tempt some to try and grasp it, others to try and thwart it. A second is the God factor. The Dominican form of government does not put its members or the larger society first but God. It claims to be at the service of God and of God's purpose in the world as this is revealed in the Scriptures and the tradition of the church. Its conviction is that in putting God and the knowledge of God first—its motto of truth—everything else will benefit. One recalls Jesus' injunction that it is only when we make him the centre of our lives that we discover who we are and who are neighbour is. Knowledge of Jesus is the antidote that heals the distorted perception of reality that we have as sinful human beings (cf. the garden story outlined earlier). So the Dominican form of government and decision making are designed to promote the knowledge and acknowledgement of God but we could hardly claim to be unique in this. It is the goal of all religious congregations and indeed of the church itself. At most we could say that the Dominican way of facilitating the knowledge of God is somewhat unique or different because the structure with which we operate is somewhat different.

Where I would like to suggest there is something unique about the Dominican form of government and decision making is that it seeks to make its members (and all people) aware of their limitations, their sinfulness, and to incorporate this awareness into the life and work of the Order. It does this chiefly by living a vowed life. While this is common to all forms of religious life, I would argue that the Dominican one is somewhat different because it places the emphasis on obedience, the decision to take part as fully as one is able in the government and work of the Order for the sake of its goals. Given that we are all parts of the larger whole the level of participation will vary with different members but each is called to full commitment in relation to the role or roles that they have in the Order. And although Dominicans vow obedience, it is in terms of the Rule and Constitutions of the Order, and these include the commitment to poverty and chastity. We take vows in the hope of being able to live the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. But we also take them because we recognize we are sinners. Hence, I need the vow of obedience to curb my pride and willful independence and lack of consideration of others. I need the vow of poverty to curb and control my greed, and I need the vow of chastity to curb and control my lust that fuels a distorted perception of the other (an object for my consumption). In short the vows are an admission of weakness and the need for God's grace to live a life in which I treat others with respect and as unique individual subjects in their own right, not as objects or property to be consumed or exploited for my benefit. The Dominican way of life, at its best, injects a healthy dose of realism and humility into the democratic form of government.

This would also seem to suggest that Dominic and the Dominican form of government does not exploit a person for the benefit of an institution or group, whether it be a school, the order or the church—at least not if this means treating them as an object or consumable. The order may invite or challenge someone to give himself or herself for the sake of an institution but it cannot be imposed. This would be an abuse of the vow of obedience (the free decision factor) and of the Order's democratic form of government. Whether this principle has been honoured more in the breach is for historians to analyse and decide. The purpose of the Order's governmental and decision making structures is to enable its members and others to be fully human and, within the Christian context, this is to be committed disciples of Jesus. This leads to another comment that I hope is worth noting here. In being an expression of our commitment to discipleship of Jesus the vows are also a recognition that we have to make Jesus, the source of grace, the centre of our lives if we are to have any hope of loving one another as he loves us. I will need to constantly beg for God's grace in order to live the vows—the need to do this, the need to make a decision, will never disappear. Furthermore, whenever I am involved in the government of the Order I will need to remind myself that I am unworthy of such a right or privilege and that it is only because of God's grace that I am what I am, a free, active, and therefore creative member of the Dominican family.

In case these remarks might create a rather bleak and depressing view of Christian life and religious vocation, I should add Paul's conviction that 'when I am weak then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10)' or 'in my powerlessness I am powerful'. This is the conviction that once one ceases to rely on one's own flawed power base and rely on Christ, then one is assured of the power that matters. And Paul, as his letters and the Acts of the Apostles indicates, was no shrinking violet. The traditional three vows of religious life are one way of focusing one's attention on this empowering process and of living it. It is not the only way of being a Christian but, for those

who believe they are called to it, it is the best way for them, a form of governance because it cannot be done alone and relies on the help and support of others. And this is the case in each walk of life. Whichever form of discipleship we believe we are called to and choose, the grace of Christ enables us to be decisive, courageous, committed, and open to others, not so much because we have talent or the right CV's but because we are aware of being redeemed by Christ, of being freed from our weaknesses and empowered by him. The best thing that one can do for others therefore is to seek to show them how Christ can free and empower them. In this sense one becomes an active agent in the Christian cause. Empowered by the grace of Christ we can obey Jesus' three-pronged command: namely, to love the Lord your God which is the primary relationship that the grace of Christ establishes and enables us to live. The second and third flow from it: to love your neighbour and to love yourself. We should be as concerned about our own Christian and human welfare as about our neighbour's, because it is also God's concern. God wants us to be nothing less than perfect human beings.

The Dominican form of government and decision takes account of another aspect of human limitation, and one that sin also affects. This is the limitation inherent in human decisions. No one person or group can assemble and assess all the factors involved in a decision and each person has a particular angle on things. The feminist and post-colonial critiques have drawn attention to how much decision making until recent times has been made by white, European, well-educated males. They have a limited perspective and a biased perspective, as we all do. The democratic decision making process tries to take account of this and in a way it renders all decisions provisional, open to revision. However, this exposes another limitation or weakness in the human project. If everything is provisional and open to revision, is there any progress or, how do we know that we are progressing? It seems to me there is no knock-down argument that proves we are progressing through a series of decisions; rather we live with the conviction that as long as we are being responsible and accountable and acting with good will, we will progress. The teaching arm of the church operates with this conviction and expects or hopes that the faithful will accept it. Otherwise, can we know anything definite about Christ, God, my role in the scheme of things, the destiny of humanity? Because there are no clinching arguments or proofs this is a fragile and fraught area that relies a lot on faith, hope and love. The recent sexual scandals among the clergy and the negative and even hostile reactions of a significant number of Christians show just how fragile it is.

As a concluding reflection and hopefully without being arrogant I would like to suggest that Dominic's vision as enshrined in our form of government can provide a timely countersign to some tendencies that I think are developing in our modern western capitalist and highly technological world. I don't want to give the impression of being condemnatory because there are many good things happening. But there are also some disturbing things emerging, among which I would like to name three that touch on governance and decision making. These are the tendency for bureaucracy to replace community, for suspicion to replace trust and respect, and for litigation to replace reconciliation. In relation to what I have been saying, these are limitations or restrictions that reveal our flawed sinful nature.