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THE DOMINICAN GENERAL CHAPTER



THE GENERAL CHAPTER is an assembly of the Fathers representing the provinces of the Order, gathered for the purpose of dealing with the affairs of the Order and its provinces; of passing laws and ordinations for the good of the Order; and, at the required times, of electing the Master of the Order." This is the official description of the General Chapter given in the Constitutions of the Order of Preachers, n. 513. Such an assembly was convoked in the Convent of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D. C., on September 10, 1949. To Americans this General Chapter offers an illustration of truly representative government five centuries older than American democracy. To American Dominicans, since Washington is now recorded along side Bologna, Paris, Cologne, Metz and the other chapter sites in the annals of Dominican history, this Chapter signifies that, like the Church in America, the Dominican Province of Saint Joseph has come of age. To Dominicans the world over, however, the convocation of another General Chapter has a more universal significance. They will realize that the only difference between the Chapter of 1949 and the first General Chapter in 1220 is the difference of personnel; that the mechanism of the Chapter is unaltered. And immediately the thought follows that the same is true of the Order itself. Through the centuries names and faces have changed, but the Order as an Order has endured. The association of these ideas is not accidental. In preserving unaltered the Order of Preachers, the General Chapter has been a vital force. For the Dominican these historical facts point unmistakably to their cause, the legislative genius which God bestowed upon

Our Holy Father Saint Dominic. So well did Saint Dominic lay down the principles of Dominican government that his Order stands today as it has for seven centuries as an Order to serve the Church.

SAINT DOMINIC'S PLAN

"Our Order is known to have been instituted from the beginning for the sake of preaching and the salvation of souls." These words, prominent in the Constitutions of the Order of Preachers even in the primitive edition, sum up the theme of the life and work of Saint Dominic. To preach and to save souls he was inspired to found an order; to preach and to save souls he founded the type of order which is the Order of Preachers. During the years of his preaching in Provence against the Albigenses, the horizon of Saint Dominic's vision widened until it encompassed the whole world. This work, he saw, was not limited by one lifetime, confined to one locale; it was a perennial work, coextensive with the Church universal. For such work there was needed a unified, centralized organization that was yet mobile, pliable, whose members could go forth to the ends of the earth without detracting from the unity of the organization. This was the vision of an order, the vision of the founder of the first religious order in the modern sense of the term. Not through the traditional allegiance to one abbey, but through the internal perfection of constitution was such a vision to be made a reality.

In meeting the problem of developing such a governmental system, Saint Dominic's mind was conditioned by many elements. Doubtless he turned to his fellow laborers in the Provence preaching mission, the Cistercians. With them he discussed the evolution of monastic government from the solitary abbey of pre-Cluniac days, to Cluny with its federation of daughter houses, down to Cîteaux and the wise governing plan of Stephen Harding's *Carta Caritatis*. When Saint Dominic came actually to compose the Constitutions of his Order, Cistercian ideas did influence him. This influence, however, came chiefly through the medium of the Institutions of Premontr , the most advanced form of monastic legislation prior to Saint Dominic's own. To these he and the early brethren who had joined him in Toulouse turned when, after consulting Pope Innocent III, the saint had been directed, in accord with the decree of the Fourth Council of the Lateran, to consult the rule of one of the older orders.

Coloring his outlook, also, was Saint Dominic's own nationality. Spain, it is important to remember, was the first European country

in which the townspeople were given voice in the national parliament.

The quintessence of all these elements, refined in the process of his own prudent thought, Saint Dominic concentrated upon the attainment of his great goal. The result of his insight was the monastic legislation which concretized his plan for a real Order. He achieved for the first time that which has become the accepted notion of a religious order. Characteristic of his legislation is the elective system which so permeates it that the rise of the Order of Preachers marks the beginning of the era in which the democratic system of government assumes its place with the autocratic system of the older orders. This elective system is a keynote assuring the unity essential to the Order. The Friars Preachers are truly an Order because they share in its government, united through the legislation they themselves help to formulate. Standing at the very cornerstone of Saint Dominic's plan of government because it deals with the affairs of the whole Order is the Dominican General Chapter.

NATURE OF THE GENERAL CHAPTER

In 1220 under the presidency of Saint Dominic himself the first General Chapter met at Bologna. General chapters had been held before, ever since the time of Cluny in the tenth century. In fact the idea of chapters had been deemed so wise and necessary a feature of monastic government that the Fourth Council of the Lateran had made them obligatory for all religious institutions not already obliged to them by their own rule. Saint Dominic utilized the ideas of the past in this regard in such a way, however, as to endow the Dominican General Chapter with a new effectiveness. Representative of the members of the Order because an elected body, the General Chapter promoted the unity and successful operation of the Order.

Since the legislation concerning the General Chapter has changed but little through the centuries, the present Dominican Constitutions afford an ample presentation of the ideas of the Holy Founder. Immediately to be noticed is the membership of the Chapters. Although in the beginning Chapters were held annually, in the twelve year term of the Master General there are now four General Chapters. The first is the elective Chapter from which he receives his office. This is composed of all the provincials of the Order plus an elected representative of each province, called a "diffinitor." Then the next Chapter is composed of the diffinitors alone meeting with the Master General. The Chapter of 1949 is so composed. The following one is of the provincials with the Master General. The fourth is made up again of

the diffinitors, thus completing the cycle. The effect of this arrangement of membership is that the General Chapter, the supreme legislative body in the Order, is composed always of elected representatives. The diffinitors are elected for this one purpose; the provincials exercise their function by reason of the office to which they have been elected. Even the Master General, who presides over these assemblies is elected by a General Chapter. There is thus no point in the universal government of the Order which is not in the hands of elected representatives.

This alternation in membership between diffinitors and provincials contributes to the Chapter a balance in deliberation which enhances its value as a legislative body. It is not amiss to say that the diffinitors represent more directly the viewpoint of the rank and file of the Order, while the outlook of the provincials is that proper to superiors. Now it is the right of any Chapter to introduce new ordinations which it deems worthy to be included in the Constitutions. That these actually become Constitutions, however, the approval of the two succeeding chapters is necessary. With the alternating membership of the Chapters there is assured first of all a sound means for testing all the ramifications of any possible suggestion and its bearing upon the good of the Order; and secondly thorough representation of the wishes of the subjects of the Order.

In addition to the membership of the General Chapter, its legislative character further demonstrates the telling use to which Saint Dominic put the General Chapter in his design for a truly unified and democratic Order. He created a General Chapter which had real powers of legislation. Before his time the rôle of the General Chapter was chiefly advisory and consultative. Even the Order of Premontré assigned little executive power to its general chapter, and this body cannot be said to have influenced the actual life of that Order. The Dominican General Chapter, on the other hand, wields the supreme legislative power in the Order. Realizing that no human legislator could foresee all contingencies, Saint Dominic provided the General Chapter as the agency for safe-guarding the government of the Order by adapting the Constitutions to the exigencies of changing times. Possible ambiguities in the wording of the law could be clarified by this living legislative body's power of interpretation. The triple approval required for any constitutional change as well as the alternating membership of the Chapter, finally, would prevent any hasty misuse of this legislative power.

SUCCESS OF SAINT DOMINIC'S PLAN

In the results that the General Chapter has achieved, however, lie the most resounding testimonies to the wisdom of Saint Dominic's adaptation of the chapter idea. The glory of Dominican history is no accident. Saint Dominic planned a religious order; he gave it the constitution which would enable it to function as an Order; the General Chapters have seen to it that it did function, and function well, by enforcing, emphasizing, revising and adapting the Constitutions to the needs of the apostolate. Every year in the first centuries of the Order's life the General Chapter met, alternating between Bologna and Paris until 1244 when the sites began to be the other key cities of Europe. The *Acta* of these chapters show how conscientiously and how forcibly the capitular fathers carried out their trust to advance the Order their Holy Founder had so wisely established. To these Chapters we can look for the key, in some degree at least, to much of the glory of the Dominican Order. On the other side it is significant that the periods in which the General Chapters were held less frequently coincide with the darker days of the Order. In the 18th and early 19th centuries when the General Chapter was hardly ever convoked, Cardinal Newman could write that the Dominican Order was a noble idea extinct. Since the Dominican revival in the 19th century, however, the General Chapter has been held regularly, except in the years when war made this impossible. From these recent Chapters has emerged legislation which indicates that the General Chapter has reassumed its rôle of responsibility in promoting the goal of Saint Dominic—preaching and the salvation of souls.

At this time of another General Chapter we Dominicans indeed turn to Our Holy Father Saint Dominic, admiring in him the workings of God's grace, which moved and guided him so to construct the Order of Preachers that it would ever be able to strive as a unit towards perfection in preaching and the salvation of souls. At the same time we look towards his intercession that the blessing of God will descend upon this first Dominican General Chapter in America and upon its work of maintaining the full vigor of Dominican service to the Church in these days of trial.