

**88th Master General of the Dominican Order
Dominican Father Gérard Timoner**



Dominican Father Gérard Francisco Timoner was elected July 13. (Didier Croonenberghs)

**New Master of the Dominicans: The Future
of the Church Is Not Confined to Asia or
Africa**

Dominican Father Gérard Timoner,

the first Asian leader in history of the Order of Preachers, discusses the challenges of his mission, as well as the contribution that Asia can bring to the Church, especially in dealing with the stakes and dynamics of the New Evangelization.

Dominican Father Gérard Francisco Timoner III, the first Asian master general of the Order of Preachers' 800-year history, is a native of the Philippines. As the 88th successor of St. Dominic Guzman, Father Timoner was elected to a nine-year term July 13 at the end of the general chapter that gathered Dominican friars from all around the world in Biên Hòa, Vietnam. He succeeds French Dominican Father Bruno Cadoré.

Born in Camarines Norte, in the Philippines, Father Timoner, 51, is the former leader of the Philippine province of the Dominicans and has also served as an assistant master on Asia/Pacific matters.

In addition, he was appointed in 2014 by Pope Francis as a member of the International Theological Commission in the Vatican, which advises the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In this interview with the Register, Father Timoner explains how his election reflects the Church's growth in Asia and discusses the main challenges he is going to face in his nine-year term.

You are the first Asian leader in the more-than-800-year history of the Dominicans. And the fact that this general chapter was held in Vietnam also seems to be a signal of the order's strong interest in Asia. What is Asia's specific contribution to the Church and to the New Evangelization?

Some brothers told me that their decision to elect a master from Asia is a sign that the order is leaning towards Asia. It is true. The emergence of Church leaders from Asia is a sign of the growth and maturity of the Church in this part of the world, which has a great number of people — China and India alone have more than 3 billion inhabitants! So, yes, we are citizens of our original countries, but we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God!

Thus I am not comfortable with the idea that Asia and Africa are the “future” of the Church, as though Europe and America were its past or its present. The “future” of the Church is in any place where the Gospel needs to be heard, either because it is ignored in religiously indifferent societies or because the Gospel has not yet been adequately preached.

The future of the Church is also to be found in the young people who remain faithful to Christ.

Regarding Asia's specific contribution to the universal Church, let me quote some data from my report, as *regional socius*, to the general chapter. Asia is the world's largest and most populated continent.

All the major religious and ethical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Taoism were born in Asia. The major religions of Asia, according to number of adherents, are Hinduism (25.3%), Islam (24.3%), unaffiliated (21.2%), Buddhism (11.9%), folk religions (9.0%), Christianity (7.1%) and others (1.3%).

On the basis of this demographic context, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), in the official documents it has produced over the years, has identified six propositions that characterize a uniquely Asian ecclesiology:

1) the Asian Church is called to be a communion of communities that is 2) shaped by and responds to the immense diversity and pluralism of Asia, 3) undergirded by a commitment and service to life, 4) inspired by an overarching vision of harmony, 5) oriented toward a threefold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor, and 6) seeking to build the Kingdom of God in Asia.

It seems obvious that these six propositions have a lot to say to the other continents, as well. Some members of the Church today seem to highlight differences that tend towards a divisive attitude — thus we need to remember that the Church is a communion of communities; that differences need not lead to division, but, rather, harmony. I also wish to note that, in Asia, the dialogue with cultures and religions necessarily includes the poor and the marginalized.

In your acceptance speech, you confessed to have been reluctant to accept your new mission when you found out the result of the vote. How would you explain such a feeling? What will be the most difficult challenges of such a mission, as you see it?

True, I was reluctant to accept the election at first. I told the brothers that I have a big linguistic handicap because I speak just one of the three official languages of the order: I speak English, but not Spanish or French. I thought I was not as talented as my predecessors, and I know that there were many qualified brothers present in this general chapter who speak all three, or at least two of the three, official languages.

I also felt I lacked the skills to solve the order's problems. I am neither the brightest nor the bravest brother in the chapter. Thus, when the secretary general asked me to meet the capitulars [participants in the general chapter] after the vote, I thought I would be foolish to say "Yes" and accept the

election. Yet it was not foolhardiness that made me accept. It was rather the brothers of the curia who talked sense into my confused head. From what I remember, here is what they said: “We all sincerely prayed for the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and the brothers decided in good conscience. Unless your house is burning, you have to go down, meet the capitulars and accept.” Another brother hugged me and told me, “You are not alone — we are here.” Then the brothers accompanied me in prayer at the chapel. And I knew I had to accept, in faith, their decision.

The order has recently celebrated 800 years of existence. What does it mean to be a Dominican nowadays?

I believe that the order will remain strong, as it moves toward a new centenary, if it remains true to its original mission. The mission of the order is to help build the communion of the Church, the Body of Christ, as St. Francis and St. Dominic did when the Church was in dire need for a “new” evangelization in the 13th century.

How do we help build the Church, the Body of Christ? First, it is important to realize that we are only “helpers” or “assistants.” The primary Builder is the Triune God, the model and source of communion. We know that the simplest yet deepest theology of communion is the prayer of Jesus for unity, which reveals his will and mission: “I pray that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21).

We recall that in our “Fundamental Constitution”: “The structure of the Order as a religious society arises from its mission and fraternal communion” (VI). Our mission and fraternal communion together constitute our nature: We are friars-preachers. Dominic’s vision for the order was clearly manifested when he asked Pope Honorius III to make a small but meaningful change to the bull of Jan. 21, 1217 [*Gratiarum Omnium*], that is to have the original word *praedicantes* (“persons who are preaching”) changed for the substantive *praedicatores* (“preachers”). Thus we can say that our mission is not primarily what we do, that is to preach, but who we are: preachers.

We serve the mission of helping build the Church through the charism given to Dominic and the order.

More concretely, this means that a Dominican parish is one in which the communion of brothers shepherds the communion of the parish. A Dominican academic institution is one in which the communion of brothers leads the academic community in study, instruction and research. A center that seeks to implement the social teachings of the Church, that seeks to promote the peace of Christ

through just relations, is a communion of brothers who seek to help people live according to their dignity as God's children.

To be realistic, the diversity and differences among the brothers could sometimes weaken communion. But this, too, can become part of our prophetic service to the Church and society: It is possible to have differences and remain brothers ... without breaking communion.

In his recent book, written at the end of his mandate, your French predecessor, Father Bruno Cadoré, says that laypeople (who are very numerous in your order) are a crucial resource to face the Church's current challenges. What do you think?

I agree with Frère Bruno. The lay faithful represent the majority of the members of the Body of Christ, the Church. The Order of Preachers, which is a part of the Church, has the same proportion. A majority of the members of the Dominican family are lay. Here in Vietnam, for example, there are about 400 brothers, 2,500 sisters and 117,000 lay Dominicans. ... This tells the capitulars to look more closely into the important and indispensable role of the laity in evangelization.

What will be, ideally, your road map for the next nine years?

The master of the order does not determine the "road map" during his mandate; rather, it is the general chapter (of which the master of the order is president but votes as any other member of the chapter) which determines the itinerary of the order.

If I may use the term "servant-leader," the role of the master of the order is to be a "servant" to the mission of the order, which is to help build the Church, the Body of Christ, and to "lead" the brothers in serving the same mission. The mission remains the same, but the contexts of the Church and the world change; so the general chapter determines the ways by which we could serve the mission in the here and now.

I hope and pray that in the coming years that the restructuring of the order, which we had begun years ago, will evolve towards a more intentional and deeper sense of communion. My predecessor, Frère Bruno, told us that we currently have 800 brothers in formation in the world. We must find ways to provide these brothers the same quality of education [that Dominicans have received in the past], because they are not just sons of provinces, but they are our brothers.