

GENERAL CHAPTER OF 1220

At the opening of the first general chapter on Pentecost Sunday 17th May 1220, the two major elements of Dominican government were in existence, those of the office of Master General and the Chapter.

When the Chapter began Dominic surprised the delegates by tendering his resignation: "I deserve to be removed from office, as I am unfit for the post and remiss." This was a mixture of humility and fact. After the Chapter was over, his personal guidance would no longer be essential. The Order would be able to stand alone. In any case, his health was failing. Years of exhausting labour, severe asceticism, and constant travelling had left their mark. The brothers refused to hear of his resignation. He deferred to their will but stipulated that while in session the chapter would be in charge, and not he who would then be subject to it.

The 1220 chapter added a prologue to the Constitutions, granting superiors the important power of dispensation:

"The prelate shall have power to dispense the brethren in his priory when it shall seem expedient to him, especially in those things that are seen to impede study, preaching, or the good of souls, since it is known that our Order was especially founded from the beginning for preaching and the salvation of souls. Our study ought to tend principally, ardently, and with the highest endeavour to the end that we might be useful to the souls of our neighbours."

This text crystallizes the Dominican mission and spirit. It aims to facilitate the Order's ministry and reconcile its demands with those of the religious life. Dominic did not set up an impossible standard when he coupled the consecrated life of prayer and the ministry. He himself harmonised both and a realistic view of his life does much to relieve the tension. Dominic prayed at night and during the day. He preached, worked, and travelled, but took the time to pray. Always he was "thoughtful before God."

Dominic was aware that there would be tensions between competing demands in apostolic religious life. To take care of this, he created the functional dispensation (an innovation in the religious life), given to facilitate study, the ministry, and the salvation of souls. Dispensation gives the brothers the assurance that when they study, preach, or do any work of the ministry, they are serving God and keeping the Constitutions as well as when they stand in chapel. Dispensation gives them flexibility, mobility, and the liberty of the sons of God, free to do his work. To increase this freedom, Dominic made it clear that the Order's laws of themselves do not bind under sin.

The Church gave the Order the mission to proclaim God's word, and Dominic knew from experience that this word can be proclaimed rightly only when it has been prayerfully pondered before God. Though he prescribed systematic study of the Scriptures, he understood that God's word is a heavenly reality that cannot be fathomed by a purely intellectual process; its proclamation must be the fruit of prayerful savouring that becomes love when it matures.

The chapter of 1220 completed its work by passing laws for preaching, study, poverty, visitation and organisation of the priories, and the procedure of general chapters themselves. By requiring that each priory have a professor of theology, it laid the foundation for the Order's schools. It also tightened the Order's poverty. In 1216 the men had decided "not to own possessions lest concerns for temporal things impede the preaching ministry . . . for the time being the Order would retain only revenues." The chapter ruled that "possessions and revenues are not to be accepted under any circumstances." The Order would trust in God's providence and the offerings of the faithful. Preachers would go out in pairs, travelling on foot, and "neither accepting nor carrying gold, silver, money, or gifts, except for food, and books."

After the chapter ended, Dominic plunged into a preaching campaign as head of a papal mission sent to preach in northern Italy. Being in Lombardy allowed him to visit the priories at Milan and Bergamo, and perhaps prepare for one in Piacenza. Upon returning to Bologna, he decided to found a monastery for Diana d'Andalo and her companions. Under his guidance, she had vowed in 1219 to enter the religious life. Although he entrusted the project to four friars before he left for Rome in December, the monastery could not be founded until after his death.

Dominic stayed in Rome until mid May 1221. He reported to the Pope on his preaching in Lombardy. He preached in the churches, talked with recluses, and instructed the nuns at San Sisto and the friars at Santa Sabina, the friars who had gone there in February, 1221. Dominic also sent two brothers to Siena in March, planned foundations in Metz, Spire, and Lund, and received papal letters of recommendation to the bishops of Amiens and Piacenza and the people of Sigtuna (Sweden) and obtained for the Order the privilege of using a portable altar. Now the friars could set up a temporary chapel while awaiting the completion of their church and need not hold their liturgies in the local parish church.