

What are General Chapters in the Dominican Order

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The General Chapter, which is the highest authority in the Dominican Order, is an assembly of friars representing the Provinces of the Order, coming together to discuss and define matters pertaining to the good of the entire Order. When necessary it elects the Master of the Order. From the very beginnings of the Dominican Order, one can distinguish two types of General Chapter: Chapters of Provincials and Chapters of Diffinitors. To these is added the General Chapter, comprised both of Provincials and Diffinitors.

The General Chapter is above all a legislative assembly. A proposal becomes law for the whole Order only after having had the favourable vote of the three successive Chapters. These three Chapters thus constitute, in a certain sense, a unity, since it is in this triad of Chapters that, according to the spirit of the Order, the entire legislative power resides. The mechanism of the three successive Chapters is provided for in Dominican legislation with an aim of: a) stopping a new law from taking effect by way of improvisation or as the expression of a tendency of only one assembly; b) providing time for reflection on the opportuneness of the new law; c) avoiding facile and frequent changes which might create "confusion and bring ridicule upon legislation" (Humbert of Romans).

The Chapters of Provincials and those of Diffinitors have equal power and equal rights. Each Chapter, independently, has faculties of proposing a law and for approving or not approving a law proposed by the preceding Chapter. The two types of assembly differ only in composition: one is formed of men of government (the Provincials) and the other of representatives from the grass roots (Diffinitors). The Dominican Order is the only one of all religious Orders that enjoys such a "bicameral" rule and the only one that has given full legislative power to an assembly formed entirely of representatives from the grass roots.

The institution of Chapters formed only of Diffinitors was suggested in order to avoid a situation where men busy with the government of Provinces (the Provincials) would have to undertake long journeys too often and consequently, be too long absent from their proper headquarters. The origins of this institution sprang from the communitarian and democratic spirit of the Order. The Chapter of Diffinitors allows the representatives from the grass roots to participate, in full freedom and autonomy, in the formation of laws of the Order and to bring to it that way of seeing things proper to those not in government. Superior see a norm in quite their own proper way, and people at grass roots level see things in quite their own proper way.

The democratic spirit present in all Dominican legislation regarding the General Chapters is also evident in the fact that in the Elective Chapter, for example, for each Provincial elector, there are two or three electors representing the grass roots of each Province. A democratic spirit so clear and advanced as that of the Dominican Order is unique in the history of religious legislation. Humbert of Romans, the fourth successor of St. Dominic in the government of the Order, attributed this to the fact that the Order is formed of educated people.

In addition to its primary legislative function, the General Chapter has also had, from the very beginning, a disciplinary function: it judges, punishes, deposes from office, etc. The Chapters, naturally, also treat of contemporary problems, but always with reference to the life and mission of the Order. They also are competent to give directives and orientations to the entire Order about the best way of living the charism proper to the Order and to reach the men and women of their own day in the most fruitful way. The General Chapter, which brings together the representatives responsible for the entire Order, is the best way to reflect in a community way in the apostolic ministry of the friar preacher in the social reality in which he lives.

Present day problems are discussed in the General Chapter, always in reference to its specific job: legislation. The General Chapter, for example, give orientations and suggestions and above all harmonises the norms of the entire Order so that all its members can live a religious life ever more faithful to the spirit of their Founder and can present to men and women of every era the message of the Gospel in a more appropriate and effective way.

(Text: Fr. A. D'Amato OP. This text was published on a special number of IDI, April-May 1983, and of May 1992, on the occasion of the Elective General Chapter of Rome and of Mexico)