

Autonomous but not independent

[September 25, 2019](#) [admin](#)

Lay Dominicans make no vow of obedience, nor do they promise obedience to anyone but they are not Independent.

Fraternities OP is under the responsibility of the General Promoter of the Laity and he chose Edoardo Mattei as social media manager. The articles signed “Admin” must be interpreted as the Fraternities OP’s official view. In this case, the text was written by Edoardo Mattei and the General Promoter verified it and authorised to publish it.

The official adoption by the friars at the Chapter of Madonna dell’Arco (1974) of the denomination Fraternities of St Dominic in place of Third Order (#234) led to the abandonment of the traditional terms in favour of those we generally use today, such as President instead of Prior. Like all changes, this was neither simple nor painless: even the term “Dominican Family” seemed so obscure that official clarification was requested of the Chapter.

It is likely that today we have adequate knowledge of the terminology used but further, less immediate aspects remain to be clarified. The thorniest of these is the relationship between the jurisdiction of the friars and the organisational autonomy of the laity, often reduced to the aphorism “autonomous but not independent”. If we are to understand

how and why the laity is autonomous in handling its own affairs but not independent of the life of the Order, certain fundamental principles must be defined, principles that can be found in the rite of professions – religious on the one hand and lay on the other.

Rite of Profession

The difference of commitment and way of life in the branches of the Dominican Order emerges clearly from the formula of profession pronounced by the candidate. A summary of the two allows us to understand:

Religious Profession	Lay Profession
<i>Prior seated, holding the Book of the Constitutions</i>	<i>President seated</i>
<i>Candidate kneeling with his hands in the Prior's hands</i>	<i>Candidate kneeling in front of the President</i>
I promise obedience [...] to you who represent the Master of the Order [...] I will be obedient to you and to your successors	Before you the President and you Assistant and representative of the Master of the Order the religious promoter; representing the Master of the Order, I to live [in some Provinces “I promise to want to live] according to the Rule of the Laity. Of St Dor

Thomas Aquinas considered the vow of obedience the loftiest of the three: first, because what is done in obedience is above what is done of one's own free will; secondly, because the other two vows are observed precisely as obedience; thirdly, because obedience aims at fulfilment of the purpose of religious life, and the closer we are to that end, the closer we are to the good (*Sum Theol* q.186 a.8 co.

Lay Dominicans make no vow of obedience, nor do they promise obedience to anyone. If obedience is one of the ends of religious life, it is not compatible with the lay condition. During a general audience, St John Paul II said: “When lay people are committed to the way of the evangelical counsels, doubtless to a certain extent they belong to a state of consecrated life that is very different from the more common state of other believers who choose marriage and secular professions” (5 October 1994). The profession of the

evangelical counsels *up to a point* brings the individual out of the lay condition, modifying her/his condition.

The Fatima Congress insisted that “there should be no confusion in the clothing worn by Lay Dominicans and the Dominican habit” and consistency demands that there should be no confusion between Religious Rite and Lay Rite. The obedience that friars owe to their superiors is implicit in the gesture (Prior seated with the Constitutions in his hands, which receive the candidate’s hands) and in the words (“I promise obedience”), totally absent from the Lay Rite (the President in her/his place and the candidate promising to live in accordance with the Rule).

That said, we may go on to analyse the difference between jurisdiction of the Order and organisational autonomy of the laity.

Autonomy and Independence

The Rule of the Laity envisages the Provincial Council and, where it is considered opportune, the National Council. These bodies are given the role of coordination, but not a juridical role, for the laity: for example, approval of the lay elections is not envisaged. This does not deprive the Provincial Council of power; its role is provided for and described in the Rule, but it is not given the ability to intervene in the lives of the fraternities. Jurisdiction continues to be exercised by the Prior Provincial, to whom application must be made for any action that has the force of law.

So we may ask whether the election of a President (whether Provincial or of a Fraternity) requires approval or confirmation? And what about the councillors?

Given what we have already said, there seems to be no need for approval. Since there is no vow of obedience and the laity is autonomous, the Provincial President does not need approval and, similarly, Fraternity Presidents need not ask for the approval of the Provincial President. This takes nothing away from the authority of the Prior Provincial

who, as representative of the Master, can always intervene juridically for or against any situation or member of the laity. The same is true of members of the Council. If this were a matter of juridical obligation, the whole Council would have to be approved, as the President is *primus inter pares*.

The Constitutions speak of the vow of obedience, defining it as a bond of unity for the consecrated, and article 18 §III suggests that obedience to the Rule may be a source of inspiration for the laity too: “Our brethren (we may read “our laypersons”) are required to obey their superiors in everything regarding the Rule and our laws. But we are not required, indeed we cannot obey in anything that is against the commandments of God, the regulations of the Church and the laws of the Order, or in those matters in which the superior is not authorised to grant dispensations. In the event of doubt, however, we are required to obey” (LCO 18, §III).

The Rule does not expect obedience to a superior, nor does comparison with the Constitutions suggest that such obedience is necessary. Nonetheless there is a right/duty to inform superiors in certain cases: the Prior Provincial must be informed of the election of the Provincial President, who in turn must be informed of the elections of Presidents of the Fraternities. The much-criticised “final reports” at the end of a mandate are given due importance, as is the frequency of contact required between the President and the Prior Provincial (Art.37, §III,1) and between Presidents (Art. 30, §III, 6).

Religious Assistant and Fraternity

The already quoted LCO18, §III offers guidance regarding the often unclear relations between Assistant and Fraternity.

In fact, the limits of the Assistant’s authority are made quite clear with reference to the Rule, as contained also in art. 33, §III, 1. The verbs used are of great

significance: *collaborate in formation, offer his contribution* etc. These are typical of a discreet, watchful, never leading role, careful that every decision and activity of the laypersons be inspired by Dominican principles.

For example, fraternity meetings are often organised as lectures with discussion, often given by friars. The autonomy of the laity should not be reduced to fixing a calendar of meetings or choosing speakers, but should make the lay members grow, not least in their ability to study and to make a presentation. Lay Dominicans should overcome their fear of autonomy and rediscover a certain *organisational emancipation*, as suggested in some Directories:

- All fraternity meetings are held under the chairmanship of the **President of the Fraternity.**

Celebrations and spiritual meetings are organised by the **religious Assistant.**

Permanent formation meetings are organised by the **Formation Officer.**

- Communion and fraternal dialogue should always be the basis of the meetings. Fundamental points are:

1. prayer (Liturgy of the Hours, Rosary);
2. close study of biblical texts, documents of the Magisterium and of the Order, **previously given out to the members of the Fraternity for a presentation of the topic;**
3. community reflection, during which each member may express her/his thoughts and experience, in order to arrive at a **judgment on the current situation.**

Rather than leading the fraternity or programming its activities, or, even worse, being resentful if s/he is not given these roles, the Assistant should be encouraging the laity to be more firmly committed to the Rule. That is the Assistant's job. Many lay Dominicans who feel unable to lead or programme because they are unprepared forget that they are in the Fraternity precisely in order to learn, so that they will be prepared a service to their brothers and sisters.

admin says:

September 25, 2019 at 10:32 pm

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Fraternally

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