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AND

THE CONVENTUAL CHAPTER

IN THE

DOMINICAN SPIRIT

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CHAPTERS AND CONVENTUAL CHAPTER
IN THE DOMINICAN SPIRIT
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PART I - GENERAL PRINCIPLES

INTRODUCTION

The primary intention and the fundamental principles which ought to arise frequently within every person, and especially in every Christian, is the desire to do God's will. There can be no deeper aspiration than this, no aspiration that belongs more to daily life, no matter how it is realized in practice. It is important that this aspiration, which begins as something vague and almost unconscious, should become a free, lucid, conscious and voluntary act. The human act is moral, to the extent that it is conscious, and voluntary, that is, free.

Animals also, follow God's will in their own way through their instincts, but they do this unconsciously.

All this is easy to accept and does not cause excessive theoretical difficulties, at least to believers. The problem becomes more arduous and complex, sometimes even dramatic, when one wants to specifically determine what God's will is, here and now. For some persons, this designation is not particularly difficult or problematical. There is a kind of logical connection between principle and practice. But for others, to make concrete decisions as to what God want, can be a source of anguish and uneasiness. Moreover, in regard to this, there are two ways we can always use to discern God's will.

On the **objective level** we have a precise criterion which is generic. Numerous are the sources which can help us to know God's will: the Word of God in Sacred Scripture, the teachings of the Church, theological and spiritual doctrine; for religious, their Constitutions and sound traditions, and there are many other indications.

On the **subjective and personal level,** when I search for what God really wants of me here and now, the difficulties and uncertainties are infinitely multiplied. It is not easy to give well-defined and useful norms for the great variety of situations in which people find themselves.

The problem becomes even more complicated when the search for God's will is not only personal and a matter of conscience, but concerns a group of persons such as religious living in community. If it is already difficult to identify the will of God on the personal level, how much more problematic will it be to identify the particular choices that are to be made and put into practice, when these choices are to be presented as "God's will" for other persons.

It appears clear that we are touching here on an extremely delicate theological and spiritual problem. To present specific choices and indications as expressly willed by God is an awesome thing and it ought to make anyone tremble who wants to impose them on others in an obligatory fashion. What are the guarantees, what are the proofs or demonstrations of authenticity that support their presentation?

Jesus experienced this difficulty, too, and for that reason He turned to those who heard him, especially the Pharisees, and stated: "If you do not wish to believe in me, believe at least in my works!" (John 10:38). Later, he would perform miracles which spoke by themselves! It is not easy for us to furnish guarantees.

I want to emphasize a serious problem of great theological and critical importance: in the religious life, how is "authority" justified, and the consequent obligation or connecting link to "obedience" which responds to it?

From the human and sociological point of view, it is very difficult to justify the value of authority, to identify the true basis on which it rests and the obligation it implicates. There are many theories about this.

But this is not the dimension to which I wish to call attention. Our interest is oriented towards finding the value of "Authority-Obedience" within the realm of religious life.

The attempts to justify the duty of obedience have not been peaceful or harmonious even in the tradition of religious life. It follows that both the starting principles or basis and the practical applications have been varied and have had different levels of success. It will be good to keep our critical attention fixed on this point, in order to understand well (perhaps by way of contrast) our own specific spirituality and genuine tradition.

I) SOME THEORIES OF THE BASIS FOR AUTHORITY-OBEDIENCE

As we have seen, from the religious point of view the foundation of authority lies in the will of God. All authority becomes binding to the extent that it effectively communicates, or attempts to communicate, the will of God and offers a certain guarantee of the authenticity of the connection.

I shall study here the two principal methodologies which are the best known and most widely diffused in the West and in the tradition of the religious life.

     1. The vertical-pyramidal type.

This was the methodology most widespread and practiced in the West, at least until Vatican II. It begins with an axiomatic supposition that God communicates his will along a hierarchical path.

        Here are the two principal paths:

        God – Christ – Pope – Bishops – Priests and Faithful

        God – Christ – Pope – Major Superiors – Local Superiors – Religious.

Within religious practice there could be other articulations, but this is the common denominator.

The one who obeys the superior certainly does the will of God. "The one who hears you hears me" and the one who sent me, "and the one who rejects you rejects me" (Lk.10:16).

The superior, therefore, is authorized by his very position as an intermediary, to express, interpret and communicate the will of God. Obviously, to do this he must be able to count also on particular graces, called "grace of office", to be supported in the correct discharge of his office.

For the subject there is certainly the assurance which gives peace of mind and sufficient guarantee. If the superior makes an objective error, the subject does not err if he obeys. The case might be of an objective error on the part of the superior, but even in this case, the subject will not err by obeying.

Sometimes a claim is easily made of the value of faith in support of obedience. To obey is to "believe" that God speaks in the superiors and by means of them. Nevertheless, one must pay great attention to this phrase, which is easily open to dubious meanings.

Our act of faith is directly theological: I believe God, I believe in God, I believe God who speaks and I believe in the word of God. The goal of our faith is God himself.

On the other hand, it is impossible to speak of an act of faith in the superior or in what he says, as if it were the word of God. We are on two totally different levels here.

I can have confidence in, or a relationship of trust, with the superior, but not faith; this act is reserved to God alone. An act of faith in God is difficult and painful; and if we add to this, faith in the superiors, too, we are really attempting too much. The correct attitude could be: "I am aware that the superior makes errors, but I have faith that God brings good even out of the mistake."

Some characteristics

Benedictine praxis: This is the concept that the superior represents and makes concrete God's fatherhood and his will. It seems logical to call such a superior, Abba-Father.

A father is, by definition, a father forever. The consequence is "once an abbot, always an abbot". The abbot is, as it were, the figure and the embodiment of God's fatherhood in the monastery. He is God's representative. Thus, it will be logical to receive what he lays down as something that comes from God.

Ignatian praxis: This underlines the radicalism and the absoluteness of obedience as an expression of the will of God. As such obedience is something obligatory, even with the full submission of one's own judgment in blind obedience.

There is no way to comprehend and justify movements of reaction, opposition, intolerance and resistance of any kind, because this would mean resisting God. Obedience becomes so radical that it is "like the obedience of a corpse".

These forms of obedience have largely left their mark on the practice of western religious life, both in the monasteries and in the institutes of the active life regardless of their spirituality.

It seems that this was the only and exclusive form of obedience admitted as valid in the Church, with no possibility of any alternatives.

2. The democratic type

This is another method of discerning the will of God. It is an authentic modality to provide a basis for obedience less widespread and practiced until the Second Vatican Council. The starting point and the goal of this method are not different from those of the Benedictine or Ignatian methods: namely, to discern and communicate the will of God to the religious in the community.

The procedure is more complex but, theologically correct. It begins from the presupposition that it is difficult to specify the will of God here and now, particularly for a community. One cannot lightly presume to know it and interpret it, especially for other people. It is not easy to conceive of a direct and charismatic communication which would guarantee immediate knowledge of God's will.

In general, as Sacred Scripture makes plain, God manifests his will in a mysterious way: he uses persons as his intermediaries; he speaks through happenings, historical events and the various circumstances of life. But mystery dominates everything, unless God raises a prophet who is authorized to transmit its interpretation. None of these factors ever makes totally clear what God wants or is doing in relation to us; they all leave a broad margin of uncertainty and hence of freedom for human initiative.

Recourse is made to an intermediary principle of great value: the search for the **"COMMON GOOD"** and the attaining of it

To the question, "What does God 'truly' want for this institution or community?",the answer would be: "God wants the common good to be realized". In this context, it is not possible for me to make a profound examination of the meaning of the "Common Good". But I cannot omit a brief reference to some significant passages in St. Thomas to remain within the sphere of our own tradition.

St. Thomas, in his philosophical investigation, sees the personal good and the good of the community connected and interrelated to such an extent that they cannot be separated.

> The common good is the end of each individual member of a community, just as the good of the whole is the end of each part. (II-II, 58, 9, 3).

But in another text he examines the problem more systematically, noting the very close connection between the personal good and the common good. He puts forward a very suggestive and enlightening example: the case of a judge who condemns a thief to death, appealing thus to the necessity of the common good of society. On the contrary, the wife of the condemned man wants to save him and avoid his death. The judge is guided by the common good; the wife seeks to safeguard her own good and that of her family. Under this aspect, we have here an obvious conflict.

But this is the conclusion that St. Thomas gives:

> The will of one who desires a particular good can be correct only if it subordinates this good to the common good. And this is also because the natural appetite of each part is ordered to the common good of the whole… Thus, in order for one to be able to will a particular good with the correct will, it is necessary that this particular good be the

> material object of the will and that the common good be the formal object of the will (I-II, 19, 10, c).

He makes his thought even clearer in another text:

> It follows that one who seeks the common good of a multitude (community) seeks his own good, for two reasons. First because his own good cannot exist without the common good of the family, of the city or of the kingdom (or of the community). This is why Valerius Maximus said that the ancient Romans preferred to be poor in a rich empire than rich in a poor empire. Second, since the human person is part of a family and of a political community, his evaluation of his own good must depend on his prudent consideration of the common good. For the good disposition of parts depends on their relation to the whole; as St Augustine says, 'a part which is not in harmony with its whole is deformed' (II-II, 47, 10, 2).

The common good is established by a set of values, ideals and spiritual riches which have their foundation in God and in the charism proposed by the founder, which can strongly influence, justify and motivate the actions and the decisions of the religious.

The common good is "of all" but, also "for all". *"Bonum commune divinius."*

Thus, if the common good, understood in its broadest and richest sense, is what more directly nourishes, perfects and correctly directs the individual, there is no doubt that God wants it, asks for it and commands it as a true expression of his will.

Some characteristics of the Common Good

A "good" which is proposed for the growth and improvement of the community, has the capacity, by its very nature, to unite the intelligence and the will of the individual persons. A common good that does not unite and does not bind is not be a true good. Thus, we recognize intuitively and directly that the common good takes precedence and must prevail over the personal good, over one's own benefit and personal opinion. This is so clear that it would be difficult to explain it to one who did not intuitively understand it. Moreover, the common good is not something pre-established and theoretical. It is rather, the unanimous receptivity, the welcomed acceptance of shared values: it is the personal contribution to the communal and general good. The common good is built up or destroyed every day! It is never complete and finished, but it is in a continuous dialectic evolution.

It requires the responsibility and the active collaboration of all. In the face of the common good there do not exist superiors and subjects, but "persons" equally bound by the same good.

Responsibility for the common good is proportionate to the intellectual and moral capacities of the individual person. The one who has more, must give more. The better and more perfect gifts of nature and of grace are entrusted so that they may be shared.

It is the authentic community of goods and sharing that create the common good and make it prosper; and this good in turn nourishes, perfects and makes the individual a better person.

This is certainly the will of God!

As one can readily see, the thought of St. Thomas is very demanding and requires a severe asceticism so that one's own personal good may not be confused with the common Good. That is why he adds: "Human souls, for the most part, differ in the knowledge of the truth and the right desire for the true Good" (De Subst. Separ. c.3,75-77)

It is necessary to keep in mind this sad reality.

Is there a way to prevent this difficulty so that one does not fall into subjectivity and anarchy? Yes, this is done by means of the correct use of the objectivity of the LAW that has the specific end (aim) of determine concretely what the common Good is. By laws, we understand particularly the Constitutions and the various ordinances of the Chapters: General, Provincial and community chapters. I shall speak about this at greater length, below.

II – ST DOMINIC AND HIS ELECTION

1. Dominic chose the democratic type

This is a marvel in itself since the entire mentality and the monastic praxis of his time lay on the vertical-pyramidal type. He went against the current, defying the conventional mentality and exposing himself to the risk of being misunderstood.

He was supported by the basic concept of his Order: the evangelical and apostolic inspiration found in the Acts of the Apostles.

St. Dominic found a great ideal and practical support in the social and political atmosphere of his times: the formation of the Communes, a certain desire for democracy, fraternity, equality, participation in the government of the Cities. He knew how to take hold of the profound inspiration of the people of his time and to bring it into religious life in the organization of his Order.

What we know best about Dominic

We do not have any of his own writings, only a few letters. But, we have in particular, the primitive Constitutions, in which the founder comprehensibly transmitted his spirit and basic decisions in regard to his Order.

There is no doubt that the manner and structure of government in the Order originated with St. Dominic. He spent the last years of his life perfecting the statutes of the Order, instilling his own will and choices in them.

I prefer to let Fr. Humbert Vicaire's historical competence have the word here:

> A new factor came into play in 1220 which finally gave structure and vigor to the Order of Preachers and oriented its evolution from then on. We are talking about the community of the brethren operating through the mediation of the General Chapter. St Dominic took pains to gather the representatives of the twelve convents on the Feast of Pentecost, in 1220, at Bologna where the most dynamic community was and the centre of legal scholarship.

He specifically gave this Chapter the highest legislative power over the Order and control and supreme authority during its sessions, even over his own person. This decision has profoundly shaped the mentality and the institutions of the Order of Preachers.

Was this St. Dominic's own initiative? It certainly was. He wanted to have this Chapter and clearly affirm its power. This was not something so evident in past history. This gesture of humility and of trust in his brothers provoked in them such an emotion that its echo has reached down to our own day. Dominic understood and appreciated the sense of community, which at that time was expressed in a principle from Roman law: *Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*: "That the which affects everyone must be discussed and approved by all".

In fact, in 1215, Pope Innocent had already encouraged the Founder, who had come to ask him for confirmation of his Order, to 'return to his brethren, to deliberate harmoniously with them and then decide' in unanimous consensus. It was a concern of Pope Innocent that all the members of religious institutes should be involved as much as possible, in the legislation and in control of the regular life in their communities " (H.M.Vicaire, *Dominique et ses Precheurs. "Chapitre et hierarchie dans la foundation"*, 210-211). Dominic and His Preachers "Chapter & Hierarchy in the Foundation

St. Dominic clearly shows a double attitude in relation to his brethren: when it is a question of the charism of the Founder and the relationship as the superior of his brothers, his attitude is firm and decisive. He is the one who knows what is to be done and what goals must be pursued. But when it is a question of the same brothers gathered at the General Chapter, his attitude is very different: he does not wish to command, order and issue directives. Rather, he submits to the judgment and the deliberations of the Chapter, as a reality superior to himself. Let us take the case of mendicant poverty so dear to Dominic's heart and an essential value in his concept of poverty. He invites, prays, implores the Capitular brothers to accept his desire. There are difficulties and resistance, but in the end mendicant poverty is approved for all the convents, as Dominic, himself wanted.

He was less fortunate in another case, when he wanted to leave all the economic responsibilities in the hands of the Cooperators Brothers so that the priests would be freer for the preaching. This time he did not succeed in obtaining his wish from the Chapter. (cf. Vicaire, *op.cit.*, 211).

2. In the following centuries

In the centuries which followed St. Dominic, the other thesis about the origin of authority, the Vertical type, became more and more prevalent in the Western world and eventually, it became the only thesis officially recognized. Great pressure in that direction was brought to bear on our Order, in such a way that St. Dominic's intuition and originality almost disappeared.

In the case of the nuns, the change in the concept of authority-obedience took place in an even more radical form, for various reasons. The majority of the monasteries were dependent on the

Bishops, so that their relationships were mostly (though not exclusively) with the secular clergy or with religious of other Orders who recognized only the vertical form of government and obedience. The influence of the Order of Preachers became ever more tenuous here, losing all impact and influence.

The same phenomenon occurred even more so within the Congregations of Sisters of the active life, almost all of which came into being in the 19th century when the vertical form of the praxis of obedience was all that was known.

Thus, the original concept of St. Dominic remained the exclusive patrimony of the men's branch of his Order, although considerably weakened.

3. The point of return: Post Vatican Council II

The Decree *Pefectae Caritatis* of the Second Vatican Council proposed a valid principle which greatly stimulated historical and spiritual research to identify the specific charism of each institute. No. 2 of this decree puts the principle forward as follows:

> It is for the good of the Church that the institutes have their own proper character and function. Therefore the spirit and the aims of each founder should be faithfully accepted and retained, as indeed should each institute's sound traditions, for all of these constitute the patrimony of an institute.

This text promoted the study and search for the charism and distinguishing marks of each institute, not in a spirit of uniformity but with the individual specification of their particular and original character.

Besides this, the spirit which pervaded the various Conciliar texts followed the democratic type much more than a rigid vertical government. Thus, the Council set in motion a spirit of fraternity, of consultation and collaboration, of creating strong democratic tendencies in Institutes that had never known these methods before.

Some exaggerations and conflicts resulted from the effort to bring about democratic government, serious imbalances resulted and the superiors' power itself entered a period of crisis. Attempts were even made to have communities without any superior! It is easy to move from one side of the pendulum to the other. In some cases the Sacred Congregation for Religious had to intervene to re-affirm the value of authority-obedience.

All this is understandable if we bear two things in mind: the lack of preparation and the improvisation on the one hand, and the lack of a steady balance, tried and tested by experience, as had been the case in our Order for many centuries.

Obviously, our Order also welcomed the Council's invitation, and there followed a period of intense reflection and the search for our true charism. In particular, the Chapter at River Forest, (1968) undertook the arduous task of preparing the text for the Fundamental Constitution of the Order and of the radical renewal of the Constitutions. The return to the inspiration of the primitive Constitutions was evident, especially in the choice of fundamental themes and in the

exercise of government-obedience. The subsequent chapters up until that of Mexico (1992) brought out more clearly and deeply the true charism of St. Dominic.

Such a constant work of renewal and clarification of the Dominican identity had a broad impact on the whole Dominican family. Obviously, the congregations of active life benefited from this, too. This renewal is still in progress and is being implemented in various ways in each of those Congregations.

 As for the monasteries, great efforts have been made towards a legislation more in harmony with the values and the traditions of the Order. The renewal has been very radical, as one can readily see in the last edition of your Constitutions in 1986, after the experimental text of 1971.

I am very happy to see in the nuns of the whole world the desire to know ever better the original thought of St. Dominic and the identity which he transmitted to the Order, so that these can be lived more fully in legislation and in praxis.

But, there is also a constant desire on the part of the Order through the General Chapters and the intervention of the Master and the Curia, to interpret and put into practice today the thought and work of St Dominic and to offer these to the entire Dominican Family. For there is no doubt that the authentic interpretation of the charism and of the identity of the Order falls to the Chapters and to the one who has the greatest governing authority, that is, the Master of the Order.

PART II – THE CHAPTERS

I) – THE CHAPTERS IN GENERAL

I would like to explore more deeply our understanding of the various characteristics of the Chapter: its value, goal, authority, functions and the ways in which it operates. To assess its importance and what it implies, one must fully accept the democratic type concept of authority–obedience mentioned above.

The supreme authority in the various forms of aggregation which for the Order as a whole, the provinces and the individual monasteries, is not attributed directly to the Master of the Order, to the Provincials, or to the prioresses, but belongs to the Chapters: general, provincial or conventual.

        The Chapters have the following principal functions.

1. Search for the common good

The Chapters, whether a meeting of the whole community or of chosen representatives of a province or of the whole Order, are the highest expression of the common good. By their number, qualifications and the mandate given them, their only objective is the identification of the common good and the indications of the ways to achieve this, at least in general. They must themselves, realize the common good, so that they can indicate it effectively to others.

In the absurd case where a General, Provincial or Conventual chapter does not promote the common good, it would be a contradiction, have no value and lose their binding force.

The participants in Chapters do not have any personal authority other than the mandate received from the base. They are the delegates of the other brothers who have placed their trust in them. The only and main intention when one places trust in delegates in this way is that they should identify the common good of the whole organism and consequently of each of its members. Thus, if a delegate were to use the mandate he had received to promote his own personal interest, or that of a group, he would betray the trust of his brothers.

The same thing can be seen by analogy, on the level of the monasteries. When a nun is admitted to profession and becomes effectively a member of the community, she has been accepted in the hope that she will make an effective contribution to the common good; otherwise she would not have been received.

2. Interpretation of the will of God

When the common good is realized, we have the highest guarantee of identifying the will of God for the good of the community. The delegates, like the members of the community (the Chapter), must be fully conscious that they are exercising a lofty theological value: to interpret the will of God for the community, or entity, they represent. Thus, their work is an entrusted mission extremely delicate which requires faith, consciousness of one's own limitations, humility, purity of heart and conscious of the mandate that has been entrusted to them. To betray or thwart the common good, and hence, the will of God is no small thing or a light sin.

3. Legislative authority

One must keep in mind the provisions of the law, the philosophy of law and common practice.

In the Civil law, the supreme authority of the State is that of Parliament and the Senate, that is, the legislative Assemblies; there is no higher authority than these, unless there exists a recognized international organization.

The principal function of Parliament is to make laws or, in simpler terms, to put forward decisions or laws that all citizens are obliged to obey, both morally and in terms of the penal code.

The government, for its part, applies the laws, actualizes the common good through the means or guidelines proposed by the legislative Assemblies. But the government depends on Parliament or is at least, confirmed by it. Thus, the supreme authority of the State is the legislative authority and is absolute within its own territory.

If we apply these concepts to the General, Provincial and Community chapters, we discover a corresponding analogy. Here we find the highest authority, superior to all others, with legislative power which binds the consciences of all the members, including the superiors.

In the same way, in Dominican spirituality, it is necessary to recognize the fundamental value and function of the Chapter in any particular setting. Keeping to our present theme, the

Conventual Chapter has the supreme authority on the local level, even if it is subordinate to higher authorities such as the Master of the Order or the Holy See.

4. Authority limited in time

Conventual Chapters are convoked periodically, either at fixed dates previously agreed upon, or on particular occasions when the prioress convenes them.

However, even if the frequency and duration of the Chapters are limited, the legislation that comes from them remains valid, unless something different is legislated subsequently or their validity is suspended by a higher authority. Even if the Chapter meetings are dissolved as physical realities, and their competence ends, everything that has been decided at them, and the guidelines they have established, remain and are binding as they were recorded in the minutes of the Chapter and are part of the official records of the Monastery. All this is valid by analogy for the conventual chapter: when the chapter meeting ends, its function is finished but the decisions agreed upon and put into words remain valid.

We can see then, that the Chapters have a wide and varied legislation, ranging from the entire Order to the individual provinces.

The same legislative function comes into practice analogously for the conventual chapter as the supreme authority in the monastery. Thus, it is my view that the convocation and the holding of the conventual chapters should never be made something banal or unimportant: these are solemn actions for the monastery, which deserve all the respect and appreciation that belong to them, since they are a true exercise of the community's self-government.

II) – THE CONVENTUAL OR MONASTERY CHAPTER (LCM 201)

1. Principal functions and tasks of the chapter

After discussing the Chapter in its most general elements, which are applicable to every form of Chapter (general, provincial, etc.), I now wish to concentrate exclusively on the **Conventual or Monastery Chapter,** which will be studied with constant reference to the Constitutions of the Nuns (LCM). I wish to make it clear in the following pages that Dominican government, and hence the government of each monastery also, is based on some nuances which must be perceived and evaluated correctly, as well as on a delicate equilibrium following from the correct application of the three fundamental elements: prioress, chapter and council.

Each of the three elements must carry out its own role with delicacy, wisely finding the right relationship to the other two. It would be useless and immature to seek to impose preconceived boundaries or find divisions among each other. Dominican government, which is based on democratic principles, requires considerable gifts of maturity, intelligence and prudence, both personally and in the act of government. A tried and tested experience is also very useful.

A – Legislative function: the Directory

The value of the legislative function of the Conventual Chapter is exercised particularly in the writing of the DIRECTORY.

Although the real significance of the Directory is not well stated in the Book of the Constitutions, we can surely affirm that it is a form of internal law in the monastery, a legislation which each community must draw up, where the preferences, the options or the original guidelines of the monastery are determined and become the "particular norm".

The Constitutions (LCM 180, 6 ff), provide for the Directory and the areas and matters which must be included in it. The conventual Chapter is the legislature of each monastery.

There are above all four areas in which the Chapter is called to legislate by means of the Directory:

a – Regular Life

➢ This includes the praxis of enclosure. Every monastery must choose its own style, its way of presenting itself, its relationship with the outside world: parlor, correspondence, telephone, egresses, etc.).

➢ Ceremonies or particular traditions which the monastery desires to retain or introduce.

➢ Fasting, abstinence, prayer and its distribution throughout the day.

➢ Determining the frequency of the Chapters, especially Regular Chapter.

b – Formation:

This is a matter on which the community can have a great deal to say. It consists in determining:

➢ the periods and forms of the various stages of formation;

➢ relations between the young sisters in formation and the community;

➢ watching over the complete program of formation, including the permanent formation in regard to the whole community.

c – Government:

➢ increase the power of certain roles of the Chapter;

➢ Can determine in particular cases such as extern sisters and other matters

d- Economic Administration:

- determine the rules for the administration, criteria, methodologies and strategies that the community wishes to follow. For example, what criteria or priorities does the monastery wish to emphasize especially?

- the economic administration of the monastery, budgets for upkeep of the buildings, on-going formation, library, formation, charitable donations, aid to more needy monasteries, and other needs.

Obviously, the decisions of the Chapter set down in the Directory, become "particular law". With respect to their validity and obligatory character, one should keep in mind LCM 186, II: "Our laws (cf. LCM180, 3-6) and the ordinations of the prioress do not oblige the nuns under sin but only to the penalty, except where a formal precept or contempt is involved."

In the same way, as the prioress can dispense from the Constitutions (LCM189), she can also dispense from the decisions of the Chapter according to the criteria given in the same number. (LCM 189, II-IV.)

B – Political Orientation

Examining and deciding the most important matters (LCM 201)

I believe this is one of the most difficult points to evaluate (consider), and precisely for this reason, we must find some criteria for discernment.

Distinction between political and practical lines

a – *Political Line*: this refers to a fundamental orientation, a chosen program, located and justified, as well as the more general options within the particular choices made.

From these fundamental orientations the "community project" is born, around which the community is built up, commits itself to the search for the common good, and through which the community "preaches".

b – *Practical Line or Determination*. Since the political line is a fundamental orientation, very general and rich in possibilities, the practical specifications or modes of realizing it can be infinite. A principle or orientation can be understood in a radical manner or in a more moderate way: one may choose to use some methods rather than others to realize it. In short, the principles must be placed on the level of everyday life.

Thus the practical line consists in seeking and applying the means one wishes to make use of to attain the goal. The practical choices can be innumerable.

Obviously, the political line is the responsibility of the Chapter, while the practical realization will be the task, each specific time, of the prioress or of the Council, or of one of the monastery officials (always with the prioress). These "important matters" can be numerous, and

discernment will probably become more a consequence of praxis and of experience than of theoretical indications.

The directory can indicate the more **important matters** on which the community is called to express its own orientation by means of a "programmatic" community meeting which usually does not exist.

These "most important matters can be many and probably the discernment is more the consequence of practice and experience than theoretical indications.

I think that the best thing to do is to give some examples, because the evaluation of what are "the more important matters" can vary from one monastery to another.

-Determining the community's own <u>life-style</u>.   By life-style I am referring, in particular, to the discernment of the values which form the basis of life, wisely including the means to obtain it. What is the picture that the monastery intends to give of itself, and consequently to show externally?

-In the monastery's own life-style what is the place of contemplation? How much is it valued and sought? What are the means available to the community for realizing this dimension? And how much space is given to the sisters so that they can live it?

-What specific meaning and role has study in the life and character of the monastery? Has its value been clearly examined, as well as its connection with the contemplative life, with the Dominican ideal? And how much time is made available for it?

-What role does work have in the community's own life-style? What theoretical and practical evaluation is given to work? To what extent are the spiritual decisions and values mentioned above respected? Some realities such as work can sometimes have a very limited theoretical value, but they can become something absolute and preponderant in daily practice, justified only by the fact of their urgency

-What place has the fraternal and communal dimension in the community's own life-style? How much is it appreciated and practiced, and on what levels? By what means is it promoted and encouraged to grow? What specific role has the practice of the Community Chapter here?

-One can say the same about permanent and initial formation. Once the criteria, the guidelines and the objectives have been established, it will no longer be the Chapter's task to get down to particular details, that will be the responsibility of the prioress and those who are entrusted with special offices, such as the mistress of the postulants and novices.

-On the practical and economic level, the same methodology must be followed. Here is a practical example: if some part of the monastery building needs to be renovated, how are the tasks and responsibilities to be distributed?

The Chapter will have responsibility for the general plan, the purpose of the renovations, the study of the plans drawn up by the architect, as well as the budget for all expenses. Obviously, the Chapter needs to be able to draw on the maximum possible information.

The more practical decisions, such as the choice of construction business, the engineer, the type of material to be used in each room, etc., are left to the Council, not to the Chapter. Finally, the decisions on the practical-operative level will be taken by the prioress, and especially, the bursar.

C – Juridical Function.

Deliberations established explicitly by the Constitutions (LCM 203)

These are juridical functions which generally are set up by Canon Law and are explicitly required by the Constitutions, either with a consultative or deliberate vote. The election of the prioress is a particular expression of the juridical function of the Chapter (cf. LCM 203 §1,2).

D – "In the judgment of the prioress" (LCM 204)

There are more or less frequent occasions when the prioress judges it opportune to consult the community, and she may do this freely, as her own prudence suggests. Obviously, the judgment about "important things" will be hers, and will perhaps retain a personal element which must be respected. We are on the level of the subjective criteria here. But it is no less important to attain the criteria as objectively as possible, and this will be more the result of hard effort than simply a given. Repeated unsuccessful attempts will be needed, before these criteria are found.

Two equally harmful extremes must be avoided:

a – The prioress decides everything alone or at most by consulting the Council. This is an autonomous and personal type of administering the common good which is certainly not in keeping with the Dominican tradition and is also, concrete contempt of the Chapter. This happens frequently.

b- The opposite may also occur: the prioress may be a little unsure of herself, feeling incapable of carrying out her role properly so she feels the need to ask the Chapter for everything or too often. She does not know how to shoulder her own responsibility. This is a serious error based on a misunderstanding. Dominican government is not collegial, but personal, of the prioress (I shall speak of this later). When the prioress abdicates her role there is always the risk that either the group or the strongest person will prevail. And this also creates an unfavorable situation.

As I have said before, the Chapter finds its best expression in examining and deciding the fundamental values, in the general choices and orientations, and in the search for the best expression of the common good.

When the Chapter wants to decide everything, even specific and practical functions of the Community (operations of the monastery), it blocks its own path, and it will never arrive at the conclusive phase when it must take decisions. An analogous procedure is found in the practice of the virtue of prudence, where two phases can be distinguished: that of counsel and that of *"imperium"* or command (I shall return to this later on).

Therefore, in regard to small or secondary matters the prioress must make the decisions. If it is difficult to find unity on the theoretical level or on principles, how much more arduous is it – if not impossible – to look for it in the small things. The Chapter is there to make basic choices, to give direction!

2. DELIBERATE AND CONSULTATIVE VOTES

The Chapter can be asked to express its mind through its vote, by the Constitutions themselves (in cases provided and laid down) or by the prioress. This vote can be requested as "deliberate" or "consultative".

A – Deliberate Vote

When the vote is requested as deliberate it implies that the result, whether positive or negative, is obligatory (binding) for the prioress, who must respect it under pain of rendering null the matter under consideration. The Constitutions require such a vote (deliberate) in ten cases (cf. 203, 1-11)

But it is also possible that the prioress asks a deliberate vote of the Chapter for a particular problem because of its gravity and importance, (which can be objective or subjective, depending on the judgment and evaluation of the prioress). It is necessary then, to state explicitly that the vote is deliberative.

Obviously, in cases like that, it is necessary that the Chapter members have complete knowledge of the matter under consideration and the conviction that the decision will be obligatory and binding for the whole community. This type of deliberation is taken with a secret vote. The prioress should be aware that the proposed decision will be binding for her, too.

However, it is important to note here that the prioress has the power to dispense the nuns from what the Chapter has decided by a deliberate vote (LCM 188). The prioress, in fact, has the power to dispense individual nuns regarding regular observance in particular circumstances and for a just reason (189, I-II), or even the entire community (189, III), but always for a proportionate reason, and not habitually (189, IV).

B – Consultative Vote

The consultative vote is required by the Constitutions in six cases (cf. 203, III, IV). In these cases the prioress has the obligation to convoke the Chapter whenever matters for which it is responsible are to be considered. Thus, the prioress does not have the faculty to consult or not to consult, rather it is a true obligation for the prioress to consult the chapter in such instances as mandated (specified) by the Constitutions.

Sometimes, the prioress might feel the need, or that it would be helpful, to consult the community about other matters so that she may receive advice, suggestions or clarifications, as well as hearing the general opinion of the Sisters. In these cases it is up to the prioress whether or not she consults the community and whether a vote will be taken or not.

If a formal vote is taken, what binding force does it have for the prioress? Only a moral value for its usefulness, in the sense that it will be good for the prioress to take note of the way the community is thinking. Nevertheless, if she has sufficient reasons to act in a manner contrary to the Chapter vote, she has the freedom to do so. Obviously, she has full responsibility to act for the common good of the community, but she might be taking into account a variety of considerations which may not all be clearly known to the community. In concrete terms, if the prioress was obliged to follow the "consultative vote", this would no longer be consultative, but deliberative. One must let the word itself retain its own meaning.

3. CONSULTATIVE AND DELIBERATIVE PHASES WITHIN THE CONVENTUAL CHAPTER.

It is necessary to note the different aspect this part has in respect to the preceding section.

We have studied the different functions of the Chapter in regard to the obligatory character of a "deliberate" vote or of providing a simple orientation with a "consultative" vote.   The present section will look at the internal dynamics of the Chapter, how they should be carried out, and the different aspects of the Chapter itself.

A – Consultative phase

The consultative phase is the first stage, or first moment, in the internal dynamics of the Chapter. It is associated with the first step in the process of arriving at a prudent judgment, common to every moral act.

In this first phase, all the members of the community should feel that they are on an equal footing. It is not advisable to have pre-existing roles since they alter fundamentally the function of the search and the comparing of ideas, which ought to be truly fraternal and egalitarian. The prioress should consider herself as one among the sisters (equals). This is the phase of the search for the common good, indeed, for God's will. When confronted with such riches there are no roles, no advantageous positions or privileges: all are equal.

Besides this, no sister should feel a stranger, incompetent, not learned or with little education. It is not learning which gives us the knowledge of the common good. All the sisters ought to speak, because the good belongs to all, without any exceptions. The common good has an infinite number of facets and each sister can reveal some particular aspect of it. Each contribution can awaken in the other sisters an awareness of something they had not realized before and this can turn into a significant stimulus for them.

This is the appropriate moment to speak: the community asks this of me, but even more, the search and identification of the greater good requires it of me. This means that speaking is a duty incumbent on all. It is easy to see how inappropriate the attitude is, not infrequently found

in our monasteries, that there are persons who never speak one single word in Chapter, but burst into criticism or a shower of remarks as soon as they have left the Chapter Room. This is neither right nor just, nor dignified. Each sister should have courage and internal freedom in regard to her own ideas and convictions, which when confronted with the ideas and convictions of the other sisters are honed and smoothed. It is the joy of making one's own contribution to the identification and realization of the common good.

B – Deciding phase

In some chapters, no true and formal decision is presupposed (at least in some particular sessions). This happens when the Chapter takes time for mutual listening in the serious examination of a particular topic of great importance for the community.   Or even more so, in those sessions where it is sensed that the community is not yet ready to make a binding decision, especially if this is to be made by means of a vote.

There are many cases when a resolute deliberation is anticipated, opportune and appropriate to define precisely the practical orientation of the community, putting an end to the consultative phase. It is helpful to emphasize the necessity of decisions, which corresponds to the "imperium" in the practice of prudence.

It would be useless, and also counter-productive, if the Chapter were to remain trapped in the first phase, that of consultation. It is not correct to prolong this phase excessively; or not to be able to make further progress towards a practical decision.   That would truly be the situation that is often described as: "All the Chapters ever do is chatter inconclusively". This would be a correct assessment!

It is necessary, therefore, for the community, rightly guided and encouraged, with prudence and realism, to come to the deliberative phase: making conclusive and definitive decisions.

Decision is a very critical, difficult and demanding phase which many people would like to avoid. St. Thomas in speaking of prudence affirms that this virtue consists essentially in "decision", not in the sterile evaluation of possibilities, or in delaying things by seeking outside advice. Decisions involve difficulties and sacrifice.

Both the individual person and the group resolve to put an end to the hypotheses or theoretical possibilities, to move on to the practical-operative level. Out of the infinite number of possibilities to choose from, one must be selected, leaving aside all the others, perhaps even more valid as such.

The risk of upsetting those who had proposed other solutions is real: this means suffering and stress.

It is helpful to remember that no matter what solution is taken, it will not mean absolutely that it is the best, the most intelligent choice or the only solution.   Much more modestly, it can be said that it is the most realistic solution, the one concretely appropriate for this community at this

time, the one in which we presume the common good can be best realized. It is possible that if circumstances are different, it may need revision and change in a relatively short time.

Between a decision or series of deliberations which are not particularly happy, pleasant, and abstaining from making any decision at all, the latter is the worse and less advisable of the two hypotheses. Great prudence does not consist in not saying anything for fear of making mistakes, but in the courage to risk, even with the possibility of error.

This is a very important point, which merits an attentive reflection: if one acts, one can make mistakes, but if one does not make a choice, one certainly goes wrong. When the decision has been taken, it becomes obligatory for the community (at least in the "deliberative" cases). If it is true that the community's decision is an interpretation of the will of God and the expression of the common good, it cannot be other than obligatory and binding.

It would be a childish excuse to say: "I voted differently from the decision that was taken, and so I do not feel myself bound by it". Such principle would mean the dissolution of the community, and the beginning of anarchy. Therefore, in the acceptance of the decisions of the Chapter, we also, exercise our obedience to the full. In fact, it is one of the most representative forms of Dominican obedience, requiring a spirit of faith, human maturity and a sense of the common good.

C – Community Responsibility to the Chapter Decisions.

This is a very delicate problem, which must be evaluated with caution and prudence.

Basic Principles

The responsibility for the actual practice of the Chapter decisions is closely related to the community deliberations. If a decision has been voted for, and evidently, has been recorded in the Chapter minutes, that is, the expression of the will of the community. Decisions not taken, are left as a dead letter in the Minutes Record book or to be 'wet paper' as the saying goes.

IN REGARD TO THE PRACTICE OF THE DECISIONS MADE BY THE CHAPTER

The first responsibility in the execution of the decision is the prioress. There is a real moral bond to do what is appropriate, but there is also a true obligation of obedience in carrying out what the Chapter has decided, since it is the Chapter as such that has the supreme authority in the monastery.

If difficulties arise which suggest putting things off for a shorter or longer period, or which prevent putting the decision into practice, the prioress must feel herself bound to inform the community of this, indicating motives and well-founded reasons which justify this.

But there is also communal responsibility to the deliberations of the Chapter. The modalities for requesting their fulfillment, or an explanation of why they are not being put into practice, are a delicate point where prudence and respect are necessary.

The two possible excesses, equally negative, could be:

> ➢ an undue pressure on the prioress, "demanding" the realization of the decision;
>
> ➢ or on the contrary, a "lack of interest", as if the question did not concern the community.

Possible ways for making demands correctly:

> ➢ requesting a formal intervention at the next session of the chapter;
>
> ➢ a request for an explanation, addressed respectfully to the prioress in private;
>
> ➢ a letter or message to the prioress from a sister or a group, etc.

4. COLLEGIAL GOVERNMENT AND PERSONAL GOVERNMENT

We must pay attention to a particular problem which now arises. We hear many nuns say with a certain lightness:" "Ours is a democratic government, a collegial government therefore, it is the government of the Chapter." These and similar phrases must be taken with great seriousness and examined carefully, in order to give a thoughtful evaluation of them.

A – Is ours a democratic–collegial government?

A clear distinction must be made:

a- If the meaning is that the laws, the orientations and the fundamental choices come from the base, or from the Chapter, this is correct, both in the case of the Conventual Chapters. It is also true in the sense that their work remains in the temporal sphere thanks to the Acts of the Chapters (General, Provincial, and Directories), or in the series of decisions taken by the Conventual Chapter.

b- If the meaning is that the Chapters govern in an habitual and continuous manner, this is absolutely not true: indeed, it is a grave distortion. When the rather brief period in which the General and Provincial Chapters are held is over, they are dissolved and their function ends. The Conventual Chapter deliberates only when it is expressly summoned, and loses its power to make decisions when the session is over.

c- Thus one can say that ours is a truly democratic government, but that this is limited to the convocation and session of the Chapter. The decisions are taken by majority vote. In the General Chapters, the vote of the Master of the Order has the same value as that of the least of the Chapter members. The vote of the prioress counts as much as that of every other Chapter member.

The Chapter is thus a collegial government where the decisions are made together by means of majority, and where all are on the same level and have the same authority. From this perspective we can speak of a "collegial government". But when the Chapters cease, the democratic-collegial government comes to an end too, at least in its exercise. (It remains in virtual existence through its Acts)

B – Is Ours a Personal Government?

When the Chapters have finished, in ordinary daily life the personal authority must emerge and be exercised: that of the Master of the Order, of the Provincial and of the prioress. I do not intend to spend much time describing this function, since it will be discussed separately in the chapter about the prioress. I will point out only the fundamental elements.

Dominican government is decidedly a personal government. The relationship between the law (the Constitutions) and the individual nun passes through the prioress. At the same time, the prioress must keep in mind what has been deliberated in Chapter and expressed in the Directory; however, she must interpret and evaluate the concrete reality especially that of the persons involved.

The Constitutions and the decisions of the Chapter and Council are not imposed on the nuns in an anonymous, impersonal and bureaucratic manner. It must always be individualized by the mediation of an understanding and sisterly human face: the face of the prioress.

The last application of God's will and the common good comes through the personal authority of the prioress. It is she who reveals and presents it in a way that is precise and binding, but also human.

It is good to consider also, that this is rightly expressed in the formula of profession: "I, make profession and promise obedience to God, to Blessed Mary, to Blessed Dominic, and to **YOU**,,, according to the Rule of Blessed Augustine and to the Constitutions…that I will be obedient to **YOU**…" (LCM157, I). So, it is very clear that the profession and thus obedience is made to the prioress. So, it constitutes a true reciprocal act of confidence and trust the prioress will be the official channel of the will of God and of the common good which the nun wants to fulfill and this is why she promises obedience.

> When your Constitutions deal with government they legislate for a very special exercise of authority, indicating it in this order: the prioress, the Chapter, the Council. Each has its own role to play and if one or the other "authority" within the community does not function properly, in the long run, neither will the community. (Fr Damian Byrne, OP - *Letter to the Nuns*),

5. VARIOUS TYPES OF CHAPTERS AND COMMUNITY MEETINGS

I think it is also appropriate in this systematic treatment of the Chapter to mention briefly the various forms or aims envisioned by the Constitutions on the Chapter.   It seems to me your Constitutions speak explicitly about two types of chapter: the Chapter of the monastery and Regular Chapter. It would be interesting to study more at length if there is any mention, at least implicit, of other forms of chapter.

A – Regular Chapter (or Chapter of Faults, LCM 68-73)

Purpose: The community is given the opportunity to examine the regular life in the monastery. This general goal is specified later in greater detail. It is really a community examination of conscience:

- ➢ on "faithfulness to the Gospel" as community behavior

- ➢ in terms of injury to the common good or regular life "harm done to the common good, or to the regular life". We can understand this as the individual's own basic attitude to the common good and observance

- ➢ on the transgressions against the Rule and the laws of the Order

- ➢ "on the mutual assistance in the renewal and development of the regular life" (68).

As far as possible it should be a true review, effectual and not a mere formality carried on out of habit.

Regular Chapter can take the form of the accusation of one's own transgressions. This would substantially be the traditional "Chapter of Faults" which remains valid, provided that it is truthful and genuine, not repetitive, not painless or devoid of regret.

"In some other way, according to the custom of each monastery". (LCM 70). Thus, it is possible to find some other form that is considered helpful and adapted to fulfill the goals proposed above. We may find here an implicit reference to the possibility of using the better known form of "review of life", but understanding by "life" the goals set out above. We must always bear in mind that the primary aim of the Regular Chapter is to make sure that the community is maintaining the observances: "The nuns gather as sisters in charity and humility under the leadership of the prioress to give one another mutual assistance in the renewal and development of the regular life."

It is easy to see that in the traditional Chapter of Faults it is the individual religious who acknowledges that she is guilty in her behavior, in regard to the observance, and asks forgiveness from the community.

In the second instance, much more appropriately, it is the community as a whole, assembled in Chapter, who examines the regular life, so that it can take full responsibility for it, making a critical comparison between its praxis and the ideal proposed by the Constitutions. There can be no doubt that the Regular Chapter understood in this second sense will be much more effective and will have greater impact on the practice of the observances. What is the use of two or three persons accusing themselves in matters where they feel they have been at fault, when it is the community as such that is at fault, perhaps in a habitual way, against the regular observance, thus making the task difficult and arduous even for those nuns who do have a good will?

When the majority of the nuns act in one particular way, they create a kind of "normal logic" which even the better nuns find it difficult to escape from.

To realize the true goals of the Regular Chapter, the community must frequently examine the principles of the monastic life, among which, contemplation and common life are the first. In connection with this, there must be a serious and vigilant attitude in evaluating the means used to reach the community's goals. It seems to me that this is the primary task of the Regular Chapter. Does it make it more difficult? I believe the answer is yes; but it will undoubtedly be more effective, and many things will change, creating a more demanding and more consistent mentality.

B – Conventual Chapter or Monastery Chapter

I have already spoken at length about this form of chapter.

C – Other Kinds of Community Meetings

All I wish to do is to mention some other possible kinds of community meetings.

a - legislative chapter: deliberate or consultative (see above);

b – listening and keeping the word of God. LCM 96,II "The purpose of all regular observance, especially enclosure and silence, is that the word of God may dwell abundantly in the monastery." Is this to be done only in private, or is it not one of the primary tasks of the community?

c – *lectio divina*, LCM 97-99, it is certainly a personal responsibility, but also through community meetings, which experience shows to be very useful and effective.

d – sharing faith: CCM 6,II. In his *Letter to the Nuns*, Fr. D. Byrne, mentioned his earlier letter about the Common Life, in which he states the six essential values of Dominican life, one of which being the faith-sharing:

It is an act of charity to share one's own faith, but should not this charity begin at home? I cannot exhort you too much to take this aspect of common life more seriously. Many of the brethren, especially among the young desire this type of sharing. Did we not enter the Order to be with men of faith? It is urgent that we enrich one another through sharing our life in Christ" (*The Essential Elements of Dominican Community Life*".)

e – study LCM 100-102.

"The prioress should see to it that lectures or conferences are given with appropriate frequency in the monastery, and that discussions among the nuns are provided for." (LCM 102,I). This form of communal study can be considered a "community meeting" with study as its goal.

One can add to this list the community meetings designed especially for the young sisters in formation, as well as the Regular Chapter reserved for them. (LCM 73).

It is easy to see that the life of the monastery is essentially a common life. Thus, all the manifestations and practices of this life will mirror on the Chapter of the Monastery, so that this becomes the ideal centre of community life, the place where mutual exchange takes place, and hence, a place of communal growth.

6. PREPARATION

This is expressly mentioned in LCM 205. Members of the Chapter may propose to the prioress particular questions it would be beneficial to discuss. This can be done by an individual sister or by a group of sisters.

The prioress must make known publicly or at least inform the Chapter members about the agenda so they can prepare themselves adequately for the upcoming deliberations.

When more delicate and serious problems are to be discussed, it will be helpful if any sister who intends to speak in the Chapter prepares a written text of what she has to say, so that she will be more precise and her thought may not be distorted by improvising. If the sister wishes, she may also request that her text be included in the minutes of the Chapter meeting.

For complex and intricate problems requiring long introductions and clarifications, it is appropriate for the prioress to ask one or more sisters to draw up a report which can be circulated in advance or read during the session of the Chapter, so that all are duly informed and can formulate what they say in Chapter in a way that is consistent with this report. Such reports are very useful especially when they set out the framework of the problem and outline the state of the question.

The success or failure (inefficiency) of the Chapter depends largely on good and correct information and on an adequate preparation. The more light we have the more does the understanding of the problem and the possibility of finding a solution increase.

7. MODERATOR

It would truly be a sad disappointment if the immense wealth that the Chapter can offer to the community were to be limited or even nullified solely because the meeting was badly conducted, due to a lack of a method to follow.

There are objective laws and methodological requirements for group dynamics (and the Chapter is a kind of 'group') which must be strictly observed. To ignore them or underestimate them would mean making a mockery of the goals and objectives of the Chapters. All the Sisters must be well aware of this point.

Thus, the presence of a discussion leader in every Chapter session is very important. The leader may be the prioress herself, but not necessarily – especially in Chapters for reflection, for faith-sharing, for the general examination of problems, but also in those Chapters when decisions are to be made. It is only the Regular Chapter that must be led by the prioress.

To spread out the responsibility of leading a Chapter can be an excellent way to encourage the fraternal dimension of the Chapter by involving a greater number of sisters in leadership roles. I know of a community where this is practice with positive results. It will be valuable for every community to prepare a certain number of discussion leaders, sisters with good communication skills gifts who would benefit from this experience.

8. MINUTES OF THE CHAPTER

LCM 202 speaks of a secretary who is elected by the Chapter. Although, there is no reference there to books, registers or minutes, LCM 214 in regard to the duties of the secretary of the Council states: "She shall record in a book reserved for this purpose the matters discussed by the Council and the decisions made", so it is obvious that the same principle applies to Chapter meetings especially when there are elections (LCM 248).

All sessions of the Chapter, deliberative or consultative, with their respective agendas and date, must be recorded, followed by a brief summary of the matters dealt with and the guidelines, directives, etc. which emerged from these discussions and were approved. One need not make a note of everything that was said (for that would be something impossible, and counter-productive); but one must certainly note the conclusions reached by the Chapter and the relative votes, if any were taken.

Before a decision is voted upon, it is good that it should be put it in writing and read and re-read to the members of the Chapter so that it can be modified and corrected. When any difficulties of understanding have been removed then it can be put to the vote.

If the prioress agrees, she may grant a sister's request to have written contributions or specific proposals included in the minutes.

The Chapter Record Book is very important for a monastery, not only for the sake of future historians, but also as a document of decisions taken and a sure objective reference-point which can be checked, if needed.

It will be helpful for the Chapter to have a meeting on how it wishes the minutes to be drawn up. There can be slight variations from one monastery to another.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this lengthy and laborious reflection, it seems that a brief summary will be useful to repeat the fundamental ideas. The particular type of government and basis of authority-obedience, with the Chapter as its foundation, is an inheritance which comes from St. Dominic himself, it must therefore, be welcomed, understood and explored more deeply to discover its unlimited potential. It is also, a priceless value that must be experienced in our communities, so that they can catch even the slightest nuances. If we begin with our imperfect and decadent way of putting these principles into practice, we may end by losing all appreciation for the ideal which is put before us with all its precious rewards.

This methodology is:

- a correct and valid way of discovering the will of God, starting from the solidarity and cohesion of the community, which makes us rediscover the evangelical dimension of fraternity;

- the Dominican form of government and of obedience is delicate, fragile and complex, it requires personal maturity, a disinterested impartiality which can discover and put into practice the true common good; a capacity for dialogue and encounter; a deep faith and the experience of what the Gospel means.

- If all these qualifications are necessary, it is equally true that a correct practice of Dominican authority-obedience will, in its turn, bring about the human and spiritual maturity of the persons involved: the ability to take part in dialogue and affirmation, as well as the certainty that they are in truth doing the will of God. It is only by successive stages, sometimes disappointing and painful, that one arrives at all this.

Because this is an integral part of the spirit of the Order, one of its most specific dimensions, it merits that we put our greatest energy, on the personal and community levels, to make it a reality in our own community. Perhaps perfection will never be reached; but the predisposition to seek its perfection, is already very valuable.