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THE *RATIO FORMATIONIS ET STUDIORUM* – PRESENTATION, PROMOTION, PLANNING

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I am grateful for the invitation to speak at this assembly. It is an honour to have been invited and I very happily accepted the invitation as soon as I received it.

I see that I get some credit (or perhaps blame!) for the development of a *Ratio Formationis et Studiorum* for the Lay Dominicans. This is because of comments I made at the International Lay Dominican Congress held in Fatima in October 2018. That was soon after a new *Ratio Formationis Generalis* [RFG] and a new *Ratio Studiorum Generalis* [RSG] for the friars had been promulgated, the RFG in 2016 and the RSG in 2017. Having spoken about what was new in our revised *Ratio Formationis*, I suggested that it might serve as a model for something comparable to be drawn up for Lay Dominicans. Somebody was listening and took it up, work has been going on in the meantime, and now we have a document before us. I've been asked to present it, promote it and perhaps say something also about planning its implementation. These are the three words that came through to me on being asked to speak: present, promote, plan.

PRESENTATION

On first looking at your *Ratio Formationis*, the first thing that strikes one is the amount of space that seems to be given to theological formation. I say 'seems to be given' because in fact there is a good balance in the document in its consideration of human, spiritual, intellectual and apostolic formation. These are the four aspects or dimensions of Christian and religious formation which are always now considered in documents from the Church and the Order.

However, that first look at the table of contents could be daunting, just as it is misleading. I am referring to section 2.3.2.2.2, entitled 'Formation Topics' which contains 33 sub-sections dealing with a range of topics that might be considered in theological formation. That is almost half of the table of contents! Somebody coming to it for the first time, and seeing that table of contents, might think that being a Lay Dominican is a very intellectual thing indeed. And if the person does not think of themselves in that way, or has come to consider the Lay Dominicans for personal, spiritual or apostolic, reasons, it could be off-putting.

It is important to remember that you have prepared a *Ratio Formationis et Studiorum*, putting in one document what the friars place in two separate documents. And some necessary qualifications are made in the text itself: the list of theological topics is not a required curriculum, merely a list of suggestions that could be used and could be replaced by others. Like the rest of the *Ratio*, theological formation must be adapted to the needs of different individuals and fraternities in different social and cultural situations. The criteria given in 2.7, the final section of the document, for elaborating a *ratio* of formation at the provincial level help also to correct what might seem at first like a heavily intellectual focus that might, as I say, be daunting and even off-putting for some. Such qualifications are needed in response to any such reaction to this list of topics.

Perhaps the list should be in an appendix to the text rather than being as prominent in the table of contents as it is. At first glance it tends to overshadow the *Ratio*'s consideration of the other aspects of formation which is I why I think it could also very easily be misleading. The interested enquirer, or the already professed Lay Dominican, needs to be assured that the other dimensions of formation are adequately treated here also, which they are.

I would add that the 33 topics constitute a fairly random collection of theological topics. It does not follow the order of the Creed, for example, or of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, or of the *Summa theologiae* of Saint Thomas. What is the rationale for the choice and the order of these topics? I think it would help if that were to be explained.

I am sorry to begin with what seems like a criticism of the document. It is simply that I was asked to speak about 'presentation' and this was the first thing that struck me when faced with the text. I want to stress again what I said just now: all aspects or dimensions of formation are given adequate attention in the *Ratio*, it is just the way the document is presented that gives a distorted impression.

There is also what seems like a contradiction regarding the canonical status of the document and it would be good to have this clarified. I am not a canonist and so cannot do this for you but there are brothers and sisters in the Order who can help with this. On page 4, it says that 'this document holds **no juridical or binding authority**' even while at the same time locating it within 'the hierarchy of legal norms'. On page 26 however, it says that 'the guidelines in this *Ratio Formationis* **carry normative weight**, offering strong recommendations while respecting the unique circumstances of each province'. It is not just in the English version: the French and Spanish versions have the same apparent contradiction. I can imagine that it is a point that will generate conversation and even argument in fraternities and provinces but one that should be relatively easily tidied up. It may be simply a question of finding the correct terminology. I say this as a non-canonist, a layman in regard to the mysteries of canon law!

I have broken one of the golden rules of teaching by beginning with critical comments but these were two issues that arose immediately for me and distracted me! Now on to the positive and substantive content of the *Ratio*.

PROMOTION

When revising the RFG for the friars we decided to begin with a statement from the general chapter of Rome in 2010 to the effect that the aim of all Dominican formation is ‘the making of a Dominican preacher’. For the Dominican Laity the aim is comparable and so you begin with a consideration of what it means to be a Lay Dominican preacher. Rightly you contextualise the vocation of the Lay Dominican within the human and Christian vocation which is lived in the Church. Here is a particular way of living the graced humanity which is yours through baptism, making you sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of Christ, living and moving and having your being in the power of the Holy Spirit. Drawn to the Order of Saint Dominic, in many and various ways, you believe that it is within the radiance of Saint Dominic that you can best live your human and Christian life.

The *Ratio* then begins to identify the gifts and virtues that will characterise the Lay Dominican as a builder of the Kingdom of God: humility, discernment, understanding and true commitment; solidarity, empathy and the pursuit of the common good (p.7); intellectual compassion building a culture of truth, relationship and conscientious denunciation of injustice (p.10); a generous, courageous and creative service of the Word (p.10). These are virtues of personal spirituality, we might say, combined with virtues of life in community. Pope Leo’s recent encyclical letter *Magnifica Humanitas* appeals constantly to the same two criteria for responding to contemporary challenges: the dignity of the individual person and concern for the common good. That whole section of the *Ratio*, 2.1 and 2.2, is a rich summary of Dominican spirituality, spelling out the goal of formation for Lay Dominicans. In order to collaborate in the Order’s mission, the *Ratio* says, a person needs a solid foundation in human formation and theological study as well as a robust spiritual life.

I suppose the aspect of the Dominican charism that requires most thought in relation to the Lay Dominican is the apostolic one. In what way are you preachers? In what way do you exercise co-responsibility for the mission of the Order? In what way do you follow in the footsteps of Dominic who was told to go and preach? The same questions arise in relation to the other lay section of the Order, the co-operator brothers who, although they are consecrated men, also belong to the laity.

Preachers is something we *are*, not just something we *do*: the present Master of the Order has stressed this point from the day of his election. It is a way of being in the first place. If

we are to be Dominican preachers, developing the intellectual compassion of which the *Ratio* speaks, then we must be contemplative and studious. That phrase – intellectual compassion – names the virtue that expresses our service of the truth, working against lies, falsehood, corruption and injustice, raising the banner of hope, being a prophetic voice, awakening consciences and taking action. Each brother and sister of the Order is called to be like that in whatever situation or circumstance they find themselves and whatever the possibilities for actual witness and explicit preaching are available to them.

On **human formation** the *Ratio* gives criteria for discerning the maturity desired for a brother or sister of the Order: conviction and commitment, responsible freedom with a sense of the interests of others, listening and dialogue, patience to take the necessary time for growth and discernment, appreciation of the uniqueness of the Dominican vocation. These themes return in later sections on **Dominican Formation** (2.3.3) and on **The Lay Dominican Rule and General Declarations** (2.4), sections which give appropriate weight to formation for participation in Dominican democracy. Why is it appropriate? Because it is in our traditions of self-government, with the values transmitted in those traditions, that our spirituality is ‘incarnated’, guiding the relationships and commitments we establish with God and with one other in the Order. It is in those traditions and values, when faithfully lived out, that our fraternity becomes real and not just a nice idea.

There is a very good introduction to the section on **theological formation**. We undertake such a formation not in order to have a degree, the *Ratio* says, but ‘to ensure that all Dominican laity can understand, reflect upon, and speak about theological issues in a manner that enables them to engage in fruitful dialogue with other branches of the Dominican family and the world’ (2.3.2, p.11). Theological formation needs to be pitched, taking account of the academic levels and backgrounds of the fraternity’s members. It must take account also of the eventual apostolic engagement in which members of the fraternity might get involved, e.g., catechetical or other teaching, apologetic or other forms of preaching and witness, pastoral activities of one kind or another. Brother Pablo has already spoken to this Assembly about the meaning of the intellectual life in the Lay Dominican vocation. Here the concern is that Lay Dominicans be at ease engaging in the discussion of theological questions whether within the Dominican Family or in interactions with ‘the world’ outside.

There follow sections on **Sacred Scripture** (2.3.2.1), **Theology** (2.3.2.2, with the 33 suggested topics already spoken about), **Spirituality and Liturgy** (2.3.2.3), **Dominican Formation** specifically (2.3.3) and **Catholic Social Teaching** (2.3.4).

Formation in Sacred Scripture is fundamental and permanent for all of us. The Bible is our first and by far our most important book of spirituality and theology, the first text of any Christian formator, and we will never be done exploring its depths and seeking to

understand the mysteries it reveals. This carries over into our formation in theology and the other areas. So ***formation in spirituality and liturgy*** is centred on the Eucharist, the Rosary, Lectio Divina and the Liturgy of the Hours. Each of these realities comes to us from the Bible and each is a way of receiving, contemplating and celebrating the Word of God. In those practices we receive the nourishment which God offers continually in the gifts of His Son, who is the Word, and the Holy Spirit, who is the Divine Love. So the Lay Dominican life, centred on these practices, truly becomes a life centred on praising, blessing and proclaiming the wonderful works of God.

The last section on formation is concerned with ***Catholic Social Teaching***. It is right to emphasise this considering how the vocation of the lay Christian and the Lay Dominican are presented in the earlier part of the *Ratio*. There is a fine quotation from Pope Pius XII, cited by John Paul II in *Christifideles Laici*, which speaks of the lay faithful as being the front line of the Church's life. They not only belong to the Church, they are the Church, Pius says, which is the animating principle in human society. In thinking about the apostolic mission of the Lay Dominican this needs to be kept in mind. Lay Dominicans can bring the spiritual and theological traditions of the Order to bear on all the family, community, social, economic, cultural, educational, intellectual, political activities in which they are involved. Pope Leo's letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, published just three months ago, is a wonderful summary of the history and principles of Catholic Social Teaching which are listed already also in the *Ratio*.

The remainder of the *Ratio* is concerned with the practicalities of arranging initial and permanent formation, who should do what, when, and where, who is responsible, and how is the progress of our formation to be evaluated. It is good to note, as the *Ratio* does, that besides the individual brother or sister, and the formation officer responsible for guiding them, an essential agent of formation is the life of the fraternity itself.

PLANNING

In my experience of the Order, we often begin to re-invent wheels that have been in place long before we came on the scene. This is because we do not always know very well the documents that are already there to guide our thinking and our planning: from the Bible and the documents of the Church, the Code of Canon Law and the Constitutions of the Order, the Rule of the Lay Dominicans and now this *Ratio* of formation and studies. To be fair, such documents (apart from the Bible itself) are not usually very interesting to read, lists of principles and criteria, recommendations and suggestions, and often the situations to which these things are addressed are not known to us personally. These texts only come alive when we find ourselves faced with situations that send us back to them.

I would say that I never really knew our book of constitutions until I spent eight years on the general council of the Order at Santa Sabina. I was already many years a friar and of course in one sense I knew the constitutions well. But at Santa Sabina it was not simply a matter of consulting them out of curiosity or in order to know about them, it was a question of consulting them, sometimes in urgent or critical situations, in order to see what wisdom the Order's tradition had already encapsulated in them. I remember one general chapter where a group of brothers suggested there should be a process for preparing a general chapter and a commission should be set up to develop such a process. A day later somebody pointed out that there is already a process outlined in the constitutions and if we were to do what was indicated there the concerns raised would already have been met. That is just one example of something I've experienced many times: often our fraternal life is not going well because we do not appreciate the wisdom there is in observing what the constitutions give us.

So it is a first point. In planning to implement this *Ratio* which you have now developed, work out ways in which the Lay Dominicans can become familiar with it in that second way. In other words, that they become familiar with it not just as a text to know about but as a **text to know, from inside as it were**. This comes about by identifying clearly the values the *Ratio* seeks to protect and promote. It articulates these values very well already, there is much wisdom and experience within it. It is just a question of finding ways to highlight that wisdom and experience. To make it a 'tasted knowledge' as St Thomas defines wisdom.

The work of **encouraging vocations** to the Lay Dominicans is the work of helping people to see that perhaps their Christian lives might be lived more fruitfully if they were to associate themselves with the Order. Such promotion of vocations needs to be very familiar with the earlier sections of this *Ratio* – what is it to be a Lay Dominican? Where a person is clear and convinced in their understanding of that, then things should flow easily.

Those who are named here as having a **responsibility for formation** – the individual brother or sister, the formation officer, the fraternity itself – must each of them take that responsibility seriously. Formation is another area where the tools required are already in place but where acquaintance with them and application of them does not necessarily follow. It is the 'human factor', we are finite and sinful, and sometimes we prefer, like bad workmen, to blame our tools and look for new ones rather than looking to our own responsibility and commitment.

A **practical suggestion** is that the brothers and sisters directly involved in producing this *Ratio* might make themselves available to speak directly with fraternities or with groups of formation officials. This could be online or through podcasts, explaining how the document took shape and what it was you felt needed to be placed at the centre in the formation of the Lay Dominican.

There is much wisdom and experience in the document. The challenge now is to share it with the fraternities and the individual members, to hear their responses to it and in turn to respond to them. In the era of modern communications I feel sure that you will find ways by which to do this effectively.