25 March 2024

To: The Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales

The Bishops’ Conference of Scotland

Cc: Fr. Martin Ganeri OP, Prior Provincial

Dear Reverand Fathers

**Synod on Synodality**

I am writing on behalf of the Lay Dominicans of the English Province (the province covers England, Wales and Scotland). At our recent meetings, both online and in person, and in our fraternities, we have been discussing some of the themes raised by the synthesis report of the Assembly of the Synod on Synodality held in Rome in October 2023. We are aware that the Synod commissioned further discussion throughout the church and that Bishops’ Conferences are reporting back in advance of the 2024 Assembly, and I hope that this letter will be useful to both Bishops Conferences as part of that reporting process.

**Background**

There are currently 8 fraternities of Lay Dominicans in the province, with a further 3 smaller fraternal groups, and 2 new groups in the process of formation. 25% of our Lay Dominicans are at an early stage of their life as Dominicans (recently admitted or temporarily professed) and there is a very positive rise in the number of people approaching us - we have at least 20 others currently enquiring with our groups.

At our annual Assembly in September 2023, our main theme was synodality. Although several Lay Dominicans had been involved in the first round of discussions during 2023, a large number had heard little or nothing about it in their own parishes, and the Assembly specifically requested that we take forward discussions in our fraternities.

From the synthesis document which came from the Rome Assembly, we chose 2 themes which seem to have specific interest for Lay Dominicans:-

* Ministry: the synod themes on the co-responsibility of the laity for mission and ministry, and on the development of existing ministries and the possible need for new ministries, seem particularly relevant to the Dominican charism of preaching, and our on-going discussion of the ways in which the laity preach.
* Chapter 10 of the synthesis: Consecrated Life and Lay Associations: A Charismatic Sign.

We held a series of on-line conversations on these 2 subjects. We also invited fraternities to discuss them at their monthly meetings and received several individual written contributions too.

**Ministry**

In our discussions we welcomed the idea of developing the existing ministries in the church. There is strong support for the development of a Ministry of the Word. Many Lay Dominicans are already Ministers of the Word and Holy Communion, in parishes where one priest may be covering 3 or 4 churches, and the suggestion in the synthesis that there could be occasions when lay Ministers of the Word could preach is very welcome.

Similarly, many Lay Dominicans are catechists in their parishes, and see this as a part of their call to preach. There is real concern about the need for formation. So many people in our parishes say that they have not had any formation since they were children at school. There are very positive programmes engaging with parents who bring children for the sacraments, but these tend to concentrate on how parents can share their faith with children. We need more opportunities for people to talk about their faith as adults, and this requires confident catechists. The formation Lay Dominicans receive in their fraternities (studying in order to preach) can help build the confidence needed and is a model we would recommend to the Bishops’ Conferences. Bringing catechists together for their own formation and faith development (rather than simply to share ideas about programmes and materials) would equip people to address the formation needs in their parishes.

There is scope for wider development of other ministries too. Welcoming, for example, can be so much more than finding people a seat and a hymn book, and can extend to encouraging and facilitating people to get involved in parish life. There was a clear message from our meetings that we should recognise very many roles as ministry rather than just tasks someone does ‘to help the priest’, but also that we need to be very wary of clericalizing the laity or of various ministries being seen as recognition, reward or status rather than service.

On the priesthood and the diaconate, there is a wide range of views on access to the diaconate for women, and there were suggestions of the ordination of mature married men to the priesthood, but there was no consensus on either of these points and neither were they major subjects for discussion. The Synod’s suggestion of a review of the role of the permanent diaconate was, however, very widely welcomed, in particular the emphasis on work with the poor and the marginalised, rather than a primarily liturgical role for deacons.

**Consecrated Life and Lay Associations: A Charismatic Sign.**

One of the joys of being Lay Dominicans is that we are part of the Dominican family, with close links to the friars and to the congregations of sisters. But there are also parts of the country where the Lay Dominicans are the only Dominican presence. We see this as a useful model of how the laity work with the clergy and those in religious life – we are strengthened by the close links we have, but we are also able to pray and to study as communities of lay people.

Many fraternities have members from a number of dioceses, who travel some distance to meetings. This means that many Lay Dominicans pray and study as part of their fraternity but find their apostolate in their parishes rather than as group activities organised by the fraternity. Many people commented that they explain to people in their parishes that their Dominican vocation is an important part of what calls them to take on responsibilities in parishes, and that this can lead to interesting conversations about what vocation means for lay people. This is very much in line with the Synod’s point about those in consecrated life or lay associations being a prophetic sign for the church. I think that many lay people are searching for ways to understand their vocation and that this is one of the main reasons we have seen an increase in people contacting us to find out more about being a Lay Dominican. There are real benefits in the orders (not just the Dominicans} and their lay associations having a visible presence in parishes and dioceses.

Many Lay Dominicans observed that they come together regularly in their fraternities, take on roles on fraternity councils and are fully involved in discussions on how the fraternity runs. They also have the opportunity to meet at a provincial level at our annual assembly and AGM, and are represented at the Chapter meeting to elect provincial councillors. We are currently putting a lot of work into improving the communication between our fraternities and across the province. Yet many are largely unaware of how their dioceses work, whether they have the chance to be involved and how they are represented in discussions at diocesan and Bishops’ Conference level. This has been highlighted for many of them by the lack of conversation in local parishes about the Synod on Synodality. The Synod presents an enormous challenge for all our parishes and dioceses, and the synthesis document’s proposals for close working and collaboration between the Bishops’ Conferences, the orders and lay associations seems to be a great opportunity to help us address those challenges.

The Lay Dominicans will be continuing to explore synodality, and to learn from the experience of listening and Conversations in the Spirit. We would welcome the opportunity to contribute to future phases of the work on synodality.

If anything you need any clarification or further information about our discussions, please do get in touch.

In St. Dominic and St. Catherine

Margaret Doyle

Lay Provincial President

Lay Dominicans