



Why Dominican?

For the Inquirer and Candidate: Before You Get Started

The journey you are undertaking is a very exciting one! A whole new world of thought as well as the blessings of a deeper prayer life, camaraderie, and ways to work in and for the Lord's kingdom will be presented to you through God's abundant graces. The journey is a gradual one. It begins with Inquiry, then goes through Candidacy, then through Temporary Promise, and then to Permanent Promises, a stage which continues for the rest of your life. In order to avail yourself of all of the opportunities available, please take the time to read the information and guidelines about the study sessions so that you have a glimpse of the total picture that will unfold.

General Guidelines

It is wise to remember that the purpose of meeting for study and discussion is twofold. We meet to grow closer to God and to each other as well as to obtain new knowledge. Newcomers and veterans alike learn from one another if this atmosphere is maintained even if someone is the presenter of a new topic.

Where and when (that is, the day and time) to meet should be mutually agreeable to all. All reasonable options should be considered with both its pros and cons before a decision is made. If there is on-going formation for the promised already in place, that day and time should be a pivotal point for all other scheduling.

Inquirers and Candidates each have essential topics that must be addressed in their separate sessions. Why Dominican? is based on the Approved Topics for the Southern Dominican Laity from 2002. Each topic is addressed in a separate module and often interwoven in another topic. If you are within the jurisdiction of another Province, please check with that Lay Provincial Executive Council to insure that you will receive proper instruction in any additional subject matter they find necessary.

Sufficient time must be given to each of these topics. The length of these stages of formation as stated in the Particular Directory for the Province must be adhered to in planning a schedule. Since the usual method of formation is for promised Dominicans on the Formation Team to present the topics of these two initial stages, the schedule of those on the Formation Team should receive special consideration since they must be present at the sessions they present as well as their own on-going formation sessions. Usually in these cases, all those who are promised meet for their on-going session and those involved in presenting the additional sessions to the Inquirers and/or Candidates schedule those sessions either before or after the on-going one, simply for convenience.

The length of each module/topic/session/meeting will vary. Each session should open with a Scripture reading or prayer and a brief period of reflection. The Liturgy of the Hours, perhaps as part of the closing activities, should be an integral part of each meeting unless the meeting immediately precedes or follows a Eucharistic celebration. Devotional practices should not be the focus of a formation study meeting, but should be scheduled at a different time/day.

Each session to be presented should be planned to include sufficient time for the presentation, any activities, and discussion. If possible, additional follow-up discussion should be planned at other times or on-line for those with computer access. Materials for each session should include a Bible, chalk and chalkboard or markers and poster board, name tags, a sign-in sheet, and whatever is needed for the specific activities. The Liturgy of the Hours should also be prayed.

Getting to know one another during meetings is an important part of forming community. This community building takes place during discussions and sharing, but also in the informal socialization before or after the more formal parts of the meeting. The seating arrangement during discussions should promote the sharing of ideas among peers rather than the question and answer seating of a lecture. Sitting in a circle or around a round table is suggested.

Camaraderie easily happens when people are encouraged to talk about other aspects of their lives. Confidentiality should be discussed at the initial meeting and remembered as personal information is shared. Having refreshments available before, or during, and/or at the end of the meetings also promotes conversation and informality. Ask permission of each newcomer to include contact information which is distributed to everyone so contact outside of the sessions is encouraged.

Materials are provided in Why Dominican? for both the “students” (Inquirers and Candidates) and the “teachers” (the Formation Team and Presenters). In one sense, these categories are artificial because all are learners. There are separate, specifically designed materials for each category, however. The materials for the Inquirers and Candidates are pre-meeting Study Guides which give the reading assignment for the study session and ask specific, reflective questions to enable the Inquirer or Candidate to participate fully in the session. The materials for the presenters contain some pre-session planning information as well as the basic lesson plan for the session.

The Inquirer or Candidate is asked to attend to the Study Guide only and not to access the materials for the Formation Team/ Presenters before the session. Sometimes the efficacy of the lesson will be based on the first impressions of the new participants to the ideas, questions, or activities presented. If they have already reflected on those things, the value of a first reaction will be lost. Accessing the materials after the session could be helpful in making notes or in journaling, however. Discuss the protocol that the group will follow at the “Come and See” or first session. Please use the “honor system” in adhering to this suggestion.

Considering Individual Needs

Dominicans embrace diversity; we do not just tolerate it. A review of a listing of canonized Dominican Saints will attest to that fact. The minimum age for entry into the Inquiry Stage is 21 years old in the Southern Dominican Laity; please check the minimum age for entry if you are a

young adult who lives in another Province. All adult Catholics in good standing with the Church and who have a passion for preaching are welcomed to become Inquirers regardless of various other factors such as origin, economic status, or education. Such a stance brings the blessings of the Lord, but also many challenges, especially with a group of “learners” in the initial stages of formation.

Dominicans believe in solid initial formation in Inquiry and Candidacy and a life-long commitment to on-going formation as well. Each person has an array of gifts, life experiences, and expectations. Every person has a unique personality and individual needs as well. Somehow, however, each person must blend into the Dominican Family locally as well as world-wide. Since this blending has occurred successfully for over 800 years, we know that it is enriching as well as possible, albeit challenging.

We also know that at least two academic areas must receive thoughtful and prayerful attention if this heritage is eventually to include the newcomer. Please attend to these areas in order to reap the most benefit from the program:

1. The newcomer must accept the Rule, the Particular Directory of his/her Province, and the Initial Lay Formation Program as the necessary foundation for living life as Dominican Laity. This will entail proceeding through the formation sessions as directed by the presenters regardless of a newcomer’s previous experience with the Order of Preachers. Newcomers will have various levels of knowledge of the essential topics that must be covered. Those who are truly beginners can benefit from the insight of those who are more well-read or who have been around Dominican thought and practice for years. Those who already understand the basic pillars of Dominican life can look deeper into the basis of his/her own thoughts as simple questions are asked and answered. Presenters require some teaching skill and creativity as well as the ability to facilitate discussions well. There will be some redundancy and review and opportunities to grow in patience.

As the sessions progress, each newcomer is asked to take the initiative in talking with the Formation Team so his/her individual needs in this academic area as well as in other areas can be addressed privately but specifically. Additional contact with the presenters or a mentor to clarify or to expand one’s understanding is a reasonable expectation for each person. Additional readings are always available to “fill in the gap” or to “deepen one’s knowledge” of the topic at an appropriate level. In this way, discussions on the same topic can develop with everyone participating. Check the Resources section of this web site for suggestions.

Particular care must be taken if a promised Dominican is not available to present the sessions of the initial stages of the Formation Program. Although a non-Dominican may possess excellent teaching skills and be indeed headed for Dominican promise him or herself, the fact remains that one cannot effectively teach what one has not yet had the opportunity to live as well as someone who has done so. In the Southern Dominican Laity, close contact with a Dominican mentor is necessary for approval to be given by the Provincial Executive Council for anyone other than a promised Dominican to assume this responsibility of being both a learner and a teacher at the same time. In such cases, this person must be well-prepared in advance and his or her fellow learners must be especially patient and supportive of these double efforts.

2. The newcomer must have a deep respect for each person, a respect that trumps any difference of opinion that may arise in the group. One of the important mottos of the Order is “Veritas” (Truth). Dominicans spend their lives searching for and illuminating the Truth in one way or another. Only God is omniscient. No one person, Dominican or otherwise, has that Truth packaged very neatly although we as Catholics do believe that the Catholic Church teaches Truth.

Inevitably, if there is a Dominican or a would-be Dominican in a group, there will be a heated discussion about a topic about which folks feel passionate. That is a good thing and is to be encouraged, with some guidelines.

It must be remembered that Faith is a gift, not something obtained by twisting someone’s arm of belief. No one should try to “out-do” the other. No one should try to convince the other to change to his/her own point of view. The goal should be to uncover the Truth through the bits and pieces of truth that exist in the various sides of opposing arguments. Dominicans call this type of investigation *disputatio* or disputation. St. Thomas Aquinas OP was famous for this type of questioning. It is a way to examine all sides of an issue objectively so that the total Truth may be pieced together. A person may thus recognize the Truth and with grace, embrace it.

Name calling, sarcasm, sullen silence, or any other demeaning attitude or behavior is to be totally absent in such discussions. Truth does not appear because of one’s level of education or understanding or previous or present involvement with the Church. It is discovered through God’s grace. Many holy people hold opposing views on important subjects. There is always the honorable approach of “agreeing to disagree” as everyone’s understanding continues to deepen. One must do so amicably as brothers and sisters in Christ and St. Dominic. Practicing this type of charity within one’s own group is good practice for when one addresses a sensitive issue with a non-believer or one who is aggressively opposed to however you think. Working “for the common good” and “finding common ground” are solid principles of conflict resolution even though some oppose them philosophically because of their private personal views.

Nonetheless, disputation is a principle that touches all four Pillars of Dominican Life. It enters into the process of contemplation and discernment. It gives proper direction in study and discussion. It helps to build trust within the Dominican community. It also enables the Dominican community to reach decisions about a group apostolate when all options are good ones. The topic of disputation will be addressed in more detail during initial formation.

The Discernment Process

Inquiry

There is evidence of God’s grace already working in anyone who seeks to grow deeper spiritually. It is assumed, therefore, that the serious Inquirer who wishes to become a member of the Dominican Order is already knowledgeable about the basics of the Catholic Faith, not necessarily as a scholar, but rather as an active Catholic who understands and practices the Faith openly in a Church community. It is for that reason that recent converts or those not yet of entrance age are asked to defer the Inquiry process until sufficient time has elapsed to practice the Faith that was learned and received and to do so deliberately in an adult fashion.

The Inquirer should take ownership of his/her own spiritual growth and seek personal ways to deepen his/her faith. Here are some spiritual habits that also assist in growing closer to God.

1. If you do not already do so, begin setting time aside daily to pray. Also say a prayer to the Holy Spirit just before you begin to read any study material. If you are familiar with the Liturgy of the Hours, continue to pray Morning and Evening Prayer. There will be instruction provided for those who are not aware of this prayer of the church.
2. If possible, attend daily Mass. Schedules often make this very difficult to accomplish. In such cases, try to attend a daily Mass occasionally in addition to the weekly Mass of obligation that you already attend.
3. Increase your practice of devotions such as praying the Rosary or praying in Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.
4. Obtain a spiritual director and regular confessor if you do not already have one. Enlist that person's support as you discern your vocation as a Lay Dominican. You should also have a Lay Dominican mentor from within the group if possible.
5. Continue to engage in spiritual reading on topics that connect to the topics being presented in the formation sessions.
6. Journaling is a powerful tool for growing spiritually, and now is a great time to incorporate it into your daily life if it is not already a habit you have. Begin by journaling particular thoughts that come to mind or portions of your study that make an impression on you. Be sure to note not only what impresses you, but why. You will not be asked to read from your journal at the meetings, but you may decide to share the thoughts contained in your journal in discussions if you choose to do so.

The Formation Team will also be available to assist you in the discerning process. This Team ideally consists of a Formation Director and other promised Lay Dominicans appointed by the Chapter, and the Spiritual Assistant of the group. In beginning groups, however, one person, him or herself an Inquirer, may be appointed by the Lay Provincial Executive Council to facilitate the group in accordance with provisions in the Particular Directory such as done in the Southern Dominican Laity. This person will be in close contact with a Mentor assigned to the group by the Lay Provincial Executive Council, enabling him/her to teach authentically and with confidence.

The discernment process is deliberately designed to take time and thus allow the person to move through the various stages of formation at a reasonable pace. The Rule states that the Inquiry Period must last a minimum of 6 months although it usually takes closer to a year to be instructed in the essential topics mandated at this stage. (That is why the Southern Dominican Laity's Inquiry Stage does last a full year.) During this time, the Inquirer is invited to become acquainted with the life of a Lay Dominican through the four Pillars of Dominican Life in order to discover which areas are strengths and which need to be strengthened. During this time, the Inquirer makes no commitment to follow the program or attend formation sessions and is free to leave at any time.

If a person decides that Lay Dominican life will not help him/her become closer to God, it is asked that he/she simply inform his/her mentor or someone on the Formation Team. No one

will try to reverse that decision, but someone on the Formation Team will ask to discuss it with the person if those involved in the formation program feel that the Inquirer may indeed have a vocation to become a Lay Dominican.

At the end of the Inquiry period, time for reflection or a retreat should be planned to focus everyone on the progress that has been made and the indications of a true vocation. Each Inquirer who thinks he/she is ready to proceed to the Candidacy Stage should then follow the procedure in the Particular Directory to make such a formal request. The procedure followed by the Lay Dominicans of the Holy Cross was to forward a letter of intent addressed to the Moderator/Local President of the Chapter/Group or the Chapter/Group Council through the Formation Director or a member of the Formation Team. It included:

1. The date of the beginning of the phase of formation
2. The approximate length of time spent in this phase of formation
3. A statement of desire to learn more about the Dominican Order
4. A statement of commitment to proceed to the next phase of formation
5. An explanation of personal reasons for this decision
6. Signature
7. Date of request

After a formal request is made, a mutually convenient date should be set for a personal interview. According to the Rule, criteria for advancement should include the person's attendance and participation in the meetings and activities of the Chapter/Group. Interviews should be conducted by at least two members of the Formation Team if possible. The interviewers may ask the person to give an oral or written response to some basic questions that will indicate the person's understanding and practice of the four Pillars. The decision to advance to the next stage of formation is a mutual one. This same procedure of a formal request followed by an interview and mutual decision is followed at each stage of formation: Candidacy and Temporary and Permanent (Perpetual) Promises.

Candidacy

According to the Rule, Candidacy lasts a minimum of one full year. This amount of time is necessary in order to become instructed in the essential topics of that stage and for the person to begin to practice living the Lay Dominican life. It is understood that when a person moves into the Candidacy Stage, he/she agrees to attend all the formation sessions for the full year. During that time, the Candidate is expected to take the initiative and become a serious student about the way of life of the Dominican Laity by committing time and reflection to the topics studied. Only at the end of the year, after a time of reflection or a retreat, may a Candidate decide to leave the program. If the Candidate chooses to proceed to make a Temporary Promise, he/she should follow the same procedure of making a formal request of intent according to the Particular Directory of the Province and schedule a formal interview. The decision to proceed to the next stage of formation is a mutual one.

Temporary Promise

The Stage of a Temporary Promise lasts for a minimum of three years. During this time, the person commits to following the Rule and the Particular Directory and attending the activities provided for on-going formation for the entire three years. In the Southern Dominican Laity, if

a person decides he or she cannot continue for the full three years, he or she must write a formal letter to the Moderator of the Chapter explaining the reasons for asking for a release from this commitment. A face to face discussion should be scheduled before a mutual decision is made.

A person may choose to renew the Temporary Promise for one or three years or choose to live the life of a member of the Dominican Laity for the rest of his/her life with a Permanent (Perpetual) Promise. The usual procedure of a formal request and one's intent and an interview is followed for either choice. Once Permanent (Perpetual) Promise is made, a person must adhere to the Rule and Particular Directory and be an active member of a local Chapter/group. In the Southern Dominican Laity, if age or disability or distance from a chapter or group prevents active attendance, the person may be officially designated as Prayer Member if a written request is made to the Moderator/Local President of the Chapter/group. Release from Permanent (Perpetual) Promise is a serious matter and must be requested in writing through the Moderator/Local President of the Chapter/group to the Lay Provincial President. There should be an appropriate discussion of the reasons before a decision is made.

It is important to understand, even at the very beginning stage of Inquiry, that becoming a member of the Dominican Laity is a true vocation. Keeping a Permanent (Perpetual) Promise as the goal of one's inquiry will eliminate the possibility of anyone thinking that the lay branch of the Order of Preachers is just like a membership in a type of club or another volunteer organization. A life-long commitment is not an on-again, off-again thing. Being a member of the Dominican Laity is not less important than being a member of one of the other branches of the Order. Honoring one's state of life as a lay person and embracing the full spirit of the Order of Preachers is a wonderful opportunity for those God has called to this vocation!

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