

Novitiate Module

Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic

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HISTORY OF THE LAY FRATERNITIES OF SAINT DOMINIC

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The Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic (formerly known as "Third Order of St. Dominic), has always attracted prayerful men and women with a deep love of the Catholic Church, an interest in living according to Gospel values, ongoing study of the Faith, and salvation of souls. "The Dominican Laity is an international family, a worldwide movement of apostolic cooperation within the whole Dominican family. It is a lay proclamation of the Gospel. In its history spans eight centuries and numbers in its family thousands of saintly lay men and women from every corner of the world." ("The Dominicans: A Brief History").

Fr. Richard Weber, O.P., wrote a detailed history of the Lay Fraternities in 1976. ("Dominican Laity: History, Purpose, Spirituality", undated). His history showed how the foundation for today's Lay Dominican started during the major economic and social upheaval in 11th century European countries. Many Catholics had been born in the feudal systems of the early Middle Ages. They were uneducated and rustic, and were served by clergy who were just like themselves.

The feudal systems started to crumble and people living in the isolated and poor villages moved into new towns where they became part of a middle class due to rising commerce and industry. Workers became interested in making money and individualism was increasing. "Paradoxically, the greatest problem was the false assumption that this culture was a Christian culture. The Church was established, the hierarchy was rich and powerful. Although everyone called oneself "Catholic", the level of religious commitment was low. Although the clergy were powerful, they were also largely corrupt." (Dominican Laity History, Purpose, Spirituality)

Meanwhile, a movement was underway for people who wanted a lifestyle of evangelical simplicity and Gospel values. This movement was the forerunner of the lay "Third Orders" and was named the "Order of Penitence." The penitents, representing all social classes, were seeking personal changes and reform in their Church. "The Third Order thus comes out of an unruly, pious, evangelistic, radical group, men and women unhappy with the decadence of a clergy and religious, repulsed by the formalism and superstition of the merely nominal "Christian", and deeply anxious to live a truly evangelical life." (Weber, p. 4)

The Dominican Order captured the spirit and the thrust of the times. Dominic Guzman founded his religious order in 1216 with the main mission of preaching. The relationship between the Dominicans, a clerical community, and the lay reform movement was one of mutual help.

"The Dominican orientation was, from the beginning, directed toward the people of the towns, towards the universities. These were the same people most affected by and interested in the "penitent" movement. From the first appearance of Dominican clerics in their town, large numbers of laity sought theological and spiritual direction from the Friars Preachers. The Dominicans, when they went to Paris and Bologna, Cologne and Barcelona, found that the people who welcomed them were the laity, not the parish clergy. Again and again the records speak of friction with the local clergy; but always the historical accounts speak of an eager acceptance by the laity who was seeking help to live a Christian life." (Weber, p. 6)

There are reports of the “Penitents of St. Dominic” beginning in 1225, but the exact relationship was not documented between the Order of Friars Preachers and the penitents. It was known that some laymen gave their money and goods to the Order and lived in the convents under religious obedience. Unfortunately, not all the penitents followed Jesus’ teachings on living in peace. In 1260 in Perouse, France, feuds and violence broke out among two different factions of the penitents. A holy hermit, Rainier, preached reconciliation and attracted large crowds. He began a march around Perouse followed by crowds of people singing hymns and chanting prayers. The civil and religious authorities were afraid of trouble, and they diverted the crowds into smaller groups, directing one group to enter by the north gate of the city, a second to enter the south gate, and still a third group to use the west gate. The groups became identified with the Church nearest their respective gates. In Perouse, they became known as the “Penitents of St. Augustine”, the “Penitents of St. Francis”, and the “Penitents of St Dominic.”

The Rule

The official beginning of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic, occurred almost 70 years after the Order was founded. In 1280, some of the penitents began to question the need for sacraments and the priests. Dominican Master General Munio de Zamora decided to set up an official organization for these lay men and women. He printed the first “Rule for Penitents of St. Dominic” in 1285.

In The Dominican Tertiary’s Daily Manual (printed in London, 1900), it noted that the “Third Order” was organized first to help with reform of Church discipline, and its initial purpose was the preaching of penance. “Second, to defend the Church and third, to develop the communion of prayer. The medieval ideal of Christ’s Mystical Body which has captivated all spiritual-minded people implies a harmony of prayer. To achieve this end, the contemplative and monastic Orders were begun; and the Third Order of St. Dominic endeavors to link pious souls to this great throng of religious.”

The “Tertiaries” followed a Rule that paralleled the Rule of clerics and religious sisters. Master de Zamora’s rule had 22 chapters of rules for the membership to follow. This original Rule for the laity was very strict. A penitent had to possess a certificate attesting to one’s moral life, good reputation, and orthodox faith. The postulant was required to have the zeal of Dominic for the defense and propagation of the Faith. Master de Zamora’s Rule demanded that one must have settled all debts and been reconciled to all enemies. Entry into the Third Order was decided by a majority of vote of Tertiary group members. Once the penitent had been accepted into the Third Order, the individual was forbidden to leave, except to enter another religious Order with solemn vows. A person could not leave to enter another Third Order or return to secular life. The ceremony of profession was a real canonical entrance into a religious Order.

The Dominican Third Order was designed for lay men and women to have an apostolate in the world, not for making salvation easier or to give structure to a penitent’s life. The tertiaries were also required to recite the daily Divine Office, as well as having obligations to attend to sick members. They fasted on Fridays and on the eve of principal feast days. Meat was only eaten on Sundays, Tuesday, and Thursdays. Once they joined the Third Order, they were no longer permitted to attend banquets, wedding parties, or dances. If one planned to travel out of town, one had to have their spiritual director’s permission. Tertiaries could, and were, expelled for grave or scandalous faults.

Revisions to the Rule occurred in 1923 to adjust to the Canon Laws of 1917. The Rule was then updated in 1967 following Vatican Council II. Amendments (i.e. “Declarations”) to the Rule were promulgated by the Masters General of the Order in 1987 and 2007.

The Rule of 1987 (Montreal) directs the Lay Dominican to use the following principle sources for spiritual growth:

- 1) listening to the Word of God and reading Sacred Scripture;
- 2) participating at daily Mass and the Eucharist (when possible);

- 3) receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation frequently;
- 4) praying the Liturgy of the Hours and daily exercising of private prayer (e.g. specifically meditating on the mysteries of the Rosary);
- 5) seeking conversion of the heart through spirit and practice of evangelical asceticism;
- 6) studying revealed truth and reflecting on contemporary problems in the light of Faith;
- 7) devoting oneself to the Blessed Virgin Mary (according to the tradition of the Order), to our holy Father St. Dominic, and St. Catherine of Siena, patroness of the Laity;
- 8) participating in periodic spiritual retreats (on an annual basis as minimum).

The Declarations of 2007 (Argentina; made effective August 8, 2008) clearly calls *“to fan anew the flame of the tradition and vocation of the Lay branch of the Order of Preachers...”* (General Declarations Regarding the Rule of Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic, Argentina, 2007). The Declarations affirm one’s vocational identity and the obligations of one’s Promise as canonically bound (without penalty of sin) to the Church and Order of Preachers.

“What’s In A Name?”

Throughout the centuries, Lay Dominicans were known by many names. A group of the penitents in the early Middle Ages became the initial members of the Third Order of St. Dominic and were known as either “penitents” or “tertiaries”. The term “tertiary” was commonly used up until Vatican Council II and its subsequent removal of numerical classifications within the Church (i.e. priests were First Order, cloistered religious were Second Order, religious in society along with the laity were Third Order). Members were then referred to as “Dominican Laity”. In 2007, the International Lay Congress met at the request of then Master Fr. Carols A. Aspiroz Costa, O.P., to further define the role and responsibilities of the Dominican Laity. With the Declarations of 2007, lay members of the Order became known as “Lay Dominicans”. Additionally, the Lay branch of the Order itself at that time, became universally known as the “Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic”, assuming the traditional term of “fraternity” when groups of the members were established.

The Spread of the Laity throughout the Centuries

Fr. Richard Weber, O.P., has observed that the history of the Laity has followed the pattern of the friars: “There is a flourishing, a decline, a reform, another flourishing, a decline, and a reform” (p.9). An example of this pattern is demonstrated in the Order’s early history when Pope John XXII wrote the papal bull, *“Cum de Mulieribus”* on June 1, 1326. It was a long report on the good works performed by the Dominican Third Order. Less than 25 years following the Holy Father’s bull, the plague of 1348 fell on Europe with one result being a gross disorganization and disinterest among the tertiaryes.

When Raymond of Capua became the Master General of the Order in 1380, he complained that there were no men in the Third Order, at least in northern Italy. “It was simply a group of pious old ladies.” These groups were known within the Third Order as the “Mantellata”. They would not receive young ladies into the Order; just widows of mature age. One of the greatest Dominican tertiaryes and subsequent patroness of the Laity was St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) who encountered her own set of difficulties joining this exclusive group.

St. Catherine and her followers led the first permanent and successful reform movement in the Order. She worked for the reconciliation of Florence and Pope Gregory XI. St. Catherine contributed to the return of the Pope from Avignon to Rome and did all she could to heal the Western Schism which broke out two years before her death. St. Catherine was 33 when she died in Rome on April 29, 1380. Pope Pius II canonized her and named her and St. Francis of Assisi the chief patron saints of Italy. Pope Paul VI declared her a Doctor of the Church.

Fr. Thomas Coffarini, O.P. and his co-worker, Fr. John Dominici, O.P. the Dominican Prior in Florence, played key roles in reviving the Third Order at the end of the 14th century. In 1405, in the papal bull *Apostolicae Sedis*, Pope Innocent VII gave canonical approval to the Third Order.

In the 16th century, St. Vincent Ferrer (1350-1490) contributed to the flourishing of the Third Order as he preached throughout France. His eloquent and passionate calls for repentance, as well as the great number of miracles wrought through God's Mercy, resulted in the conversion and reconciliation of thousands of souls. The fire of his countenance and preaching on the need to repent and reform one's life earned him the moniker of "*Angel of the Apocalypse*". A century later, in the New World of the Americas, St. Rose of Lima (1586-1617) convinced her family that marriage or life in a convent were not her vocations. She wanted to be a Dominican tertiary. St. Rose spent her life performing severe penances for the sins of the world and was known throughout Lima, Peru, for her acts of mercy. When she died in 1617, the people of Lima thought she was a saint. In 1671, St. Rose became the first canonized saint of the New World.

Another Lay Dominican saint from Lima (in the same era) was St. Martin de Porres (1597-1639). He was a "donado", a lay helper in a Dominican monastery. "The donados were members of the Third Order who offered their services to a monastery and lived there permanently, receiving food and lodging as compensation for their work. They took upon themselves the heaviest tasks and were considered as ranking below the lay brothers." (Cavallini, 2000)

Dominican missionaries preaching throughout the Orient in the 16th century brought many souls to Christ and consequently received many vocations into the Third Order. Many Dominican martyrs from the regions of Japan, China, and Indo-China were Third Order members. They gloriously fulfilled their penitential vocation in suffering the atrocities of persecution and death for the Faith.

A decline in vocations was prevalent throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Following the French Revolution, fraternities of Third Order members were reduced to and described as "parochial societies".

Since its inception, the Third Order of St. Dominic was comprised of lay men and women. However, many clerics and religious attracted to the life demonstrated by its members, became members of the Third Order. Fr. Arnold Janssen, a native of Holland who founded the Society of the Divine Word in 1875, was himself a Dominican tertiary. Fr. Janssen used the Rule of the Third Order for his priests until 1884. (Hinnebusch, 1985)

Dominican missionary, Fr. Edward Fenwick, O.P., wrote a letter to Fr. Luke Concanen in Rome to ask about receiving men and women as Lay Dominicans in the United States. He wrote, "I think the Third Order, if I understand it well, might be established with benefit to the pious people and much honour to our Lord." There is little information about the early tertiaries in the United States. One of the few records shows the reception of a Betsy Wells by the Dominican friars in 1826 at St. Rose Church in Springfield, Kentucky. (*Brief History of the Founder of the Order of Preachers*)

The celebrations marking the 700th year anniversaries of the Order in 1916 and St. Dominic's death in 1921 provided momentum for the Third Order. Pope Benedict XV, himself a Dominican tertiary, published an encyclical on the "Seventh Centenary of the Death of St. Dominic" on June 29, 1921. In it, the Holy Father addressed the needs of the Dominican Order, including the role of its tertiaries.

From the Dominican Tertiaries also, the Church expects much good, if by instructing the ignorant and the unlettered in the precepts of Christian doctrine, they try to conform themselves to the spirit of their Founder. It is our hope and desire that many of them will be constant in this work, since it is a matter of supreme importance to souls. Finally, we wish that all Dominicans will take special interest in promoting among the people the practice of reciting the Rosary. (Pope Benedict XV, 1921)

One tertiary, Blessed Bartolo Longo (1841-1926), had been a strong promoter of the Rosary and Marian devotions in the 1870s. He established a Rosary Confraternity and was instrumental in the building of the Church of Our Lady of Pompeii in Italy. Another tertiary in the 20th century, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925), was devoted to the Blessed Virgin and the Eucharist. He called his rosary, "my testament in my pocket." (Di Lorenzo, 2004). Pope John Paul II, on the beatification of Pier Giorgio in 1990, described Frassati as "the man of the Beatitudes".

Lay Dominicans in the 20th Century

The spirit of Dominican tertiaries in the 20th century was strengthened by international congresses, a revised organization, and giving members a larger role in decision-making. The estimated number of tertiaries in 1936 was 100,000 and grew to 130,000 by 1966. The number of Lay Dominicans in the early 21st century has been calculated to be over 200,000 members, with approximately 80,000 members in the Vietnamese Province alone.

In 1960, Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., wrote the article, "The Dominican Third Order: Old and New Style" that repeated the criticism of the Order's Laity as a devotional prayer society only for older people. He felt members were overly focused on the monastic practices of prayer and study, and failed to attract younger members. "The modern layman does not feel at home in the Third Order and seeks to give form to his apostolic aspirations elsewhere." Furthermore, he noted that the Lay members needed to consciously stand in the world as Christian apostolic laymen. "Tertiaries need to be involved with attaining the goal of the Dominican Order. Third Order members are therefore Christian laity who are involved with the apostolate of the First Order – proclamation of the Word – in the broadest sense of the word." (Schillebeeckx, 1960)

Fr. Charles R. Malatesta, O.P., disagreed with Fr. Schillebeeckx's description of the Dominican Laity as a "devotional prayer group." "This description denies the apostolic purpose of the Order", he wrote in his article, "The Purpose of the Dominican Laity." Fr. Malatesta stated that the first purpose of the Dominican Laity, the individual purpose, is simply to be Dominicans. The second purpose of the Laity, the purpose within the family, flows from the first; the Dominican Laity are truly members of the Dominican family.

Fr. Vincent de Couesnongle, O.P., Master General, wrote in his 1975 Christmas letter to the Order about the developing spirit of dialogue among the priests, brothers and sisters in the family.

Until now I have rarely encountered a deep cooperation of the brothers and sisters with the members of the lay confraternities of St. Dominic, who ought to be faced with the world as it is, an irreplaceable help and inspiration. Without them are we able to give to the world of today the new spirit which it needs and which can be found only in the Gospel of Christ? (Couesnongle, 1975)

At various times in history, the Laity have filled different functions among God's people. But in one way or another, the Dominican Laity must be engaged in the proclamation of God's Word, at the very least, by living it. As Fr. Christopher Kiesling, O.P., suggests, "Members of the Dominican Laity can share their insights about their faith with others, teach CCD classes, and participate in such apostolic activities as Marriage Encounter. All of these involve verbal proclamation, as does participation in dialogue homilies." (Kiesling, 1976)

An expanded vision of the Laity was proposed at the first International Conference of the Dominican family in Bologna in 1983. There, led by the Master of the Order, Vincent de Couesnongle, the members changed the concept of "lay Dominican" to include all men and women who "look to Dominic and the Order for inspiration." This definition includes men and women who are associates of many congregations of Dominican Sisters (Brief History of the Founder of the Order of Preachers).

In October, 1996, the Master of the Order, Fr. Timothy Radcliff, O.P., made a canonical visit to the United States. He celebrated Mass at Holy Rosary Church in Hawthorne, New York, and followed the Mass with a talk on the vocation of the Dominican Laity. He invited them to widen their sense of Dominican identity by developing collaboration with all the branches of the Dominican family.

At a time when the Church is invited by His Holiness Pope John Paul II to involve the laity, and especially women, more profoundly in its mission, our tradition means that we have a special contribution to make. Often the brethren are unenthusiastic about working to deepen the bonds between the friars and the other branches. We may be tempted to think of such work as another tiresome obligation when our hands are already full. Yet everywhere we have such a collaboration that is immensely fruitful and gives back far more to use than we ever contribute. (Radcliffe, 1997) [source not located]

Fr. Malatesta wrote that in God's plan there is a purpose for the Order's existence. "The Dominican Laity, as true members of the Dominican family, share in that purpose. Present and future members of the Dominican Laity are urged to reflect upon these ideas and penetrate ever more deeply into the vocation to which God has called them. Each Dominican, of whatever branch of the family, must do that; another cannot assume such a responsibility for any of us, nor should we expect another to do so." (Malatesta, pp. 17-18)

Master General, Fr. Damian Byrne, O.P., wrote in his 1987 letter on "The Laity and the Mission of the Order" that "The heart of the Dominican charism must be found in preaching, in the kerugma of the Word of God. To be a Dominican is to be a preacher." He continued by stating that the Order was born at a historical moment of special ecclesial crisis and at the same time of extraordinary vitality. "It was a moment of the awakening of lay movements and this influenced the foundational project of the mendicant Orders and created a new conception of the church, beyond the limits of parishes and dioceses. All through history, the Order has significant experiences which can help us to understand this new time for the laity; the incorporation of the Third Order into the Dominican project the evolution of the functions and ministries of the Cooperator Brothers, the incorporation of numerous female congregations into its mission. The memory of these facts is a challenge for these new times." (Byrne, 1987)

The Laity and the New Millennium – *Duc in Altum!*

The 21st Century began with Pope John Paul II's invitation to "*Open wide your doors to Christ*". The Holy Father's message of hope and his scriptural mantra of "*Be not afraid*" has been a source of courage and consolation to people worldwide. Faced with morals and values that have seemingly declined to the Biblical state of Sodom and Gomorrah, along with socio-economic and ecologic disasters that continue to devastate humankind, there is no better time for the Lay Dominican to answer the call of "*Duc in Altum! (Go out into the deep!)*".

Those answering the call within the first decade of this new millennium have brought a surge of energy to the Order. Inquirers are typically professional men and women in the 30-40 year range, holding advanced educational degrees, and who are seeking to deepen their spirituality in accordance with traditional values. The face of the Laity is changing once again!

As a true member of the Order of Preachers, the Lay Dominican must be diligent in prayer and contemplation, filled with the virtuous gifts of charity and humility, and knowledgeable in the Word of God and Church doctrine. One must also adapt to the times in order to be effective in evangelization. Computer networking has taken evangelization to a new height. Technological advances, to date, have enabled easy access to a limitless amount of information on the worldwide web, and have increased the speed and scope of communication through email and sundry social networks.

The Lay Dominicans of the 21st Century have 800 years of Dominican spirituality and tradition to support their evangelical efforts in proclaiming Christ's truth, hope, and unconditional love. Like their Lay Dominican brother, Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati, O.P., the Laity must become "living Beatitudes" in and for a world so in need of the love of Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the culture of the post feudal system and the status of religion of the times. What movement arose in reaction to this tepid spiritual climate?
2. Where and with whom did the Dominicans experience greatest acceptance and why?
3. Who is responsible for the first Rule for the Penitents of St. Dominic? When and why was the Rule promulgated? Discuss the official organization for lay men and women.
4. Discuss the evolution of the name "Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic."
5. When was canonical approval granted to the Third Order?
6. Discuss the contributions of various Dominicans such as St. Catherine of Siena, St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Rose of Lima, St. Martin de Porres, Blessed Bartolo Longo and Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati.
7. Comment on the following statement: "The Third Order is a devotional prayer society only for older people."

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