

The Third-Order of Saint Dominic

What is a secular Third-Order?

Canon 702 of the Canon Law code defines thus the secular Third-Orders: “*The Third-Order members are those who, in the world, under the direction of a religious Order and according to its spirit, wish to attain Christian perfection in a manner that conforms to a secular life and according to the rules approved for them by the Apostolic See.*”

The secular Third-Orders are therefore an association of faithful living in the world and whose goal is to search for Christian perfection by means inspired by the religious life and adapted to the secular state. The tertiaries imitate, as much as the world permits them, the life and spirit of the religious members and that is why the Third-Order members are called *brothers* and *sisters* and within the Order there are also such things as the *rule*, the *habit*, the *novitiate* and the *profession*.

In the religious family to whom they belong, the tertiaries constitute the *Third-Order*, after the brothers of the great or *first* Order and the cloistered nuns of the *second* Order. Therefore, even though they are not religious, nevertheless the secular tertiaries belong to the religious Order whose name they bear. They have an *effective and real part* in the life of this Order and not only in its merits or its spiritual benefits. These considerations help understand the great value of the Third-Orders and why the Church recommends them so much and holds them in great esteem.

The secular Third-Order of Saint Dominic

◆ *Origin*

The Third-Order of the Friars Preachers, also called *Order of Penance of Saint Dominic*, goes back to Saint Dominic himself. At its origin we find two distinct institutions:

- *The Militia of Jesus-Christ*, lay military organization founded by Saint Dominic in collaboration with Archbishop Foulques of Toulouse, (France) to fight against the Catharian heresy;
- *Fraternities of lay penitents*, formed in the cities where the Order of Preachers had founded convents.

In 1285, the seventh master general of the Dominicans, Munio De Zamora, united these two institutions into one Third-Order for which he wrote a rule that was later approved by Pope Innocent VII, in 1405. As a result of this double origin, the Third-Order of Preachers is both an *association of penance* and a *militia combatting in the service of the Truth*.

◆ *Goal of the Third-Order of Saint Dominic*

The Third-Order of Saint Dominic has two goals:

- A *general goal*, which consists in promoting “the personal sanctification of its members by the practice of a more perfect Christian life” (*Constitutions*, article 2);

- And a *special goal*, based on the special ends of the whole Order of Saint Dominic, that is to say: “procure the salvation of souls by means in conformity with the state of the faithful who live in the world.” (*Ibid.*)

The General Goal

Essentially, this general goal does not differ from the goal of every Christian life, which is to tend towards the perfection of Charity according to the precept of Our Lord: “Be thou perfect as thy heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48) Every baptized person must love the Lord with his whole heart, his whole soul, his whole mind and his whole strength and act out in his life all the aspects that this commandment implies (charity towards God and neighbor; practice of the virtues; a certain contemplation of God).

But he who takes this obligation to attain perfection seriously, searches for the means most efficacious to attain that end. The Third-Order thus offers a series of means, both practical and very traditional, analogous to those proposed by the religious life, but without vows or community life and adapted to the family and professional life of one who lives in the world. These means help the tertiary advance more easily, more surely and more quickly to the Christian perfection to which he aspires.

The Special Goal

As for the *special goal*, it recalls the specific vocation of the Order of Saint Dominic, which is to “procure the salvation of souls” by the *preaching* and the *defence* of the Faith.

The constitutions of the Great Order specify how we must understand these words, using a formula of Saint Thomas Aquinas (II-II, 188, 6): “We must pursue this end [procuring the salvation of souls] by preaching and teaching out of the abundance and plenitude of contemplation, according to the example of our Holy Father Dominic who would talk only with God or about God, for the benefit souls.” (Const. 2, § II) In other words, apostolate, the “procuring the salvation of souls”, cannot be separated from prayer and contemplation of the Truth: it requires an intense activity, but it has to derive from contemplation which must be its principle, according to the word of Saint Thomas which has become the motto of the Order: “*Contemplari et aliis tradere contemplata*” – “contemplate and deliver to others the fruit of one’s contemplation”.

This point is capital and needs to be well understood: procuring the salvation of souls is a work that needs to proceed from the interior life, not only to become supernatural, like all activity that has God as its end, but also to be totally itself and achieve its proper nature. Otherwise apostolic action is denatured and in the long-run, can even fall into a form of naturalistic action that overestimates the use of human means to the detriment of supernatural action and lowers Christian apostolate to the level of a mere enterprise of human inspiration.

This is why the Third-Order of Saint Dominic combines the requirements of a *contemplative life* (liturgical prayer, meditation, spirit of penance, study of the revealed Truth...) and those of the *apostolic action* in order to procure the salvation of souls. This is precisely the example that Saint Dominic gave us, whose soul was devoured by a “surprising ambition and nearly incredible desire for the salvation of souls”¹ and who spent his nights in prayer at the foot of the altar crying out: “O Lord, what will become of poor sinners!”

¹ — Chronicle of Blessed Jordan of Saxon, first successor to Saint Dominic at the head of the Friar Preachers.

◆ *Means proposed*

These means or “observances” are codified in the *constitutions* or *rule* of the Third-Order. We will content ourselves with briefly explaining them. They form *four great axes* around which the life of the Tertiary is organized:

1 – “Principally, assiduous prayer, liturgical as far as possible”

By “principally” the rule indicates, from the beginning, that *prayer*, which is a common obligation to all the faithful, must be practiced more assiduously by the Tertiary and that it constitutes the first means of sanctification proposed by the Third-Order.

By this “assiduous prayer, *liturgical* as far as possible”, the constitutions mean the recitation of the “*Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary*” or the *Holy Rosary* (article 28) which they consider as a true liturgical office, prayed for the intentions of the Holy Church in order to offer to God the worship due to Him and to obtain from His divine mercy the graces that are needed by all souls. The distribution of this prayer during the whole day gives it a deeply sanctifying character since it reminds the Tertiary of the thought of God and helps create a healthy balance between prayer and duties of state.

Prayer is essential to the Christian life and without it neither sanctification nor apostolate is possible. “Mountains of prayer” would be necessary today to cure our world that is so sick. That is why the Third-Order of Saint Dominic instructs its members to receive regularly the Sacraments of Penance and of the Eucharist (article 35) and to practice a true life of prayer, encouraging them in particular to “devote themselves every day to mental prayer” (article 37) inviting them to “apply themselves readily to pious exercises in compliance with the spirit of the Order, especially devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, to the Blessed Virgin Mary and suffrages for the souls in Purgatory”.

It is necessary to note that these prayers prescribed by the rule are not imposed under pain of sin and that they are to be rendered according to one’s state, that is according to one’s availability in time and health and one’s duties of state. This does not mean that the choice of observances is left to the free initiative of each Tertiary but being that the rule is there to help and facilitate the sanctification of souls and not to overburden them, the principle of dispensation applies (article 75). Consequently no one should feel prevented from joining the Third-Order of Saint Dominic because he thinks that the requirements are too difficult and that he won’t have the time to do all that is asked. One does not have to do everything at once, from the beginning: the constitutions envisage a notable time of probation (the “postulancy” and two years of “novitiate”) which enable aspirants to become more familiar with the observances and customs of the Third-Order and slowly progress.

2 – The practice of penance

This is the second axis and one of the typical features of the Dominican Third-Order whose official name contains a reference to the spirit of penance: “Third-Order of Penance of Saint Dominic.” We need to do penance because we are sinners; but in addition to this general necessity that all Christians need to follow, the special reason for which the Third-Order invites us to do penance is because its goal is the salvation of souls. The supererogatory sacrifices and penance of the Tertiary are generously offered up for this intention: to make reparation for the errors and sins that are committed in the world, to save poor sinners, to save souls from hell, to convert them...

As an example of penance indicated by the constitutions, there are some fasts (for the vigils of certain feasts, Fridays in Lent; article 41) and the voluntary deprivation of worldly outings and amusements through vain curiosity. (Article 43)

In his *Manual for the Brothers and Sisters of the Third-Order of Penance of Saint Dominic*, Reverend Father Jandel (who was Master General of the Order under Pius IX) wrote these lines on the spirit of the Cross and mortification that are more than ever of current interest:

“It appears that there is a desire to eliminate physical mortification from the catalog of virtues prescribed by the Gospel. A multitude of Christians, let us say even of people who make profession of piety, do not understand its necessity and do not even seem to guess its motives. One will admit, at least in theory, that there is an obligation to perform spiritual mortification, mortification of the will: one will even note and exalt the merits of interior renuncements; as for physical mortification, it is, as they say, only a means: it is the heart, more than the flesh that one has to circumcise and immolate; Our Lord teaches this to us Himself: “it is the Spirit that vivifies, the flesh is for nothing”. (Jn 6:63) And on top of that, we fall into an easy and comfortable life, soft on one’s nature, without worries and remorse and we do not realize all of the illusion and error hidden under this specious appearance of the Truth. Without doubt, *it is from the heart that life proceeds* (Proverbs 4:23) and all of man’s perfection consists in the conformity of his will to God’s will. But doesn’t mortification enter in the plan of God’s will ? [...] Understand this well: the more a corrupt civilization will multiply around us the seed of pleasure, refinements of luxury and of flabbiness, the attraction of pleasure and sensuality; the more human intelligence will become accomplice of the passions and the senses, putting to their service the lights of its degenerated wisdom, consecrating its discoveries and the progress of its works to the satisfaction of material pleasures, the more the faithful Christian will need to protest against this disorder and protect himself by renewed vigilance and of salutary rigor.”

3 – “Works of the Apostolate for the defense of the Faith and the Church”

This third series of means is directly in line with the special end of the Order of Saint Dominic. The Tertiary of Saint Dominic must be a “Champion of the Faith”.

The children of Saint Dominic are familiar with the words given by God to Saint Catherine of Sienna, the patroness of the Third-Order:

“Look upon the ship of your Father Dominic, my beloved son, and see how everything is disposed there in perfect order. He wished that his brothers have no other thought than my honor and the salvation of souls, by the light of science. It is this light that he chose to make the object of his Order. [...] His office was that of the Word, my only Son. He appeared to the world as an apostle, so powerful was the truth and brilliance with which he sowed My word, dissipated the darkness and spread the light. He himself was a light that I gave to the world, through the intercession of Mary; his mission, in the mystical Body of Holy Church, was to eradicate heresies.” (Dialogue of Saint Catherine, Vol. II, Chap. 5)

In this area, the rule encourages thus the Tertiaries to have a true zeal for the propagation and the defense of the truths of the Faith, in particular by helping the brothers of the Order in their works of the apostolate and by performing works of spiritual mercy: teaching catechism, apostolate of the Rosary, organization and participation in study circles... (Art. 47-50)

4 – “Charitable Works”

Charity must start with those who are closer to us, especially other Tertiaries, in particular by visiting and caring for the sick and by prayers for the dead, very much in honor in the Order of Saint Dominic. (Art. 51-55) But the rule invites us also, according to the necessities and possibilities of each individual, to perform acts of temporal mercy towards those who are in need.

One point needs to be underlined: the Third-Order is a true family, organized in “Fraternities”, united in the same ideal and by supernatural links of affection. The Fraternity which unites the Tertiaries of a same location is, so to speak, the core cell of the Third-Order. It is that Fraternity, through its regular meetings, its periods of prayer, its formative activities, that enable the Tertiaries to have a certain form of community life and to live like brothers, “*cor unum et anima una*”, one heart and one soul. The members of the Fraternity will therefore try to know each other, keep close contact, help each other and give the best of themselves in order to make a spirit of family and true Charity reign in their Fraternities that they might be more fervent, radiant and joyful. The Tertiaries recite Psalm 132 during Compline from the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary: “*Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum* – how good it is and sweet to live together as brothers”. We should not contradict these words and live in indifference towards others in a same Fraternity.

To conclude, let us mention this beautiful text from the Dialogue of Saint Catherine of Sienna, in which God talks to the saint. It summarizes well the spirit of the Third-Order of Saint Dominic, spirit of firmness and mercy, of faith, truth and joy:

“This is how Saint Dominic, thy Father, has prepared his ship. [...] The discipline found there is royal: in the rule he did not want to oblige under pain of mortal sin. It is I, the True Light who enlightened him in this matter. By doing so, my Providence wanted to respect the weakness of the less perfect: for despite the fact that all those who observe the constitutions are perfect, nevertheless there are some that are, in this life, less perfect than others. Accordingly, perfect and non-perfect are at ease on this same ship. *Dominic is therefore in full accord with My Truth in not willing the death of the sinner but his conversion so that he may live.* Consequently, his religion is all open, all joyful, all perfumed: it is like a garden of delights.” (Dialogue, Vol. II, Chap. 5)

◆ *Conditions of admission into the Third-Order*

Rather than conditions, these are actually dispositions. To enter the Third-Order of Saint Dominic, one must “*sincerely desire to attain to Christian perfection and give hope of perseverance in his pious intention*”, as the rule mentions. (Article 8) It is obviously an essential disposition because it is the very reason for the existence of the Third-Order.

Nonetheless, the rule does not stipulate that one must be advanced in the ways of the spiritual life: entrance into the Third-Order is not a reward or a goal in itself, but a starting point, a help provided to simple Christians who are desirous of sanctifying themselves.

The constitutions also specify that whoever applies for admission into the Third-Order must be “as should be a son of Saint Dominic, *a zealous apostle of Catholic truth*,” (Article 8) in other words, whatever the concrete possibilities of apostolate that are presented to him, he should have, anchored in his soul, a deep love of Catholic truth and a desire to defend it and make it triumphant always and everywhere.

This devotion to the Church and to Catholic truth is of particular importance today in these times of crisis: more than ever, in a time where the Church is being assailed by its enemies and betrayed by its friends, we should make all our efforts to love it, defend it, honor it and serve it, "in particular by fighting against the modern errors of naturalism, liberalism and modernism." (Article 8)

This being said, "all the faithful that present these good dispositions, man or woman, clerical or lay people, married or single" (Article 9) can be part of the Third-Order of the Friars Preachers. There is no restriction on the social condition, science, fortune, profession, etc... The doors are wide open to all those who understand the importance of sanctification and the work of the salvation of souls, particularly in our world profoundly secularized and de-christianized. *If therefore God gives you a special attraction to the religious family of Saint Dominic, and you believe to have the dispositions aforementioned, there is nothing else that is needed, and you must not hesitate to look into it and pray that God may give you light in order to know His will.*

◆ *Course of Admission and Training*

As soon as he has made his request for admission into the Third-Order, the Postulant is assigned to a Fraternity. (Except if he lives in a region where there is no fraternity, in which case he remains an "isolated" Tertiary.)

When the period of probation has been completed, he receives, according to a pre-determined ceremonial, the *habit* of the Tertiaries, which is a little white scapular that he will wear from then on under his usual clothes ². He then becomes a "Novice". As soon as the scapular has been legitimately received, the Tertiary participates in all the spiritual benefits of the Brothers and Sisters of the Order.

◆ *The benefits of the life of a Tertiary*

Without being able to give an exhaustive list of all the benefits that the Third-Order brings to the Tertiary, let us mention a few of the most important ones.

The Third-Order provides a spiritual family

The Tertiary truly and canonically belongs to a religious order, in this case the Order of Preachers, and obtains all of the spiritual benefits that this religious family possesses (indulgences, privileges granted throughout the ages, patrimony of merits and benefits of the communion of the Saints of the Order...). He is the brother or the sister of countless Saints, Blessed, Martyrs, Confessors and Virgins that the Order of Saint Dominic has produced in eight centuries of existence, and endeavours to imitate this army of models, helpers and intercessors in whose following he has placed himself. Like them he has the same Father and Founder, Saint Dominic, the same Mother, the sweet Virgin Mary,

² — White is the symbol of light. It makes up, with the color black, symbol of penance, the Dominican colors. Black and white: the union of these two colors evoke perfectly the radiance of light casting out the darkness, the fight for Truth eradicating error, the work of grace destroying sin: here is suggested the whole Dominican ideal.

The scapular of the Tertiary evokes the scapular of the Brothers and Sisters of the great Order, given directly to Blessed Reginald of Orléans by the Blessed Virgin Mary at the very beginning of the Order. This is why, as the prayer for the reception of the Scapular says, "it is the main part of the habit of the Preachers, guarantee of the maternal love given us from Heaven by the Blessed Virgin Mary, who took us under her wings and her protection (*scapula*)."

Mother of the Preachers and an incalculable number of Brothers and Sisters, among whom number the great Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Saint Catherine, the virgin of Sienna, Patroness of the Third-Order. In the Third-Order alone, we count many elite souls. Here are just a few from the Anglo-Saxon world:

Eleanor of Castille (called " the nursing mother " of the English Province), wife of King Edward I of England, who reigned from 1272-1307; King Richard II of England, who reigned from 1377-1399;

Blessed Adrian Fortescue (1476-1539), attached to the priory in Oxford, a married man with five children, who was martyred by beheading on July 9th, 1539 and beatified by Leo XIII in 1895; Queen Maria Clementina (née Sobieski, daughter of John Sobieski, the Polish hero who defeated the Turks), wife of King James VIII of Scotland and III of England (he was proclaimed in Edinburgh in 1745 but was never crowned there or anywhere else, and his throne was occupied and still is by a Protestant usurper) : when Maria Clementina herself died in Rome in 1735, her body lay in state in St. Peter's, clothed in the habit of the Third-Order of St. Dominic.

If we consider our present times, we should take note that each Tertiary, because he is attached to the Third-Order, *is pulled out of his isolation*. He finds great encouragement at the thought that he is not alone, that others like him, on the same days and often at the same hours, perform the same exercises of prayer and penance, follow the same rule, obey the same observances, make the same privations, in short, strive to sanctify themselves in the same manner despite these tragic times and are impassioned with the same apostolic zeal. Each Tertiary feels his enthusiasm increased ten-fold by this community of effort and sacrifices.

Other benefits

If we now consider the personal advantages, those that concern individual sanctification, we will retain the following points:

1. – *Affiliation to a Third-Order helps to avoid and repair for sin.* Without a doubt Creation in itself is "good" and even "very good" (Genesis 1:31) but after our parents' first sin, man has a tendency to turn towards himself what he should offer to God, to use Creation to serve his selfishness and flee from God rather than tend towards Him. That is why man, harmed by sin, has to continually control, curb and mortify his will. In this respect, the penances of the rule, freely chosen, strongly help to avoid any possible sin and repair the wrong usage of goods in the past.

2. – *Affiliation to a Third-Order provides more liberty to love God and allows one to give to God something that is more gratuitous.* The way proposed here goes further than the sole precept of Charity, in that it pertains to means that are in themselves not strictly necessary to the perfection of Christian life. One can save his soul and become a saint without belonging to a Third-Order.

But, as we said, to embrace voluntarily a rule like the one proposed by the Third-Order helps the heart to free itself from base or pre-occupying pleasures that impede or tempt it. Abnegation is rendered easier. Furthermore, it encourages one to give of oneself more and gratuitously, far more than is strictly required by the Commandment of God. God who is so good and knows well what love is, does not want to deprive us of the joy of giving and giving freely, but this can only be done with the *sacrificing of good things*, because the bad things have to be renounced necessarily.

3. – *Finally, affiliation to a Third-Order prepares us for life in Heaven.* “It passes the figure of this world” (1 Cor 7:29), so let us live from now on in the hope and desire of the goods to come: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” So the Third-Order, by removing us from the vanities of creatures and by fortifying us in charity and its growth, contributes powerfully to fixing our wills and our hearts “where our real joys are”. (Collect from the 4th Sunday after Easter)

To conclude, let us read *these strong words of Pope Benedict XV* (Letter from August 4th 1919):

“To save Christianity from the plague of heresies by which it was pathetically devastated, God raised up in the 13th century this miracle of zeal and virtue that was Saint Dominic of Guzman. It is through him that the Lord instituted a glorious phalanx of apostles. Today no less than in the times of this valorous champion of the Faith, a pestilential breath of all sorts of errors and prejudices insinuates itself in the Christian people. [...] Thanks be to God the Order of Saint Dominic is still present. [...] Today, as in the times of this great Patriarch, it offers a sure refuge against the excesses of depraved humanity. That is why, We, knowing it well, appreciate greatly and paternally love the so illustrious and meritorious Dominican family. *The strong desire to obtain the salvation of souls invites us to guide the faithful to the means of sanctification that will preserve them from threatening dangers. So too, We exhort all those who desire to sanctify themselves and sanctify their neighbor, to enroll under the white banners of Saint Dominic.* For, with a special protection from the Blessed Virgin Mary, his eminent Order has exerted during the centuries and will continue to exert even more today a providential mission.”

And in an autograph letter addressed to Reverend Father Ferreti, O.P. on September 6th 1919, the same pontiff Benedict XV insisted on the good done by the Third-Order of Saint Dominic:

“In the middle of so many perils from all sides that set traps to the faith and the morals of the Christian people, it is our duty to protect the faithful by proposing to them *the means of sanctification that appear to us to be the most useful and most opportune for their defense and advancement. Among these means we recognize that there is one that counts among the most remarkable and easy to follow and at the same time is one of the surest: the Dominican Third-Order* that the glorious Saint Dominic of Guzman received the inspiration to establish, he that knew so well the traps of the world, as well as the salutary remedies in the divine doctrine of the Gospel, *in order that within this affiliation all classes of persons can find the means to satisfy their desire of a more perfect life* ³.”

For more information, please contact :

**Father Director of the Third-Order
Couvent Dominicain de la Haye-aux-Bonhommes
49240 Avrillé – France**

Phone: (33) 2 41 69 20 06 – Fax: (33) 2 41 34 40 49 – Email: st-dominique@wanadoo.fr

³ — Letter printed in *La Vie Spirituelle*, t. II, p. 74-75.