

Orientation and Introduction to the Dominican Order

We welcome you today for the first stage of Formation in the Lay Dominicans. This first year is known as “Inquiry”. For the next year you will be learning the fundamentals of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans). It is only the beginning of a lifetime of continuous learning. Fundamentally, Dominican life is centered on four “Pillars” (key characteristics of the Order that make the Dominican Order what it is): Community, Prayer, Study, and Preaching. Upon the completion of the Inquiry year, the Formation Director will present to the Chapter Council a list of Inquirers who qualify for reception into the Order. If the Chapter Council is in agreement, then the Inquirer receives the Dominican pin (usually in a reception ceremony) and begins the next phase of formation, “Candidacy”.

For one year, the Candidate attempts with the help of God and the Chapter to be formed as a Dominican. At the end of this year, the Candidate asks to make Temporary promises for three years. The new Temporary Promised is given the Dominican Scapular and the Rule and Directory of the Chapter.

The Lay Dominicans are a part of the world wide Order of Preachers, otherwise known as the Dominican Order. In some areas Dominicans are also known as “black friars” because of the black cloak and Cappus that the Friars and religious wore for travel and during Lent.

The Order had its beginnings in 1203 when St. Dominic of Guzman was sent with his bishop to arrange a marriage between the son of the king of Castile and the daughter of the Lord of the Marches. While traveling through southern France, Dominic was appalled at the major inroads a heresy known as Albigensianism was making in that part of the world, (so called because it started in the town of Albi). Albigensianism taught that all matter was evil and all spirit was good, and that the “good” God created the spirit realm while a demon god created and reined over the corporal world. This meant that all material things and pleasures had to be rejected.

The “Elect” of their society lived strictly, while everyone else could do whatever they desired , as long as they accepted all Albigensian teachings as true. They had to renounce the Catholic faith and , instead, admire and respect their Elect.

As soon as his mission was completed, and with permission, St. Dominic resolved to return to Southern France and endeavored to counteract this heresy with the preaching of the truth. It must be remembered that at this time it was not common for any priest to preach – only the Pope and bishops could preach. Dominic began to attract many men and lay people to him. The lay people at first were known as the “Militia of Christ,” and would soon be given a rule and become known as “The Order of Penitents”. This was the beginning of the “Third Order” or more commonly known today as Lay Dominicans, which is now the largest branch of the Order.

As time went by, Dominic realized that it was not just Southern France that needed the preaching of the truth, but rather the entire world. With the approval of the Holy See, Dominic began to assemble a band of well-educated men to be itinerant preachers. Eventually they were to become the Order of Friars Preachers. He dedicated the Order to preaching, winning souls for Christ. St. Dominic placed great emphasis on study. A preacher had to be educated to know what he was talking about before he got into the pulpit. Another characteristic of the Order that was even more innovative for the time was the democratic spirit of the Order. All superiors were to be elected for certain limited terms, and laws were to be made by elected delegates. It is this democratic characteristic that has allowed the Dominican Order, of all the major religious Orders, the ability to be able to reform itself from within – the Dominican Order has never split into several different Orders, as have the benedictines who are in several groups (Trappists, Cistercians, and regular Benedictines), or the Franciscans (who are Conventuals, Capuchins, and Minors), or the Carmelites (who are either Calced or Discalced).

At about the same time as St. Dominic was gathering a group of men around him to be the nucleus of the Order, he also founded a monastery of cloistered nuns in Prouille near Toulouse. Most of these were women who had been Albigensians, but who had returned to the Church and wanted to continue to serve God in some kind of Catholic religious life. Thus, the Friars, the Laity and the nuns came into being at roughly the same time.

The Dominican Order or Family is worldwide and is composed of various branches. First are the Friars. Second are the cloistered nuns, living in monasteries. Third are diocesan priests and apostolic Sisters/Brothers (Third Order Regular/Religious). Lay Dominicans are Third Order Secular, living in the secular world, not in a conventual setting.

The head of the Order is known as the Master of the Order. He has direct jurisdiction only over the Friars, Nuns, and Laity. The convents of Dominican Sisters are under Pontifical jurisdiction. Each convent has a Superior.

In the United States, there are four Dominican provinces: Eastern, Central, Southern, and Western. There are Lay Dominican Chapters located in each Dominican Province.

The units of Lay Dominicans are called Chapters. In the Southern Province, the Chapters are lead by a Moderator. The Chapter elects a Council which conducts the business of the Chapter. When necessary or desirable, a council's decisions are presented to the entire chapter for approval or input. Following the tradition of the Friars, all the officers including the members of the Council are elected directly by the Chapter. Chapters typically meet once a month. At the provincial level, there is also a Lay Provincial Council which meets annually.

Becoming a Lay Dominican is not like joining a club, a sodality, or even a Confraternity. One is joining a Religious Order, and becomes a Dominican in the fullest sense of the term to be taken very, very seriously. Inquirers and Candidates receive a period of formation. They make public promises to live according to the Dominican spirit and the Rule and Directory of the Chapter.