Inquiry Formation

Meeting Three

"History of the Dominican Laity"
by Father Richard Weber, OP

In 1974, on the seventh centenary of the death of St. Thomas Aquinas, I delivered a paper entitled: "A Modern Dominican Looks at His Out-Dated Patron." Though the title was meant to be facetious, its intent was serious: St. Thomas, not "Thomism," is the valuable heritage of Dominicans and the model of theologians.

The publication of that talk in ***Challenge***, however, provoked some comment. One Dominican director warned his chapter about "smart aleck, young Dominicans" who "attack" St. Thomas today and will soon, he warned, be "attacking" St. Dominic.

This present article is based upon a talk I gave to the Provincial Council of the Dominican Laity. Their acceptance of its thesis has encouraged me to prepare it for publication. But I feel that some who "read as they run" may misinterpret this article as well. Some may feel that somehow St. Dominic is "attacked," for I must state clearly and positively that the Third Order was not founded directly by Dominic.

This opinion is not set forth in any mood of iconoclastic deprecation; I do not mean to shock anyone by playing the role of destructive critic. Truth — Veritas — is the motto of our Order; and it is a far better guide than legends, however pious. My intent is not to make the Third Order less "Dominican" but rather to show just how essentially Dominican it is. My appreciation of the Third Order has been deepened by examining its history. I present this paper to my Dominican brothers and sisters in the hope that it will also help them to deepen their love of our Order.

Beginnings

Historians are under an obligation to discover how things really happened. This task sometimes makes them less than welcome partners. Cardinal Manning, in the 19th century, stated that, "the appeal to history is treason to the Church." Yet in the 20th century, Hubert Jedin has written that, "without a knowledge of history, a purified love of the Church is impossible." Welcome or not, historians must begin. And here they have developed an annoying habit. They have a compulsion to go far back in beginning their stories. John Tracy Ellis, for instance, in writing about Catholics in colonial America, began with the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 312.

Thus, it is not surprising that the "history" of the Third Order does not begin in 1285, when the Master General Munio de Zamora officially promulgated its Rule, nor back to the early years of the 13th century, when St. Dominic lived and worked. The "history" of the Third Order goes back

many decades before that. To understand what the Third Order is and whence it came, we have to look at the Church of the Middle Ages and the society in which it lived.

For at least a century and a half, romantic notions of the Middle Ages have colored our perceptions of the reality of that time. Slogans such as "The Thirteenth, the Greatest of Centuries" have no place in a serious discussion. Medieval society was complex. These were not "the best of times"; many medieval men believed indeed that they were the worst times. Vincent of Beauvais, writing in the mid-13th century, declared that the end of the world must come very soon, since the world could get no more sinful than it was then.

Yet, though the picture of the Middle Ages as "the Ages of Faith" is overdrawn, it is undeniable that certain Christian attitudes and ideals were helping to shape the lives of many people and influencing society. One such idea was that of *creatio* (creation). This was God's world; though men and women might be in revolt against God's law, the idea of God informed and shaped the thinking of both saint and sinner about the world. A second attitude was that of *perigrinatio* (pilgrimage). Life was seen as a journey through this world of tears and sorrows to a better world beyond death. Our conduct on this journey was all-important.

A most important concept was that of *ordo* (order). Everything in the universe is shaped according to a divine plan. The heavens run according to God's order; the earth, too, runs according to His plan. There is as well an order in human society and in human affairs. These various "orders" are interrelated; they mirror each other. The macrocosm, the universe, is matched by the microcosm, man. Society must exhibit this order.

How were these attitudes and concepts applied in practice? The men and women of the Middle Ages faced enormous problems in adjusting a Christian concept of life to the intractable demands of daily existence. The majority of people still lived upon the land, in an agricultural society. Villages were isolated and poor; the people were without education. The rural clergy, like the people they served, were rustic and ignorant. Leadership in this society had for centuries been the prerogative of a feudal nobility. These knights, romanticized in novels and movies as dashing, chivalric paragons of virtue, were often, in reality, a ruffianly lot: mafia-types in armor, living in drafty and unsanitary stone and timber stockades.

Problems

In the 11th century, however, the stagnation of the early Middle Ages in its feudalistic and manorialistic ruts began to end. An "urban revolution" occurred: people began to move into rapidly developing towns; commerce and industry began to revive; new lifestyles developed; and a bourgeois middle class began to emerge. The towns challenged all the established conventions of the Middle Ages; they challenged the Church as well. People became interested in making money. The rough communalism of the early Middle Ages was challenged by a rising individualism.

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. Yet although everyone called himself "Catholic," the level of religious commitment was low; although the clergy were powerful, they were also largely corrupt.

The greed and ignorance of the clergy are a constant theme in the writings of the Middle Ages. Learned treatises and popular songs and stories told of the parish priest who knew only enough Latin to mumble through a Mass; of the priests who never preached; of the priests so avaricious that they would not administer the sacraments unless paid.

Besides the greed, there was also superstition. The conversion of tribes and kingdoms had often taken place by the simple command of a king or chief. The former shrines of pagan gods and goddesses had been transformed into shrines of Christian saints or of Mary. But people still visited these shrines with pagan ideas such as: "If I burn this candle for you, you must protect my crops," or "I will make an offering in return for your assistance." Too often the level of Christian observance was merely formal. Beneath the observance of Christian feasts and ceremonies the life was often unchristian.

Reform Movements

But the picture is not unrelievedly dark. Throughout the Middle Ages there was a constant demand for reform. It came from all classes of society. In the 10th century the German emperors tried to reform the Church; in the 11th, the reforming movement was led by monastic groups like Cluny and later the Cistercians. In the 12th, the call and dynamism for reform came from the laity. Changed social conditions helped to call forth this lay reform movement. Towns and cities had grown up; trade and industry had revived. A demand grew for a deepening of Christian faith. An example of this can be found in the wool-weaving trade. While weavers sat around doing their work, someone read to them, often from the Bible. Between readings the weavers began to discuss what had been read. For many it was the first time they had heard the Bible. They began to contrast what the Bible said a Christian should do with what they are doing; they contrasted what the New Testament said a preacher of the Gospel should be with how their own priests lived.

Such a movement for reform had varied effects. In some cases it led people to a deeper union with the Church, to work for reform within the body of the Church; in other cases, it led people out of the Church, to proclaim a "Gospel" that was set up against the "Church" of corruption and sin.

The lay-reform movement had no definite founders; it had no definite program, except for a return to the Gospel. This call for evangelical simplicity and values ran deep in the Middle Ages; medieval men and women had a "nostalgia for the Sermon on the Mount," as Ronald Knox expressed it.

“Order of Penitence”

The name generally applied to the movement at the time was “the Order of Penitence.” This “order” expressed the deep medieval concern for the order that must underlie all of human society. The members of the movement were called “penitents.” The movement cut across all borders and across all social classes. Penitents would appear in one area, then reappear in another. Orthodox or heretical, they were bitterly critical of the “establishment” in the Church: the bishops who were more concerned with politics, the lazy, greedy monks, the ignorant, grasping priests. Their cries against this kind of clergy found an echo at Rome where Pope Gregory VII had seized leadership of a reform movement that would transform the Church. The cross currents are vividly illustrated in the incident of Ramihrad, a layman of Cambrai in France. He was a “penitent” who preached against the corruption of the local clergy. He was seized and burned at the stake for heresy, in 1077, at the very time when the Pope in Rome was advocating the same thing.

The origins of the Third Order can be found in this lay reform movement, among the Penitents. The Third Order thus comes out of an unruly, pious, evangelistic, radical group, men and women unhappy with the decadence of clergy and religious, repulsed by the formalism and superstition of the merely nominal “Christians,” and deeply anxious to live a truly evangelical life.

All the reform groups of the later Middle Ages will have some connection with this movement. The Franciscan and Dominican movements will have a close relation with it. Out of this group as well will come all the heretics of the 13th century. There is thus an extraordinarily complex relation here, one that must be examined.

Third Orders

One type of relation is exemplified in the group called the *Humiliati*. These lay people had dressed in a kind of “habit”; most importantly, they insisted upon their right to preach. In 1184 they were excommunicated for heresy. In 1201 Pope Innocent III reconciled a portion of this group to the Church on the basis of a distinction: those who would preach must become clerics and be ordained. They became a clerical Order of Humiliati. Those who remained as lay people would form a lay Order of Humiliati, in dependence upon the clerical Order. The lay Humiliati are the first group to be described as a “Third Order.”

Another type of relation is shown in the history of the Franciscan Order. In the past it has often been alleged that St. Francis founded a lay Order, and that out of this lay Order finally evolved, to the founder’s chagrin, a clerical order. Father Cajetan Esser, a contemporary Franciscan historian, has disproved this. Francis founded first a clerical order. The Franciscans were “from the beginning a canonical order, although certainly with novel and new features.” Francis founded an order of men that was never consciously a lay movement nor yet exclusively a clerical community, but rather a combination of the two. But this Franciscan *fraternitas* was profoundly influenced by the lay reform movement and had close ties with it. Around the year 1221, Francis

decided to found a group of lay people associated with his original group. This was the founding of the Franciscan Third Order.

Here it is important to realize what the words “religious” and “religious order” meant in the 13th century. Profession of a particular rule and the wearing of a particular habit made one then a “religious.” Canon law of the time held that those who bound themselves “to a more difficult and holier life” are *religious*, contrasting them to those who lived a completely secular life. The contrast was between those who lived a “regular” life — the life of profession to a rule (*regula*) — and those who lived a totally secular life. In the 13th century meaning of the term, therefore, members of a “Third Order” were truly *religious* and their association constituted a truly religious *order*.

The Dominicans

At length we come to St. Dominic Here the relation, in one sense, is simple. Dominic founded a clerical religious order. He himself was a cleric, a canon; he founded his Order on the Rule of St. Augustine, a rule for clerics; the members of this order were clerics. But the inspiration of his Order, the spirit of his order, was the same inspiration and spirit that informed the lay reform movement; the integral gospel, an apostolic spirit, and evangelical poverty. The aims of the lay reform movement were applied now to clerics.

The Dominican Order captured the spirit and the thrust of the times. It appealed to men from the middle classes of the towns and cities; it appealed to the students of the universities that had grown up with the towns. Dominicans were so visibly associated with this class of people that when Thomas Aquinas, scion of a great, noble family, wanted to join them, he was forcibly restrained from doing so for a year by his brothers. The family of Aquinas had determined that Thomas would be a Benedictine — an order worthy of nobility; they would not allow Thomas to lower himself in social status to join the Dominicans, a non-noble community.

The Dominican orientation was, from the beginning, toward the people of the towns, towards the universities. And these were the same people most affected by and interested in the “penitent” movement. From the first appearance of the Dominicans in their town, large number 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 records speak of an eager acceptance by laity who were seeking help to live a Christian life.

The relation between the Dominicans, a clerical community, and the lay reform movement is, therefore, one of mutual help. Dominicans find support and material help from the laity; the laity find among the Dominicans their spiritual directors and counselors. The origins of a Dominican “third order” can be found in the “association” of the two groups, the lay groups associating and affiliating with the friars.

“Penitents of St. Dominic”

From 1225 onward, we begin to hear mention of the “Penitents of St. Dominic.” The depth and the extent of the association of these groups with the Order of Friars Preachers cannot always be accurately judged. It seems certain, however, that there was some kind of dependence upon local Dominican priories. Humbert of Romans gave a sermon to a group called the “Brothers of Penance,” obviously an important group of laity but not yet a “third order.” A small group of laymen entered into a close association with the Order: the “oblates.” They were laymen who gave their money and goods to the Order and lived in the convent under religious obedience.

The association of a “penitent” group with the Order is illustrated also by an incident in 1260 at Perouse. A holy hermit living in that locality — Rainier, by name — was distressed at the bitter struggle between the two factions of Guelfs and Ghibellines. Feuds and bloodshed were the results of this division. Rainier began to preach a crusade of reconciliation and attracted large crowds of people. He began a march upon the city, followed by the huge throng of people singing hymns and chanting prayers

The civil and religious authorities of the town, fearing a disturbance, diverted the crowd 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 the respective gate In that city, henceforth they were known as the “Penitents of St. Augustine,” the “Penitents of St. Francis,” and the “Penitents of St. Dominic.”

Dominican Third Order

In 1280 two factors operated toward some kind of regularization of this relation. First of all, by 1280, many of these lay penitent groups were drifting into heresy. From criticism of an individual priest there developed criticism of the entire sacramental system. “Why pay money to the priest, to give out the sacraments?” The question was then asked: “Why have sacraments at all? Why not be in direct contact with God, without priest or sacraments?”

The second reason was that Munio de Zamora, Master General of the Dominicans at that time, decided that an organization of some sort had to be devised for these people. Accordingly, in 1285, Munio de Zamora published a “Rule for Penitents of St. Dominic.” This is the foundation, the origin of the Third Order. 1285 is your birthday.

Early Rule

The Rule of Munio de Zamora was in 22 chapters. In order to enter the Order of Penitents of St. Dominic (we read in one chapter) one had to have a certificate that attested to one’s moral life, good reputation, and orthodox faith. According to the Rule, postulants must acquire the zeal of Dominic for the defense and propagation of the Faith. The apostolic end of the Order was clearly stated; all penitential practices were to be directed to the apostolate. The Dominican Third Order was never conceived of as a way of making salvation easier, or subjecting one to certain customs

or obligations. It was from the outset to be an apostolate in the world. The Rule of Zamora demanded that one must have settled all his debts and been reconciled to all his enemies. The habit was a white tunic and black cloak of simple material.

Approval of a majority of those who belonged to the Third Order chapter was needed for a postulant to be received. Once accepted, he was forbidden to leave, except to enter another religious order with solemn vows. In other words, one could not leave to enter another Third Order, or return to "secular life." The ceremony of profession was a real canonical entrance into an Order. There was an obligation to recite the Divine Office, so far as possible. On Sundays and feast days from November 1 to Easter, members of the Third Order were obligated to recite the night office, Matins at 2 A.M. There were severe rules on fast and abstinence: fast every Friday and, of course, on the eve of all principal feast days; no meat was allowed except on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday. Members were to give up all worldliness, all banquets, revelries (the word used for "revelries" is basically the word for "wedding parties"), and dances.

Tertiaries were under obedience to their directors to such an extent that they could not leave town without his permission. There were obligations to sick members, and obligations to certain suffrage prayers.

Expulsion was possible for grave and scandalous faults. The director of the Third Order chapter was chosen by the Order and named to his office. The chapter itself elected a prior or a prioress from among its senior members.

A Second Tradition

There has been a somewhat divergent tradition about the origin of the Third Order. This tradition holds that the Third Order evolved from the "Militia of Jesus Christ," a group founded directly by Dominic. The tradition rests upon a statement by Raymond of Capua in the 14th century. It is the tradition that is repeated by Benedict XV in his encyclical letter of 1920 to the Third Order. But the tradition had been undermined by historical research.

First of all, this "Militia of Jesus Christ," even if it had been a part of the penitent movement (and we are not exactly sure whether it was or was not), had a different focus. It was for the military defense of the Church and Church members in those areas where heretics had taken over the administration of towns. In those cases the "Militia of Jesus Christ," a "vigilante" organization, protected the property of the Church and the Catholics. The aim of the penitents, on the other hand, was ascetic and evangelical.

Secondly, we have the documents that prove that the Militia was founded by Fulques, Bishop of Toulouse, a close and intimate; friend of St. Dominic. But no document associates Dominic with its founding. It seems very probable that Raymond concluded that since Dominic's good friend founded it, Dominic also must have some relation with it. But there is no evidence to that effect. The bishop of Toulouse is its sole founder.

Later the Dominicans did assume some responsibility for the Militia. The Militia was officially approved by Pope Gregory IX in 1233; two years later, in a letter to the Dominican Master General, the Pope instructed the Dominicans to take over the spiritual direction and guidance of the "Militia of Jesus Christ."

Dominicans were acquainted with the work of the "Militia of Jesus Christ," and, in northern Italy, Militia chapters were founded by Dominicans. For example, the Dominican Bartholomew of Vicence began the Militia in northern Italy. This is where the tradition arises. The picture is somewhat confused. But it is well established now that the origins of the Third Order are to be found in the "Penitent" movement and not in the "Militia of Jesus Christ."

[*The "Militia of Jesus Christ" has been revived in our own time, especially in France and attempts have been made to institute chapters in this country. The Master General of the Dominican Order was petitioned by members of this Militia to be associated with the Dominican Order but he has refused permission.*]

Munio de Zamora, then, gave the Rule to the Third Order in 1285. But this action antagonized the incumbent Pope, Nicholas IV. Pope Nicholas was a former Minister General of the Franciscan Order. He had an idea of what to do with the Penitent movement: attach all the penitent groups to the Franciscan Order. Thus, he was quite unhappy with de Zamora's action in affiliating a substantial sector of the penitent movement with the Dominicans. This, along with several other grudges which he seems to have had against Zamora, caused him in 1290 to demand that the Dominican General Chapter remove this Master General from office. The General Chapter met, and refused to remove him. In the next year, 1291 — Pope Nicholas deposed him personally. But by now the Third Order was firmly established, and survived.

Subsequent History

Historians of the Order have noted that the subsequent history of the Third Order follows the pattern of the First Order. There is a flourishing, a decline, a reform, another flourishing, a decline, and a reform. In 1316, for instance, Pope John XXII complains in a letter that "tertiaries" and "beguines" in large numbers were falling into heresy. But then he adds, "I exclude the Dominican tertiaries whose faith and docility to the Church are irreproachable."

By the 14th century both the Third Order and the First Order were in deep decline and seriously in need of reform. Raymond of Capua, who became Master General in 1380, complained that there were no men in the Third Order, that at least in northern Italy, it was simply a group of pious old ladies. These groups were called the *Mantellata*. The Mantellata would receive no young ladies, only widows of mature age. Catherine of Siena, for instance, found it difficult to break into this religious elite. Raymond criticized the Mantellata, declaring that while they may have been pious, they were much too exclusive.

While he was Master General he reformed the First Order, and approved the work of another Dominican, Friar Thomas Coffarini, to reform the Third Order. Friar Thomas began in Venice; he

preached the Third Order, opened it up to men and women and to young and old. Raymond wrote to Thomas that what he was doing was especially pleasing to him because it honored the Blessed Catherine, “my mother.” An eminent co-worker of Coffarini in reviving the Third Order was John Dominici, Dominican Prior in Florence, and one of the greatest preachers of the 14th century. In 1405, in the Bull *Apostolicae Sedis*, Pope Innocent VII gave canonical approval to the Third Order. Vincent Ferrer in the 14th century preached the Third Order throughout France. In the 16th century the Third Order was taken by Dominican missionaries to their missions in the Orient: to Japan, to China, and to Indo-China. A great many Dominican martyrs from those regions were members of the Third Order.

But, once again, as with the First Order, there was a decline during the 17th and 18 centuries. By the time of the French Revolution, the Third Order as well as the First, were in decline. After the French Revolution the decline continued. Chapters of the Third Order in France were described as “parochial societies.” In the mid 19th century, when Father Lacordaire renewed the First Order, he asserted that the first order of business was to renew the Third Order, and by way of underlining its renewal, in a ceremony in Notre Dame Cathedral, gave the Dominican habit to four youths, in 1844.

Conclusion

The conclusions I would draw from this brief history are these:

The Third Order has its origin in the desire of the laity for a radical, evangelical style of life. The Third Order found its origin in this and, I think, finds its continued reason for existence in this.

The Third Order became associated with the Order of Preachers because it found that the Dominican apostolate and the Dominican spirit of action and contemplation, was its aim, also.

The Third Order is truly an Order, an *ordo*, and Tertiaries are truly *religious* in the medieval sense of those words and the medieval sense of these words is much more relevant to contemporary conditions than the words of modern canon law.

The Third Order and the First Order are bound together in what I call a “symbiotic” relation. Webster defines “symbiosis” as “the living together in more or less intimate association or close union of two dissimilar organisms”: “a mutually beneficial relationship.”

The Third Order requires a clear program of apostolic aims for full flowering and productivity.

Throughout the presentation I have referred to the Third Order. The name has now been changed; it is now “Dominican Laity.” I think that this is to say, at least, a mistranslation, since it transposes the adjective and the noun. From 1217 to 1285 the term “Dominican Laity” would have been acceptable, but the history of our Order leads me to conclude that the term should be “Lay Dominican.” You are members of the Order by historical association and conscious

profession. Remember the groups led by Rainier the hermit. “You have gone in by the gate of St. Dominic.”

Additional Reading List
Dominicana

- Ch 3 (The History)
- Ch 4 (Mission of the Order)

Questions

Dominicana: A Guidebook for Inquirers
Ch. 3 (The History)

1. What background did Saint Dominic have before founding the Order of Preachers?
2. Compare the heresy of Albigensianism to the Pagan thinking of today?
3. In Saint Dominic’s last will and testament, what does he leave his Dominican Family? Apply this to your Dominican way of life.
4. What does he remind his followers at the very end of his Testament?

Ch. 4 (The Mission of the Order)

1. What is the common thread of the Order’s mission that flows through all branches? What is the Mission of the Order?
2. How does the Lay Dominican play a role in the Mission of the Order?
3. Write your comments on the two videos from Institute of Catholic Culture on Saint Dominic the Preacher and The True Story of the Inquisition.