



Inquiry Formation

Meeting Six

The Pillars of Dominican Life: *Loyalty to the Church*

Total obedience to the Church and its magisterium must be in the heart of every Dominican. It was for this very reason St. Dominic founded the Order. After witnessing the devastating consequences of the Albigensian heresy, St. Dominic realized that Friars must be formed to preach the Truth. The Truth is Jesus, and Jesus is the Church and its teachings. Loyalty to the Church and its magisterium has been a hallmark of the Dominican Order from the beginning. There is tradition that Pope Innocent III saw in a dream the Basilica of St. John Lateran collapsing but two men were holding it up. To understand the significance of this dream you must remember that the Lateran, and not St. Peter's, is the cathedral of Rome and of the world. As such, it symbolizes the universal Church, so what the Pope saw was the Catholic Church collapsing. Shortly afterwards he met St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic for the first time and he recognized them as the two men he had seen in his dream holding up the Church. As you know from the life of St. Dominic, the first thing he did, after he had worked out plans for founding the Order, was to go to the Pope to get approval for it.

His sons were to continue in the same spirit of submission to the authority of the Church. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, humbly submitted his writings to the judgment of the Holy See. St. Catherine of Siena was so firmly convinced of the authority of the Church and infallibility of the Pope, that she referred to the Holy Father as "*sweet Christ on earth*".

Down through our long history we have been extraordinarily loyal to the Holy See, submitting ourselves to its magisterium. Only a tiny few have been exceptions to that general rule. In fact, the official theologian to the Pope, the Master of the Sacred Palace, is always a Dominican and has been since the time of St. Dominic who was the first to hold that office.

That same loyalty holds true for the Dominican Laity. Every Dominican can take pride in the words of Pope John XXII. In the year 1316 he lamented that tertiaries and beguines in large numbers were falling into heresy. But he went on to say, "I exclude the Dominican Tertiaries whose faith and docility to the Church are irreproachable". This is just common sense on our part. After all, we have the clear words of our Lord:

And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matt. 16:18 and 19)



Southern Dominican Laity
PROVINCE OF ST. MARTIN DE PORRES
laydomsouth.org

Updated April 2026

Thus we have His guarantee that the gates of the netherworld or hell would not prevail against it. This means that falsehood could never breach its walls. Satan, the father of lies, is the source of all falsehood and loves to sow wit among us poor mortals. We have our Lord's assurance that there is one place it cannot be sown and that is the Roman Catholic Church. We know that in it we shall always find the truth. It just stands to reason that an Order dedicated to the truth, as ours is, will be completely loyal to the Church for it is the only source of divine truth in this world. The world will try to tell you differently, but the world will pass away, Jesus and His Word will not. While we must accept the teachings of the Church, we do not have to overlook or deny the sins of its members, condone the failings of its clergy, or accept the erroneous opinions of certain "modern" theologians. Everyone seems to have an "expert" opinion and they'll try to prove it to you by touting their years of research and many degrees. But if their "expert opinion" differs from the teaching of the Church, you can be absolutely sure that the Church is right they are wrong. Jesus said; "No slave is greater than his master" (John 13:16).

A good way to understand the meaning of the word "magisterium" can be found in what are called the Loci Theologici (Theological Places) proposed in the sixteenth century by Melchior Cano, the great Spanish Dominican theologian. After Scripture, of course, at the top of the list are apostolic traditions, the defined dogmas of the Church, defined either by Ecumenical Councils in concert with the Pope or by the Pope alone speaking "ex cathedra," which is rare. (Only two come to mind, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of our Blessed Mother). Next come teachings of Ecumenical Councils in concert with the Pope, as for example, Vatican II. Next are statements of the Popes in bulls, apostolic constitutions and the like. Then comes the teachings the Church Fathers, and the common opinions of theologians, not necessarily unanimous, but an overwhelming majority of them are. All of these put together make up what is the teaching of the Church, which is called the magisterium.

It is this body of doctrine that we have to accept as what we must believe if we have good sense. All this can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church which is a summary of authentic Catholic teaching, approved by the Pope. Next to The Holy Bible, The Catechism should be your most beloved book. It will provide you with the Truth, making your position as a Catholic clear. Hopefully, this will serve to reduce the number of what are known as "cafeteria Catholics." We use the word "cafeteria" because these Catholics are something like the diners in a cafeteria who pick and choose whatever they like to eat, leaving what does not appeal to them at the serving tables. In much the same way, this kind of Catholic picks and chooses whatever doctrines from the truths taught by the Church that he or she likes, denying or ignoring the rest. This approach is not only arrogant but also illogical. Illogical because, at least implicitly, it denies the infallibility of the Pope but assumes that *they* are infallible in that they are able to choose what is true and what is not. As someone has said, there are as many popes as there are cafeteria Catholics.

Not only are they illogical, but very often they are contradictory. Let me give you an example of what I mean. There are people who will deny that there is a hell. But if there is no hell, why would we need to have a redeemer? In one fell swoop these people wipe the need for Christ, his incarnation, his suffering, death and resurrection. It makes you wonder, if these people are

correct, why God would go to the trouble of going through all the pain and suffering that he did. More importantly, Jesus Himself tells us there is a hell, and Jesus is always right.

You could go on right down the line and find one inconsistency, one fallacy after another. For many of these people it is due to a sheer ignorance of their religion. For others, it's a desire to be "politically correct" or thought of as "open-minded". Some want to have their cake and eat it too. They want to be Catholic but do not want to accept everything it believes and teaches. But it does not work that way. Either you buy the whole package or you end up with nothing. If you buy it, you have truth, divine truth guaranteed, not based on human opinion, likes or dislikes, but on every word of Christ. This error is so widespread and unfortunately there is no interest or desire to learn the truth. It would seem reasonable for them to say, "Well, if the Church teaches this, there must be a reason," and then make an honest effort to find out what the reason is. This is why all Dominicans should be eager to know their faith and know it thoroughly. Certainly, it is one powerful reason why study is one of the pillars of Dominican life. It sheds light on what a beautiful and precious gift we have in the Church, one we should treasure. This is why loyalty to Church is one of the pillars of Dominican life.

Penance

Back in 1285, the seventh Master of the Order, Munio de Zamora, issued the first rule for lay Dominicans. It was called "The Rule of the Third Order of Penance of St. Dominic." In the revision of it in 1923 it was entitled "The Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of the Secular Third Order of St. Dominic," but its opening words speak of "The Third Order of Penance of St. Dominic." In the latest revision in 1987, the word "Penance" is dropped from the title and is given only passing mention in the text itself. The title of the new Rule is "The Rule of the Lay Communities of St. Dominic, commonly known as the Dominican Third Order." This represents quite a change in the tone and spirit of the Rule as well as in the purpose of the Third Order itself. Originally, the Third Order was an outgrowth, as you may know, of groups of lay people in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries known as Penitents. They practiced severe penances, such as fasting, self-scourging, the wearing of hair shirts, chains and the like. These practices sound rather repugnant to our ears and we may wonder why they were so popular. We read the lives of the saints and are amazed at the severity of the penances they inflicted upon themselves. We may even think that we should imitate them, and, in a way, we should. To understand what I mean, we must keep in mind that penance is so closely connected with prayer that it cannot, and should not, be separated from it, but we do not have to go to the extremes St. Dominic and many of his followers went to. In the first place, it is hard for us to imagine how extraordinarily difficult every day living was for the average person in the middle Ages. In the wintertime, particularly, the diet was completely monotonous. There was no way they could preserve meat, for example. French and Italian cuisines were undreamed of. There was no pasta, no potatoes, rice, tomatoes or a great many other vegetables that are staples nowadays. Few spices were available and they were dearly expensive. There was gruel, root vegetables like turnips and rutabagas, and, of course, bread but not much else. At best, the people were undernourished, even the wealthy.

The houses were most uncomfortable. When you visit restored peasant homes and palaces in Europe you might conclude that the peasants lived better than their lords. The peasants' cottages were small but with large fireplaces so that they could at least keep warm. Palaces had fireplaces too, but they were big stone buildings and even with the use of tapestries on the walls they were unable to keep out the freezing cold. Monasteries did not even have fireplaces. The author was told by a Spanish Dominican who had done his studies in Avila, Spain, that the stones out of which the monastery was built were always moist. He said that on winter days he could reach out of bed in the morning and touch the walls and they were covered with a thin sheet of ice. In situations like that, what are you going to do for penance? Their whole way of life sounds like a penance to us. But they took it for granted. The result was that they had to find some way of depriving themselves of even what little they had according to our standards. It was those practices they adopted that sound so dreadful to us.

In evaluating the role of penance in our lives, we must keep in mind that those people of the Middle Ages were starting from their life situation and so must we. What would be penance for them would be agony for us. But what would be severe for us would be sheer luxury for them. Nonetheless, our practices of penance must come from the same three principles that motivated them. The first of these is that, as in all religions that emphasize contemplation, we must bring under control our love of pleasure and comfort if real serenity of mind is to be achieved. This is essential for contemplation, which as we as Dominicans are committed to, as we saw in our chapter on contemplation. The second principle is that original and actual sin are facts of the human condition. We find it difficult to free ourselves from sin and achieve that inner harmony God intended us to have when he created us. We can do this only by disciplining our appetites and subjecting them to the governance of reason enlightened by faith. The third principle that guided the medieval folk and should also guide us is a desire to identify ourselves with Christ and Him crucified. We want to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow in his footsteps, and we cannot do this if we put our own pleasure and comfort first.

Another factor that must be taken into consideration is the lack of consciousness of sin in our times, in our culture. In 1973, Dr. Karl Menniger of the famous Menniger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, published a book called "Whatever Became Of Sin?" in which he decried the loss of a sense of responsibility for our words and actions. It is always someone or something else's fault – not ours. This attitude of society affects us and our awareness of our own sinfulness. Even though we may not be in mortal sin (please God that He keeps us from that), when we read about the saints like St. Dominic who frequently bemoaned the fact that they were such great sinners, we may wonder how they could honestly say that. The answer lies in their clear and keen realization that their response of love to the love God has shown them is totally inadequate. They can see that they have received so much from him and they are giving back so little. *Any* flaw, *any* failing, *any* imperfection that interferes or gets in the way of our response to the love of God is a horrid thing, a thing to be deeply regretted and grieved over. That holds as true for us as it did for them. We can, then, say with St. Dominic, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." On the practical level we must begin with a clear realization that while we may not commit big sins, we do commit smaller ones or, as they are called, venial sins. As our Lord told us, "Even the just man falls seven times a day." Over and above this, our response to God's love

is so often feeble and lukewarm. All of these interfere with our love of God so we despise them and yearn to be free of them. We will not be, of course, until we get to heaven, but while we are here on earth we can do penance for them.

Penance can do two things for us. First, as we have said, its discipline will help us to develop those virtues that are so necessary to our inner serenity. Secondly, it can serve as reparation for our sins. Ideally, the expression of this sorrow that we choose will accomplish both purposes of penance. Besides being acts of reparation for our sinfulness, they will also help us to grow in one or more of the virtues. For example, one penance may be to pray a Rosary for someone we hurt. That Rosary can be an act of reparation, but also used to grow in the virtue of charity. Although we may not exercise the same penances as St. Dominic did, we should, however, be motivated by the same principles that motivated them, namely, our desire to foster contemplation by mastering our love of pleasure and comfort; the development of those virtues that free us from our sinful impulses; and thirdly, our desire to take up our cross and follow Christ.

We should not overlook, either, those crosses that present themselves without our willing or desiring them, such things as illness, the debility of advancing years, heartaches, hurts inflicted on us by others and so forth. Accepting them, as crosses to bear with Christ can be most fruitful penances.

Penance, then, should be an integral part of our lives as Dominicans. It is especially our heritage as lay Dominicans. As the new Rule says, one of the sources from which you draw strength to grow in your vocation is *“conversion of heart and penance according to the spirit of the Gospel.”* (II, 10, e) In this sense, we are still members of the Third Order of Penance of St. Dominic.

Poverty

St. Dominic emphasized the need for poverty for his Order of Preachers. He differed, however, from his contemporary, St. Francis of Assisi, in his reasons for it. For St. Francis, poverty was an ideal, a way of life, a value to be lived. In his poetic fancy, he sang of “Lady Poverty” It was an end in itself too, doing this makes us more Christ like.

For St. Dominic, it was a means to an end his Order should use if it’s preaching was to have an impact. As a canon regular in the Cathedral of Osma he had taken a vow of poverty which was a sharing of common property and living off the generosity of the laity. When he came to Southern France to begin his ministry of preaching he saw how the perfect of the Albigensians could exert their tremendous influence, not only by the austerity of their lives but by their poverty, depending entirely on the alms of their faithful followers. This was not difficult where most of the people were friendly. St. Dominic realized that if his preachers were to have any effect they would have to be just as poor.

For this reason, he urged the Cisterians who had been sent to preach against the heresy to take off their splendid garb and get off their fine horses, dress simply and walk among the people. The Cisterians did this willingly because they were men of a simple life used to living poorly. (Since

they were sent officially as papal legates they thought they had to take on the splendor that papal legates commonly used in those days). Dominic himself lived in great poverty and required his little band of preachers to live the same way.

As the Order spread throughout Western Europe Dominic continued to hold to that principle, but as time was to show it was excessive in its application. Its severity had to be mitigated. It was St. Thomas Aquinas who laid down the realistic purposes and limits of religious poverty. Members of religious orders must take a vow of poverty, for religious life would be impossible without it. Now, the question arises: what about the laity? Are they required to take a vow of poverty and to own nothing? That would be unrealistic, particularly if there were families involved. They have to work for a living, buy food and clothing, provide shelter and furniture and, of course, they have to pay taxes. Does this mean that poverty, which is so essential to the Order, plays no role in their lives? Of course, not.

There is such a thing as what the Catechism calls “poverty of the heart.” The basis for all voluntary poverty is to be found in the First Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Pay special attention to those words “poor in spirit.” Our Lord is not requiring material poverty or penury. Rather, he is asking for a spirit of detachment from worldly goods. As the New Catechism says:

The precept of detachment from riches is obligatory for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. (no. 2544)

It goes on to explain:

All Christ’s faithful are to direct their affections rightly, lest they be hindered in their pursuit of perfect charity by the use of worldly things and by an adherence to riches which is contrary to the spirit of evangelical poverty. (no. 2545)

Thus even rich people can cultivate a spirit of poverty, although it is more difficult for them than it is for those of modest means. A wealthy woman, a Lay Dominican, once told me that she could feel the tug of her wealth and she had to resist it firmly. She could drive any make of car she wanted, even the most expensive, but she chose to drive a small Ford until it wore out. She could afford a mink coat but she bought only cloth ones. Her husband’s position required a certain amount of luxury and elegance, but she resisted becoming attached to them.

On the other hand, just because people are poor does not mean that they have the spirit of poverty. They can avariciously long for material things, covet the riches of others and be attached to possessions they may not have but want. The great Dominican theologian, Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange summed it up in these words:

Voluntary poverty can be practiced either in the midst of the abundance of worldly good, when the spirit is not attached to them, or in destitution when one bears it generously for love of God (Three Ages of the Interior Life, Vol. II, page 141)

He urges us to keep in mind the words of our Lord:

O you of little faith? So do not worry and say "What are we to eat? Or What are we to drink? or "What are we to wear? All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil. (Matt. 6: 30b-34)

Thus, poverty of the spirit is closely connected with confidence and trust in God. As Father Garrigou-Lagrange says:

Voluntary poverty and confidence in God go hand in hand; the more detached a man is from earthly goods, the more he desires those of heaven; and the less he relies on human helps, the more he place his confidence in God's help. Thus confidence in God is the soul of holy poverty. All Christians should have the spirit of this counsel. (ibid. Pages 143-44)

Another benefit of the spirit of poverty is that it makes us more like unto Christ. St. Dominic recognized this value because he was convinced that anyone who preaches Christ should imitate him as much as possible. Christ, as we know, became poor for our sakes. He could have chosen to come as an earthly prince, dressed in fine clothes and living in a splendid palace with dozens of servants at his beck and call. Rather he chose to come as a poor man – not a destitute one. The trade of a carpenter was an honorable one and those who plied it could live reasonably well by their standards. Of course, there were times when people could not afford to have work done and the Holy Family had to be concerned about where the next meal was coming from. A good example of this combination of poverty and trust in God was during the flight into Egypt. The angel had appeared to Joseph in a dream and ordered him:

Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him. (Matt. 2:13)

Nothing was said about where he was to go in Egypt or how he was going to make a living to support his wife and her child. The message was "just go." Joseph, without question, got up, packed their sparse belongings and set out. They had nothing but their confidence in God to take with them. Apparently it was enough because after the death of Herod about two years later, they were able to return to Nazareth where Joseph was able to resume his trade as carpenter. If God treats people as much as he loved the Holy Family in this way, we can expect no better. We must imitate them and trust in God to keep his promise to see to it that we will have enough to live on.

The spirit of detachment and voluntary poverty will also make it possible for us to fulfill the command to give of our superfluity to the poor. In this, we imitate Christ who had a concern for the poor and even worked a miracle to feed them in their need. The Church from the beginning has shown its love and care for the widows, orphans and the sick. In time religious orders were

founded that dedicated themselves to these needs, but the laity have always been active in assisting or financing these corporal works of mercy. Our Dominican Laity should also be involved in these works, as, indeed, they have. As we read down through the lives of our Dominican lay saints we can see that every one of them has reached out to care for the underprivileged. St. Rose of Lima is a good example. She is, in fact, considered to be the founder of social services in the Americas.

All of this involves simplicity of lifestyle, of detachment from this world's goods, as desirable as they may be and a deep trust in God's providence and love for us. It is in this way that the Dominican Laity can participate in the spirit of voluntary poverty that St. Dominic felt was so essential to the work of his Order. We should strive to live a life of modesty, as our Particular Directory calls for, both interior and exterior. We must practice the frequent giving of alms, for that is dear to Our Lord's heart. This doesn't mean, of course, that you forego saving for your children's education. Jesus wants us to be responsible in our duties. But how many houses, cars, computers or clothes do you really need? In addition to the gift of providing for your family, give them the gift of your example of trusting in Divine Providence. All we have to do, really, is to make our own the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," and seek nothing more.

“Offer It Up”

by Charles Shonk, OP

“Offer it up!” It’s not an expression we hear much anymore, but for a long time it was a commonplace among Irish grandmothers, much to the chagrin, perhaps, of their less stalwart progeny. It’s a distinctively Catholic saying—certain Protestants might almost call it heretical—and yet Catholics themselves are less and less able to understand, much less appreciate, its meaning. To most, it’s simply an exhortation to stoic resignation, a pious way of saying, “Stop complaining,” “Do your duty,” or “Accept your lot in life.” As such, it seems a somewhat ungracious response to another’s suffering, a poor substitute for sympathy. If we dig a little deeper, though, this old chestnut turns out to be a nexus of deep theological truths and, accordingly, a maxim of great spiritual profit.

To see how this is so, we have to go back to the Cross and, specifically, to the Atonement. Though a word of simple, English derivation, “At-one-ment” names an unfathomable mystery: the incredible fact that Jesus reconciled us to God by suffering for our sins. We accept this on faith, of course, but, having accepted it, we naturally want to know, as much as we can, why. Why did God have to become man, suffer, and die? Wasn’t there some other way?

St. Anselm called this sort of wonder *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”), and, in his short dialogue, *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why God Became Man”), he left us a profound theological meditation on the questions just mentioned. In a nutshell, he argues the following: (1) justice demands that mankind should make satisfaction to God for the havoc and disorder of sin; (2) man, a finite creature wounded by the consequences of his own transgression, is incapable of making such satisfaction; (3) God can make satisfaction on our behalf, but only by himself becoming a man, capable of suffering; (4) in doing this, God is true both to his infinite justice, since he pays the price for sin, and to his infinite mercy, since—marvelously—he accomplishes for man what man neither deserves nor could accomplish on his own.

Now, the word “satisfaction” may seem a bit strange or technical here, but it is really a very ordinary idea. We use it all the time, not only in more formal or legal contexts, but also in our everyday personal relationships. If we infringe on another’s rights or offend a friend, we not only want to apologize or pay back what we owe; we also want to make up for the hurt we have caused by doing something more. That “something more” is satisfaction.

Notice that satisfaction is not the same as punishment. In fact, the two are mutually exclusive. Whereas, by definition, punishment is endured unwillingly, satisfaction is willingly made, and it is the more willing the more it is animated by love. Moreover, while it is possible to make satisfaction on behalf of someone else, a person can only be punished for his own sins, i.e., if he is actually guilty. Anselm himself makes this distinction, and it is important to understand it, because otherwise we might slip into a “substitutionary” theory of atonement, according to which God punished Jesus in our place. This would be troubling on many levels, not least because it seems to make God unjust.

The question remains, however, was there some other way? Did Jesus have to become man, suffer, and die? Anselm seems to answer in the affirmative, but St. Thomas Aquinas, like most theologians before and after him, answers negatively. In fact, St. Thomas says that, just as, if someone commits a purely personal offense against any one of us, we can, mercifully and without injustice, simply forgive him without demanding reparation, so God, without any prejudice to his own infinite justice, could have simply forgiven, or dismissed, the sin of mankind without requiring any satisfaction.

Now, on the one hand, this is comforting because it safeguards the gratuity of the Incarnation and Atonement: God did not have to become man, suffer, and die; he did so out of love. But on the other hand, it might trouble us because, if God could have simply dismissed our sins, why didn't he? Why did he choose the "hard way"? St. Thomas gives many reasons, but I would like to highlight just one: God required satisfaction for sin because doing so was more merciful.

This sounds counterintuitive, but it really makes wonderful sense; and we can see why by drawing an analogy. Just as, when we have really offended someone we love, we are all the more tormented if he or she refuses to allow us to make reparation in some way, so God does in fact act more mercifully by allowing us to make satisfaction for our sins, than he would by simply dismissing them. And he gives us this ability, this dignity, through the Incarnation, Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ, whose life we share through the gift of the Holy Spirit, our sacrifices and sufferings are no longer a "dead loss," but, borne out of love for God and neighbor, they actually participate in the infinite value of the God-man's satisfying sacrifice of love.

Yes, though our own acts of love may be small, we can truly "offer them up" to God, confident that he will accept them as really, not just nominally, imbued with the love of his own Son. And, like little children on their dad's birthday, we can take all the more delight in giving our Father gifts when we know that all we have to give comes from him.

Additional Reading List

Dominicana

- Ch 10

Saint Dominic

- Ch. 5

Questions

1. How would you explain to a Protestant the "freedom" of your loyalty to the Catholic Church?
2. Give some examples of penance that we may use today.
3. What is the real meaning of poverty for a Lay Dominican today?
4. Give one thought about the article: "Offer It Up".