

An Introduction to Lay Membership in Religious Orders

Do you want to deepen your faith? If you are looking for a deeper spirituality, how do you discern what to do? You may be interested in learning more about lay membership in religious orders.

Contents

What are religious orders in the Catholic Church?	1
Why join a religious order?	2
How can I determine if I should choose the Dominican order or a different order?	2
Structure of the Dominican Order	2
Eligibility and Requirements of the Dominican laity.....	2
Obligations of members.....	3
Benefits of members	3
In Conclusion	3

What are religious orders in the Catholic Church?

Religious orders are groups of individuals who share a common style or charism in their spirituality. There are many paths to heaven as demonstrated by the broad spectrum of saints and how they lived and died. Since few of us will be called to die for our faith and become a martyr, we must live out our everyday life in some fashion. Aside from our work, we raise children, teach, and care for the sick etc. If we teach we may have friends who are teachers. If we are musicians we may spend time and share ideas with other musicians. Having a particular interest or style does not limit us but allows us to grow beyond where we could, had we stayed alone.

Many of the religious orders have existed in the Catholic Church since the middle ages. Dominicans, Franciscans Benedictines, Jesuits and Augustinians are examples of these ancient orders. Third (or Secular) Orders are literally “third” parts of these “orders” and the laypeople who join them try to adapt the charisms and characteristics of one of these orders into their daily routines, which in turn tends to shape their lives in ways reflective of the lives of their vowed brothers and sisters. A Third Order is a general term encompassing lay people who embrace, in their own homes and workplaces (as opposed to in a convent, friary, or monastery) a deeper religious spirituality which is most often associated with a religious Order in the Catholic Church. Thus there are Benedictine Oblates, Secular Franciscans, and Third Order Carmelites. Each of these, and many other groups like them, has a Rule of Life and Constitutions which members follow. Additional groups like the Legion of Mary are not Third Orders but do require certain religious practices and disciplines. Third Orders were generally so named because they were the lay (third) expression of a male Religious Order (the First Order) which had associated with it a female Religious Order (the Second Order).

These third orders are characterized by vows, which are like promises, to live a certain way and perform certain tasks, like study, poverty and daily prayer. A person may be dispensed from vows, and in the Dominican Order no vows made by the laity are binding under pain of sin. These orders are also characterized by an authority structure with some individual exercising guidance over the members. In the Dominican order this individual is called the Master General. Laity members make their vows to the Master General of the Order. There have been 87 masters general since the order was founded in 1215. Many are canonized saints.

The Dominican order has a presence throughout the world. It is divided into regions called provinces. Members of the order live under the guidelines of the same “Rule” regardless of their location but also adhere to a particular directory for each region or province.

When a lay person joined an order, they were originally considered third order, with priests of the order considered first order. This terminology has changed over the centuries and today Dominican lay persons are called lay fraternity

members. It is also important to note that in the Dominican order, the second order is comprised of cloister nuns not the Dominican sisters which we are accustomed to see teaching in schools. These teaching sisters are not technically part of the Dominican order as they do not come under the authority of the master general, but are aggregated to the order by their life under a Dominican rule.

Why join a religious order?

As with all orders, sanctification of your soul and that of others is the primary goal. As an individual grows in their spiritual life, it can be a great advantage to be with others who are on the same path and share the same values. Sharing your knowledge and experience with friends will strengthen your own faith as well as theirs. A musician will become more accomplished if they share ideas and learn from other musicians.

How can I determine if I should choose the Dominican order or a different order?

First determine what draws you closer to God in your spiritual life. Devotion to Mary especially through the rosary could mean a Dominican vocation. Dominicans received the rosary from the Blessed Mother in the 1400's and have preached it and spread its use ever since. Teaching is also a Dominican vocation. Dominicans are also known as order of preachers. They were founded for the salvation of souls. A particular attraction to adoration or devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary may indicate a Carmelite vocation. Feeding and clothing the poor and detachment from worldly goods may be Franciscan vocation.

Structure of the Dominican Order

The order is headquartered at Santa Sabina outside of Rome. We have one of the most democratic constitutions in the church which is why the Dominican rule is used by other orders in the church. Today, Dominican friars, nuns, sisters and other affiliated members of the Order live throughout the world. There are presently around 5,800 friars (of whom about 300 are cooperator brothers) living in 550 Dominican priories and houses throughout the world, 2,750 nuns living in 200 monasteries, 23,000 active sisters belonging to 150 congregations, and around 166,000 Dominican laity living out the Dominican charism in the midst of their daily lives. Among the great Dominican saints are:

St Dominic

St Catherine of Siena, Doctor of the Church

St Thomas Aquinas, Doctor of the Church

St Rose of Lima

St. Albert the Great, Doctor of the Church

St. Louis Marie De Montfort

And there are 70 canonized saints and 200 Blesseds, 86 have had the stigmata and three have been pope.

Eligibility and Requirements of the Dominican laity

Eligibility:

In order to be eligible, the person must be at least 18 years old.

Requirements:

It should be clearly understood that no requirements are binding under the pain of sin. This is a hallmark of St Dominic's vision for his order. There are four stages of membership each with its own requirements taking in total about 4.5 years. The introduction stage is where the candidate discerns whether to join a lay fraternity. This lasts between six and twelve months. This timeframe is fluid depending on the individual.

It is very, very important to note that as the interested individual ponders their joining a group, the group is also pondering their suitability both as their type of spirituality and their similarities and friendships with existing members. So as the new member moves to each of the three steps the group votes on their suitability and their commitment.

Next is the inquiry or postulant stage of six months which concludes with reception into the Dominican order with full benefits and privileges. At this stage the individual receives the small white scapular of the Dominican order.

The person then moves to the candidate or novitiate stage for one year and then makes the temporary promise of three years. Finally the person makes a lifelong promise where member receives the large scapular. Candidates may withdraw at any time. Advancement is allowed with completion of each stage of study, demonstration of understanding of the material and vote by members of the group.

There are no tests of knowledge as the individual moves through formation but rather a relationship develops between the candidate and the existing members. The candidate demonstrates their commitment by consistent attendance (there are excused absences) and willingness to be part of the group.

Obligations of members

These obligations include daily rosary, and 15 minutes of the liturgy of the hours, scripture reading or mental prayer if possible. Further weekly monthly and annual requirements involve mass, communion and fasting on certain days and specifically prayers for deceased Dominicans. This great devotion to our deceased members will be your consolation after death. Dominicans also share in numerous special indulgences throughout the year.

Benefits of members

One of the greatest benefits will be Dominicans worldwide will pray for you after your death. A pope once said live as a Jesuit, dine as a Franciscan but die as a Dominican. Also, finally professed members may wear the large scapular at profession ceremonies may choose to be buried in the large scapular. Lay members also share in all the graces and indulgences granted to the order as a whole.

In Conclusion

If all seems positive to you, inquire with the local chapter. Go to a few meetings. Or correspond electronically. Enter the first stage of formation. Doing so does NOT mean that you are professing to live the Rule. It means that you are seeing if you MIGHT want to live the Rule. Entering formation is like asking that potential spouse on a first date. Dating helps couples to know one another better. Formation will help you to know the order better.

There is nothing mysterious about it. The great religious orders of the church have always made room for laypeople who want to share in their mission and spirituality, and some of these lay people have even progressed so far in holiness as to be proclaimed saints. One of them, St. Catharine of Siena, OP, was a lay Dominican and a Doctor of the Church. The Order of Preachers does have bragging rights to an impressive number of lay-members in the canon of saints, beatos and venerables. Blessed PierGiorgio Frassati was one, as were saints Martin de Porres and Rose of Lima.

Lay professions are not vows but promises, and while Oblates will renew their professions, most Third Orders eventually "profess for life." Although they may wear scapulars or medals as signs of their profession, a Tertiary or Oblate is only entitled to wear the robes with special permissions, or upon death. A few years ago the actress Jane Wyman, a lay dominican and wife of President Ronald Reagan , was buried in a Dominican habit.