

# THE PURPOSE OF THE DOMINICAN LAITY

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## Introduction

Before speaking of the Purpose of the Dominican Laity it is necessary to face and lay to rest certain ideas that seem prevalent concerning the Dominican lay vocation. In particular three such ideas must be mentioned.

First, the Dominican Laity has been described as a “devotional prayer society in particular for older people.” Father Schilebeeckx described it thus in *The Dominican Third Order “Old and New Style.”* This idea denies the apostolic purpose of the Order.

Second, there is an idea that the Dominican Laity is a group whose nature has been determined once and for all at some point in the past, and which, consequently, can point infallibly to some document, presumably the Rule of the Dominican Laity, as a never-changing model for all things pertaining to the Dominican Laity. Yet the General Chapter of the Dominican Order, as long ago as 1958, petitioned the Master General of the Order “to establish a special commission which must make a penetrating study of the *nature* of the Third Order.” Obviously this indicates a less than complete understanding of the nature of the Dominican Laity as a part of the Order.

Last, there has been confusion about the place of the Dominican Laity and of all “Third Order” groups in the structure of the Church. Some would make of these people mini-religious, people who are no longer laypersons in the usual meaning of that term. This is untrue. Members of the Dominican Laity are indeed laypersons.

The fact that these ideas have been expressed and unfortunately lived, indicates the necessity of some change in the understanding of the Dominican vocation. In this paper we will examine some of these necessary changes.

## The Dominican Family

Before we can understand the Dominican lay vocation, however, we must establish the purpose of the laity in the Dominican family. If we are searching for the fundamental realities relating to things Dominican, the first place we must look is the Constitutions of the Order of Friars Preachers.

These Constitutions, insofar as they are *laws*, bind only the priests and brothers of the Order. Yet the Constitutions as we have them today have descended directly from the original Constitutions written by St. Dominic and the first brethren — written, that is, by those men whom the Spirit first led to conceive of, and to live, Dominican life. What they set down was their attempt to put into words a description of the life they had experienced. Accordingly, the fundamental concepts of what it means to be a Dominican will be found in this source — as well as in the writings of their descendants in the Order.

In a return to an earlier, and more intelligible, presentation of basic Dominican ideas, those who rewrote the Constitution after Vatican II began with a section titled “The Basic Constitution.” The ninth and last article in that section, in the translation produced by our Australian Province, reads:

*The Dominican family comprises clerical and cooperator brothers, nuns, sisters, members of secular institutes, and fraternities of priests and lay folk.*

It is obvious from the reference to “fraternities of priests and lay folk” that members of the Dominican Laity are authentic members of the family Dominican. This is the first fact to be considered in determining their purpose.

### **Lay Members of the Family**

It is also important to emphasize, however, that these people are LAY members of the family. The Constitutions of the Order of Friars Preachers explicitly asserts that “lay fraternities of the Order are associations of *lay* people (149, I). They are lay members of the people of God — laymen and laywomen — to whom the Spirit has given those qualities, or that particular combination of qualities that equal Dominican. Since the [most recent] General Chapter of the Order (1974) deleted the terms “first” “second,” and “third” as designating various divisions of the Dominican family, lay members have been called, in the United States at least, Dominican Laity.

Father Weber argues that the term ought to be “Lay Dominicans.” He argues so on the theological grounds. I agree with him on theological grounds. In recent history, however, the laity have been considered, and unfortunately have often considered themselves, second-class citizens in the Church. This was occasioned, presumably, by an inadequate view of the Church. According to this view, THE Church was composed of bishops, priests and religious. They were the first-class citizens among the People of God who are the Church. Lay people were, at best, second-class citizens. Like children, they were to be seen and not heard. They were, as more than one ecclesiastic implied, to keep their mouths shut and their pocketbooks open. Their duty was to listen and obey.

To undermine this less-than-adequate view of the Church, and of the laity in it, I prefer, at this moment in time, the term “Dominican Laity.” Perhaps I shall live long enough to see the next step, the triumph of the theological view. People will then accept without hesitation the fact that all of the baptized make up the People of God. There is only one class of citizenship — first-class. There will, of course, be a variety of tasks to be performed by the different citizens, each doing what he or she has been called by God to do.

Similarly, all Dominicans will recognize one membership in the Dominican family, though each member will perform a different function according to his or her call by God. When this longed for day arrives, we can easily adopt the term “Lay Dominican.”

With this thought in mind — namely, that the Dominican Laity are truly members of the Dominican family, and specifically LAY members — it is possible to discover the purpose of the Dominican Laity as family members. In fact we can recognize three purposes, and shall call them Individual Purpose, Purpose Within the Family, and Purpose Beyond the Family — that is, purpose in the world.

### **Individual Purpose**

The first purpose of the Dominican Laity, the Individual Purpose, is simply to *be* — to be Dominicans.

To quote again from the Constitutions:

*“All the groups composing the Dominican family share in its common vocation,, (141). [Dominican laypersons,] organized by a special gift of God in the apostolic spirit of St. Dominic, aim to achieve the salvation of themselves and of others, by the profession of the evangelical life according to the way of life adapted by the Order to their state of life in the world” ( 149 ) .*

The Rule of the Dominican Laity spells out the meaning of “evangelical life”: it means living in the spirit of the beatitudes (see Rule, I, 3, b). The Constitution cited acknowledges that there are laymen and laywomen who have been led by the Spirit into a Dominican vocation. These people will achieve God’s gift of salvation by living “in the apostolic spirit of St. Dominic . . . professing [that is, carrying into practice] the evangelical life” adapted to their lay state.

The elements that coalesce to make Dominican Life are discussed in Father Kiesling’s article on Dominican Spirituality. Their general adaptation to lay life in our era must be the task of the Dominican Laity, who are the best judges of what lay life means. Each lay Dominican must further adapt these elements to the life situation in which God has placed him or her. From this point of view, the purpose of the Dominican Laity is fundamentally the same as that of the priests, brothers, and sisters.

### **Purpose Within the Family**

The second purpose of the Dominican Laity, the Purpose Within the Family, flows from the first; the Dominican Laity are truly members of the Dominican family. All members of any family have a contribution to make to all the other members of the family; indeed, one who makes no contribution to the rest of the family is a member in name only. I would focus on two contributions the Dominican Laity could make. Both might be called forms of teaching.

I would call the first contribution *sharing*. Let me cite examples where I see this as applicable. We are all concerned, for instance, about the question of community. What is it? how does one live it? what can community do for us? what are its limitations? People were living community before anyone thought of religious life as we know it. The natural family was meant to be a community. I am sure that the average married Dominican layperson knows far more about what living community means than some religious will ever know. Living community is now so second-nature to the married laity that they have all but forgotten how they put it together. Their memories can be jogged, however. In honest dialogue with them, the rest of the Dominican family may learn more about community than from reading dozens of books on the subject.

Or, take the business of prayer. The priests and religious members of the family have no monopoly on prayer. The Spirit seems to be leading more and more laypeople into deep prayer. Conceivably they can teach priests and sisters of the Order to pray better, more personally, especially us of the older generation whose prayer has often been formal and sometimes mechanical.

There is a second teaching function that members of the Dominican Laity can fulfill within the family, and this I consider even more important. They can help the rest of the family to be “honest.”

There are problems in our world and among the people who make up our world. All those problems have answers in God's plan. We do not yet know the whole of God's plan; however, some of those problems do have answers that can be identified now. But how can priests or sisters, who are not lay people living in the world, know that they are addressing the real problems of the world? As I keep protesting to the laity I know, I have not been a layman for nearly forty years. No matter how much I think I know about this world and people's problems, no matter how concerned I may be about helping them solve those problems, the only way I can really know is to have people tell me what it is all about "out there."

The Master General, in his 1975 Christmas letter to the Order, said much the same thing. After commenting on the spirit of dialogue he saw developing among the priests, brothers, and sisters in the family, he continued:

*Until now I have rarely encountered a deep cooperation of the brothers and sisters with the members of the lay confraternities of St. Dominic, who ought to be, faced with the world as it is, an irreplaceable help and inspiration. Without them are we able to give to the world of today the new spirit which it needs and which can be found only in the Gospel of Christ? (I.D.I. No. 14 — 22/XII/75)*

It is the Master of the Order himself who says that the members of the Dominican Laity are an irreplaceable help, that they are the people "faced with the world as it is."

If their help is irreplaceable, then somehow or other we of the Order are being less than honest if we are not utilizing that help. We are in danger of giving answers to questions that people are not asking, and then concluding that the problem is theirs because they ignore us. Unless we are in constant dialogue with those who are in contact with the world as it is we are in danger of offering solutions to non-problems and missing the real problems.

Examples that come to mind (for which we blame others, not ourselves, naturally) are the concerns expressed by some people priests among them — over communion in the hand, or sisters' attire. Jesus said nothing about either. Christians who are concerned about what Jesus taught could not care less about those presumed problems. But these Christians are very much concerned about applying Christ's principles of justice and charity to the poverty-stricken of the world, to the black and Chicano family newly arrived in the neighborhood. Priests and religious cannot be "honest" — that is, they cannot fulfill the mission God gave the Order in the world — without contact with people who are grappling with the problems posed by the Gospel as it must be lived in the world. The lay members of the Dominican family through their deep love for the family, will be the first to help us identify these problems.

I would mention yet another way in which the Dominican Laity's love for the family can help to keep the rest of the family honest. They can critique the family's endeavors — not only those of the priests of the Order but, *mutatis mutandis* (as we used to say), those of the brothers and sisters as well. How do I know, for example, that my preaching really reaches people? am I actually saying it so that the people I address can understand? do my words give them a reason for the faith in them? do they give a valid course of action? do I move people to action? Or am I only a "sounding brass

and tinkling cymbal?” There are other difficulties besides those of recognizing problems or giving Scriptural answers.

Techniques have been available and used successfully for some time to give helpful feed-back to preachers. Either as a chapter or smaller group project, the Dominican Laity could use these techniques to supply valuable suggestions to their brothers in the Order. Those in teaching, parish, hospital, or any other ministry could benefit equally from similar criticism. We will all be more effective ministers through the help of criticism given us within the ambit of a loving family.

### **Purpose Beyond the Family**

The third purpose I recognize for the Dominican Laity, the Purpose Beyond the Family or purpose in the world follows also from the fact that the Dominican Laity are truly family members. To return to the Basic Constitution of the Dominican Order, the very first article quotes from the letter of Pope Honorius III to St. Dominic and his first brethren:

*“You have given yourselves to the proclamation of the Word of God, preaching the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ throughout the world.”*

In another place the Constitutions state:

*“Lay Fraternities of the Order . . . aim to achieve the salvation of themselves and of others by the profession of the evangelical life according to the way of life adapted by the Order for their state of life in the world” (#149, 1).*

Since, for a Dominican, the salvation of others means the “proclamation of the Word of God . . . throughout the world” it follows that the Dominican Laity must share this purpose by reason of membership in the Dominican family.

At various times in history the laity have fulfilled different functions among God’s people. But in one way or another the Dominican Laity must be engaged in the proclamation of God’s Word, at the very least by *living* it. I believe — and I am not alone in this — that *verbal proclamation* also belongs to the Dominican Laity. As Father Kiesling suggests, members of the Dominican Laity can share their insights about their faith with others, teach CCD courses, participate in such apostolic activities as Marriage Encounter. All these involve verbal proclamation, as does participation in dialogue homilies.

The unique element in Dominican life and spirituality which St. Dominic enjoined upon his Order is study. Members of the Dominican Laity should know and be able to explain to others at least the fundamentals of Christianity, “to give a reason for the hope that is in them,” as St. Peter put it (1 Pet. 3:15). St. Catherine of Siena did this in her time. Men among the Dominican Laity are doing it in our time by entering the diaconate programs in many dioceses. Women are offering themselves for the various ministries at last opening to them within the Church, such as leaders of religious education programs, leaders and members of liturgy teams, parish visitors. Dominican laywomen ought to be among the first to acquire competencies that can be developed into full ministries among God’s people. Many of them have already acquired such competencies.

There is no area of life or activity in which members of the Dominican Laity should not be engaged. They should bring the principles of Christ to bear upon the unchristian and even inhuman conditions that exist in many of the social, industrial, and political institutions of the world. What might be accomplished, for instance, by dedicated, *competent* members of the Dominican Laity in the political life of a city, state, or nation? It is the work of the laity to think through and determine how best they can influence political life.

As all these activities develop according to the specific talents of those people to whom God gives Dominican vocations, the apostolic goal of the Order will be achieved more fully than it can be if only priests, brothers, and sisters are thought to have Dominican vocations and to be the apostolic members of the Order. It is important to note, too, that the Dominican Laity carry out these activities as apostolic Christian lay persons. In these activities they are not simply helpers of the other members of the Order but have been called by God at baptism to these tasks.

However, lay members of the Dominican family can and should be enlisted by the other parts of the Dominican family to assist them in their apostolates. As Father Schillebeeckx pointed out several years ago:

*The fact is that priests in many cases are carrying on an apostolate which, the longer it is maintained, the more proper priestly work is relegated to the background. These forms of the apostolate could be better entrusted to the laity... Thus the fathers would have a complement of their own priestly apostolate in the world, made more fruitful by the Third Order itself. Hence Third Order life is a special case of apostolic cooperation of laymen and priests. What is special in this case is that there is operative an apostolic cooperation of laymen with the priestly apostolate of a distinct religious Order. (The Dominican Third Order "Old and New Style")*

The cooperation of which Father Schillebeeckx speaks is also possible between members of the Dominican Laity and sisters' communities. But whether this cooperation be between priests and laypeople, or sisters and laypeople, its modes must be thought out and worked out by each Province and Community, and even each local community.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have attempted to penetrate the purpose of the Dominican Laity. I have relied for basic premises on the principles enumerated in the Constitutions of the Order of Friars Preachers. The Dominican Laity must not only understand its purpose in the Order but also continually adapt that purpose to the present era. The whole Order is engaged in this work of exploration, realizing that each generation must do it anew for the era in which it lives. Such a task is never easy. It is made more difficult by the various ways in which the lay members of the Dominican family have been looked upon, and have looked upon themselves, during the history of the Order.

Yet in God's plan there is a purpose for the Order's existence. The Dominican Laity, as true members of the Dominican family, share in that purpose. Present and future members of the Dominican Laity are urged to reflect upon the ideas presented here and penetrate ever more deeply into the vocation to which God has called them. Each Dominican, of whatever branch of the family, must do that; another cannot assume such a responsibility for any of us, nor should we expect another to do so.