

History of the Dominican Third Order

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Author's Note: 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.”*

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

* 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 USA). 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.

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 tertiary 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 the “Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic” and “Priestly Fraternities of St. Dominic.” I think “Lay Dominican” is, 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.”

A History and Theology of Sharing Responsibility for the Church

Richard K. Weber, OP, PhD (†1995)

The “third orders” associated with religious orders express the laity’s conviction of their importance in the life of the church and testify to their concern for reform and renewal.

It has been cynically observed that anniversaries are the enemies of truth. And always there are some who wonder why all this energy might not have been spent for something better. Yet there is something about marking the passage of time, something about observing an anniversary, a centennial — or more — that seems to be justly an occasion for congratulation, an opportunity for reflection, and, at times, a reaffirmation of purpose.

Last year the National Cash Register Corporation celebrated its centennial and took the occasion to ask in its advertising: “What other computer company is one hundred years old?” The implication was obvious: our products are better because our company older and more experienced. This year the lay branch of the Dominican order celebrates the seventh centenary of its founding. The Dominican Laity cannot claim to be the oldest “third order,” but they may be permitted to feel that seven centuries gives a certain cachet of authenticity and legitimacy.

The Abbé Sieyès could boast, after the turmoil and changes of the French Revolution, of one accomplishment: “I survived!” This seventh centenary must prove more than that third orders have survived; it should provide the opportunity for them to build more securely upon their tradition and reach forward in confidence to the future.

It is now a commonplace that the late Middle Ages have many disturbing parallels with our own times. That indeed was the thesis of Barbara Tuchman’s book *A Distant Mirror*. It is the background for enjoying the much more brilliant evocation of that time in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. Indeed, one reviewer of that novel detected “allusions to modern personalities, among them John Paul II, Stalin, and Che Guevara.” Munio de Zamora, elected master of the Dominican order in 1285, was not drawing up a rule for simple people in serene times when he provided the first rule for Dominican laity in that year. The third orders were not founded in any “Age of Faith” for people without problems.

The times then demanded a committed and evangelical response among all Christian folk. On every level of society there were massive problems; it was a civilization in transition certainly, and perhaps in decay. “Evangelical poverty” was a slogan. How could it be translated into a program? The disputes about Aristotle were not about a long-dead Greek thinker but about the seemingly corrosive effect of “new learning” and “new theology” upon the foundations of the faith. Governments were growing more bureaucratic, more intrusive, and more amoral. Wars were dividing Christian kingdoms, while domestic violence, feeding on injustice, ripped apart the fabric of social life. To the east and the south there hovered constantly the threat of Islam, while within there was the threat of subversion from heresy and witchcraft. And priests and knights, kings and popes all seemed concerned only with their pursuit of power, money, and pleasure.

Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites, and other medieval religious orders proposed some answers. But I do not propose here to speak directly of the charism, or spirit, of the friars. Rather I propose the question: Given the problems, why did lay people opt to associate themselves with the religious orders? That the times were dreadful is obvious. But that the solution for some lay folk was a third order is not, at least to us.

THE NOTION OF “ORDER”

Though historians are, as Martin Luther remarked, “most valuable people,” they have some annoying professional habits. One of them is the compulsion to go far, far back in time to begin their story. John Tracy Ellis began his history of the Catholic church in colonial America with the Emperor Constantine in 312. It should come as no shock, then, if I begin my historical reflections on the third orders with Cicero!

In his *De Officiis*, Cicero spoke of “the order of things,” that is, the just and proper organization of the universe. For him the preservation of that order was the locating of everything in its proper place. Rhetoric was the art of putting words, and politics was the art of placing people, in their correct positions relative to one another. This orderly universe was, of course, in accord with a prior and divine plan.

But Cicero was much more than a popularizer of Greek philosophy; he was a consummate politician. The word order (*ordo*) had an especial richness for the Roman mind. It had denoted the division of adult Roman males into distinct groups (*ordines*) for military organization; in the Roman legion it referred to the close-order troop of infantry deployed for battle; in Roman politics it denoted the group of men officially inscribed on a list drawn up by the magistrates; in the Roman social hierarchy it was used to refer to “the senatorial order” and “the equestrian order.”

Order was, therefore, not only the abstract *idea* of the proper organization of the universe but its reflection in concrete relationships between people and classes. *Ordo* could refer to an elite social class or to the row or bank of oars on a galley; these were the human “pictures” that went into an image of the way the universe was arranged. There is, thus, the idea of structure, a whole in which each part is invested with particular responsibilities, made cohesive by shared ritual, and bound together in loyalty and service. To be a member of an *ordo* was to have a position. The undifferentiated, the unpositioned, belonged to the people without order, the *plebs*.

The rich and profound term *ordo* was adopted by the Christian church — and used just as ambiguously. Authority was conferred on bishops and priests for the governance of the church, and hence they were spoken of as an order. But laity who went into the desert to live a life of total commitment were also an order, the order of monks. Chaste and unmarried women, consecrated to the service of the church, also formed an order, the order of virgins.

There was, it must be acknowledged, in both Roman and Christian traditions, an element in the thinking about order that tended to coalesce the concept of order with the idea of “giving orders,” that is, the concept of *ordo* is bound up with authority. In Cicero’s time, the old republic was obviously bankrupt; the ideal of many orders cooperating was impossible. Caesar exemplified a structure and ideology in which there was one ruling *ordo* in society and everyone else obeyed. Living under that empire, Tertullian applied the same ideology and structure to the church. For him there was a single *ordo*; all else was *plebs*; the church was clergy and laity. Leo XIII’s formulation of that plan in the nineteenth century is no

different: “It is established and manifest,” wrote Leo, “that there are in the church two orders by nature distinct: the pastors and the flock, that is to say, the leaders and those who obey.”

But authority is not the sole basis for order. If it were, then the dual system of pastors and flock was sufficient. Classical and medieval thought saw that inequality governed the universe. In everything some command and others obey; some are leaders and the rest are followers. But classical and medieval thought was also agreed that this was simply not an adequate view of the world and reality. There is more to human relations than government — and more to the church than hierarchy.

Christianity itself had brought division into the classical picture. The emperor had been *princeps* and *pontifex*; but Jesus spoke of obligations to both God and Caesar. How were Christians to image the relationships between church and world, between clergy and laity, between sacred and secular? They were intermixed but they were also distinct.

The common medieval image was that of three orders. Depending on the sector of life examined, these three orders could be described as king-bishop-knight, or clergy-nobility-towns, or bishop-priest-deacon, or priest-monk-laity. Yet each component was described as an *ordo*. It would almost seem that medieval thinkers felt that a three-legged “support” was stronger; it is almost certain that they saw it mirroring more of the messy reality of life.

DEEPER SIGNIFICANCE OF “ORDER”

The common assumption today is that “third order” is a disparaging name, that organizations so named are “third-class” organizations because they are behind the clergy in authority. My point here is not to argue for the retention of a title, especially a title that takes so many pages of explanation. But a serious theological point is to be made in the reconsideration of what “third order” meant to the men and women who eagerly adopted the name. I believe there is a deeper significance to the “third” in “third order” than simple “lack of real authority” in the parent order. I believe that the “third” invites us to go beyond the duality of officeholders and non-officeholders. That division is, as Father Congar points out, the basis for the canonical distinction between clergy and laity, those who hold office in the church and those who do not.

That dualism has the deceptive appeal of contemporary political myth: the division of reality into political terms, the division between the haves and the have-nots, between the exploiters and the exploited, between the clerical fascists and the evangelical Marxists. That mythic picture, like the economic and social ideologies on which it is based, is rooted in a static view of life, the idea that there is “X” amount of authority in the church, and how do we go about distributing it — or seizing it?

The ternary view always introduces another element into the simple equation of “them versus us.” There is unity but there is also diversity. Ternary views are the despair of a theocratic clergy or a caesaropapist government. Humanity is one — yet it is obviously divided by race, religion, and custom. Authority, even if acknowledged to be of God, must be seen as deriving in various ways and refracted in different modes, and set forth in different groups. Within the one church of Christ there are not only different ministries, different gifts; there are different orders.

In the medieval schema, the various strata of human life — the sacred and the secular, for instance — are inextricably mixed. The very common division of the three orders into those who fought, those who prayed, and those who worked, testifies to the complexity. Those who fought required the active cooperation and assistance of those who prayed and those who worked; the

same applied to each order. It was obvious to medieval folk that there were connections between all things.

Thus, after 1100, when Western Europe entered a period of economic, social, political, and cultural change it was obvious that there was bound also to be religious change. These tremendous upheavals echo only faintly for us under the cumbrous academic phrases such as “the revival of the towns,” the “rise of the monarchies,” the “beginnings of the universities.” These were not just culture shocks; they were religious earthquakes. Inevitably they impinged upon the idea of orders.

The “winds of change” swept through the church with the Gregorian reform movement. Clearly revolutionary, this is most often studied as a clerical movement, an attempt by the popes to gain control of the *ordo* of the clergy and to exercise authority over all of Christendom. But there was also a lay reform movement, and Gregory VII had consciously allied his program of ecclesiastical reform with the lay forces demanding reform within the church.

Integral to the lay reform movement was the idea of a return to evangelical living, a basing of Christian life upon gospel values. The reading of Scripture, the imitation of Christ, and the example of the apostolic church were its essential demands. Members of the movement were bitterly critical of the *ordo* of bishops for entangling themselves in struggles for land and power; they were critical of the *ordo* of monks for forgetting their vocation of being Poor and pious followers of Christ; they were critical of the *ordo* of priests for being ignorant, lazy, sensual, and greedy. In good and true medieval fashion, many of these groups called themselves an *ordo* — the “order of penitents,” the “order of penitence,” etc. The very name was a statement of their belief that they had a place, a position, within the church; they were important for the life of the church.

The origins of our own super-respectable third orders is among these unruly, pietistic, evangelical, charismatic, and radical groups. Triggered by the decadence of the other orders — bishops, priests, monks — these groups determined to lead an evangelical way of life- in an “orderly” way.

THE “GENIUS” OF THIRD ORDERS

Certain of these groups became associated with the Franciscans, the Dominicans, or the Carmelites. Still other groups, probably a majority, kept an independent existence. A significant number slipped into heresy and schism. The anniversary of the Dominican third order should not give anyone the impression that its creation was a masterstroke of genius that overnight defused a potentially dangerous situation and successfully channeled the religious effervescence of the lay reform movement into acceptable bounds,

But there was genius. Within the complex relationships of these lay groups and the equally complex relationships that developed with the friars, there was clearly the desire to be an *ordo* and the willingness to be recognized as such.

Because it happened, we tend to think that such an event was inevitable. It was not so. Some of the lay groups, angry and critical, had begun to develop “antihierarchical” beliefs. They began to develop an ecclesiology that identified authority or function within the church with personal goodness of life. Instead of an order based on *officium*, they insisted upon an order based upon merit. They began to disregard the sacramental within the life of the church and exalt the emotive and personal. They rejected the church as institution and saw it only as association.

The genius of the third orders was the refusal to confound distinctions, the ability to live with differences. The third orders sought not authority but the space in which to live religiously.

in the thirteenth century, anyone who made profession of a particular rule and wore a particular habit was a “religious.” By this profession, he or she bound himself or herself to a life “more arduous and holier than that led by the other seculars who live completely *saeculariter*, that is, dissolutely.” The contrast was thus not between an *ordo* of religious and the *ordo* of laity; the distinction was in the acceptance of a rule of living. Hence, the brothers and sisters of the order of penance were truly “religious.”

One aspect of the history of the friar movement that has been well and thoroughly researched is how it became “clericalized.” That is true; but it is only part of the history of the movement. This anniversary should remind us of another facet of the history that needs more attention now: how the friar movement was seen as an order based, not upon clerical function, but upon a way of life.

If Dominicans are simply a “clerical order,” a group of priests who wear a distinctive habit and have an extradiocesan organization, then there would seem to be no need and no place for a “third” order. But the Dominicans never regarded themselves in that light, nor did the Franciscans or Carmelites.

When Jordan of Saxony was asked what “rule of life” he followed, he replied: “The rule of the preacher, and it consists of three things: to live an upright life, to learn, and to teach.” Goodness of life, discipleship, and knowledge were thus presented as “the Dominican way of life.” In 1285, it was officially acknowledged that “the way of the preacher” was also a “way” for lay people, that the “order of preachers” included them.

St. Thomas Aquinas observed that every order implies a division. Where division in the church is seen in political terms, such as who rules, who obeys, who runs things, who gives the orders, then there is only clergy and laity and division means antagonism. In such a church, a third order is, at best, an anomaly and, at worst, a pious fraud. Boniface VIII has the last laugh: “Laymen have been hostile to the clergy from the most ancient times, and this is proved by the experiences of the present.” But if division in the church is seen as the healthy process that a living body undergoes, if it is seen as reflecting the richness of reality and providing for the working of the Spirit, then the third orders still have a place.