

Holy “Orders” for Lay People

Following in the Footsteps of the Saints as Tertiaries

by Michael Wick

I recently attended the funeral of an elderly secular Franciscan. For an hour or so before the Mass of Christian Burial, he was laid in state for last-minute mourners and out-of-state visitors. Seeing him vested in his Franciscan habit—one of the privileges of being a third order member—there was no doubt in my mind that the spirit of St. Francis had truly permeated Stanley’s life. This was further made manifest when I discovered that his late wife was, and six of their eleven children are, professed secular Franciscans too.

Sanctifying the Temporal Order

Following in the footsteps of the saints, particularly through associating oneself as a third order member of a religious community, has always been widely supported by the Church. Through the ages the laity have been encouraged to draw deeply from the wellspring of these spiritual families to assist them in living more fully their baptismal promises, as well as fulfilling a specific role in the mission of the Church—the sanctification of the temporal order.

By immersing oneself in the heavenly wisdom of the saints and the proven pattern for holiness as exemplified by holy founders and their religious congregations, lay men and women serve as “leaven for heaven.” For while *Lumen Gentium* teaches that all Christians are called to be “in but



not of the world,” it also reminds us that the laity have the special challenge to “contribute to the sanctification of the world as from within, as leaven” (no. 31). By doing God’s work in the world, lay persons who are third order members are greatly assisted in bringing the Gospel message into their homes, the marketplace, and elsewhere in ways that they can be most spiritually and apostolically fruitful.

Canon Law defines secular or third orders as “associations whose members, while living a secular life, strive after Christian perfection by observing a papally approved rule, under the direction and spirit of a religious order” (canon 702). Members—consisting of lay men and women, married or single, and even diocesan clergy—are called “tertiaries,” given their relationship to a religious community’s first and second orders, to which men and women religious respectively belong. The term “secular” indicates

that they live in the world. And although they are not bound by public vows as consecrated religious in community, tertiaries are full-fledged members of a religious family.

Gradual Historical Emergence

Historically, most third orders trace their origins to the 12th century, to emerging communities of laity who desired to live in close connection and in apostolic collaboration with particular religious orders. These devout laypersons received spiritual guidance and apostolic direction from Benedictine monks and Premonstratesian (Norbertine) canons, but it appears that a formal or extensive movement did not exist. St. Francis of Assisi changed all this when his burning desire to live the Gospel inspired baptized believers to reevaluate their lives. Francis specifically composed a Third Order Rule and wrote a letter to those lay members whom he dubbed

“the brothers and sisters of penance.” This sparked a widespread renewal within the Church on all levels, and the third order movement spread as rapidly as the Franciscan Order did.

From the 15th century onward, the Holy See granted various religious communities the right to establish lay associations within their respective institutes that have characteristics quite similar to those of the Franciscans. The Augustinians, Dominicans, Servites, Carmelites, Minims, Trinitarians, Mercedarians, Norbertines, Marists, and Benedictines were permitted to foster among the laity their specific charism and to involve them directly in their apostolates to spread the Kingdom of God.

The effectiveness of this intimate spiritual relationship and close apostolic bond is quite evident in the great number of blessed and saints who have arisen among those who have embraced the tertiary way of life. Examples such as St. Louis of France, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, St. Maurus, St. Catherine of Siena and Bl. Anna Maria Taigi verify that wholehearted dedication to this type of commitment can lead to a life of extraordinary holiness and heroic virtue. Modern-day tertiaries include CUF’s founder H. Lyman Stebbins (Benedictine), Matt Talbot (Franciscan) and even Pope John Paul II (Carmelite).

In Spiritual Solidarity with Religious

This desire to be in spiritual solidarity with an established institute of consecrated life in no way makes members of third orders “mini religious” or “second-rate religious.” On the contrary, a layperson’s desire to embrace and incorporate a particular charism concretely manifests the working of the Holy Spirit in and through an established religious family. It shows that the special graces bestowed upon a founder and subsequent followers are intended to build up the Body of Christ in all places and in every age.

Secular tertiaries take their commitment to be a Christian vocation in the deepest sense of the word. It is not merely another Catholic organization or group. Entry into a third order requires spiritual discernment and a

proscribed period of spiritual formation, followed by a formal profession that includes promises or vows. After their profession, members are required to fulfill certain spiritual practices or exercises, and, if at all possible, meet in a group setting for ongoing formation and fraternal exchange. They also must participate, according to their particular gifts, talents, and circumstances, in the apostolic mission of their religious order, according to the specific rule followed.

Since Vatican II, there seems to be some confusion whether secular or third orders are still viable within the Church. Are they simply outdated with the emergence of a so-called lay spirituality and in light of the plethora of new ecclesial movements? Should archaic structures merely dissolve to make way for new expressions of lay involvement within the Church?

While Vatican II did indeed refreshingly emphasize the uniqueness of the lay vocation and its vital importance within the People of God, the acknowledgment of the universal call to holiness and the explicit encouragement for the lay people to live an apostolic life in the midst of the world is hardly a new teaching. In fact, one could point out that this is something that had been encapsulated by the third orders since their origin. Inspired by the example and instruction of the first and second orders, tertiaries have always striven for sanctity by embracing the spirit of poverty, chastity, and obedience according to their state in life. Theirs is merely accomplished in an ecclesial “family context” of a religious institute that is called to radically live the Gospel with “an undivided heart.”

Consecrated Life as a “Bridge”

As Pope John Paul II noted in his apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, “the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element of her mission” (no. 3). Therefore, consecrated religious men and women serve as visible reminders that Christ’s call to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48), can and must indeed be lived in today’s world. And by closely associ-

Third Order Info on the Internet:

Augustinians—www.augustinian.org
Benedictines—www.osb.org
Carmelites—www.carmelnet.org
and www.ocdswashprov.org
Dominicans—www.laity.op.org
Franciscans—www.nafra-sfo.org
Marists—www.maristlaity.org
Mercedarians—www.orderofmercy.org
Minims—www.minimi.it
Norbertines—www.premontre.org
Servites—www.servite.org
Trinitarians—www.trinitarianhistory.org

ating themselves with religious in the apostolate, laity can discover, as Vatican II’s *Apostolicam Actuositatem* encourages, “the innumerable opportunities open to the laity for the exercise of their apostolate of evangelization and sanctification” (no. 6).

Vocations to the third orders provide a wonderful “bridge” connecting the consecrated life and lay life within the Church’s life and mission. Dedicated tertiaries lead ordinary Catholics to draw even greater inspiration from the rich spiritual tradition of the Church and to tap into their many well-established apostolic activities. They also can serve as catalysts for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life within Catholic families and parishes. For if children witness a parent living out a vocation as a Lay Dominican or Secular Franciscan, for example, they themselves may be much more open and aware of their own vocational possibilities.

Involvement in the traditional third orders, or even as lay associates of newer religious communities and other institutes of consecrated life, can help bring about the “new springtime of the Gospel” as Pope John Paul II has so often urged. Such an intimate association with the consecrated life anchors and guides the lay faithful both spiritually and apostolically to the institutional Church as she strives to “put out into the deep” with renewed fervor at the dawn of the Third Millennium. ■

Michael Wick is the Director of Operations for the Institute on Religious Life (www.religiouslife.com) and serves as the vice-chairman of the new Blessed John XXIII CUF Chapter in the Chicago area.