

## What is a “Third” or “Secular” Order?

**The Short Answer:** The Catholic Church’s *Code of Canon Law* states: “Associations whose members share in the spirit of some religious institute while in secular life, lead an apostolic life, and strive for Christian perfection under the higher direction of the same institute are called third orders or some other appropriate name” (canon 303).

**A Medium Response:** With the Holy Spirit guiding her, the Catholic Church is full of options when it comes to living out different charisms or spiritual gifts. The Holy Spirit has raised up in the Church a great variety of religious and spiritual families to meet the needs of each generation. While religious priests, brothers or nuns literally vow their lives to a particular spirituality, that commitment and dedication is not just limited to them. According to the *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Third Orders signify in general lay members of religious orders, i.e. men and women who do not necessarily live in community and yet can claim to ‘wear the habit’ and participate in the good works of some great order. ... Any Catholic may join a Third Order, but may not at once belong to more than one, nor may he or she without grave cause leave one for another.” Married or single Catholic women and men from all walks of life are able to join Secular Orders, as are diocesan priests and deacons. Unlike religious (monks, friars, nuns, sisters) who remove themselves from the world and live apart in monasteries, convents or friaries, those in Third Orders stay where they’re at in the world (homes, jobs, families, etc.); hence, the term “secular.” Like their religious counterparts, seculars (also called “tertiaries”) undergo a period of formation according to the processes established by their Orders, after which they become professed members. Profession for seculars means they promise to live according to the *Rule* of their Order; it does not consist of professing the evangelical counsels (or vows) of poverty, chastity and obedience.

**A Longer Response:** Since the days of St. Francis of Assisi, Third Orders have allowed the laity (and diocesan clergy) to be closely united to the spirituality of their choice. But what exactly is a Third Order? To answer that question, one must journey back to the days of St. Francis whom many consider to be the founder of third orders; indeed, he has the distinction of being the only founder of a religious order who also directly founded the third order as an expression of his tradition. For St. Francis, the vision was simple and clear. He wanted to develop a new spiritual path of life where laymen and women could participate more intimately in the Franciscan spiritual way (see accompanying article on the characteristics of Franciscan spirituality). This new Order would complement the First Order of male religious in his spiritual family, the Lesser Brothers or Friars Minor, established in 1209. It would also be connected to the Second Franciscan Order founded in 1212 consisting of cloistered religious women, who were then called the Poor Ladies of San Damiano (they would later be known as they are today, the Poor Clares, named after their foundress, St. Clare of Assisi).



The year 1221 is most associated with the founding of this **Franciscan Third Order**, for it was then that a *Rule of Life* for its members (commonly known as Tertiaries, though originally called “The Brothers and Sisters of Penance”) came into existence. Among the practices that the lay members were expected to follow were simplicity in dress, praying of the canonical office or the Liturgy of the Hours, and they were prohibited from taking up arms. In seeking to adapt the life of the **Secular Franciscan Order** to the needs of the Church from time to time, this *Rule of Life* has been revised by three different Popes: Nicholas IV in 1289, Leo XIII in 1883 and St. Paul VI in

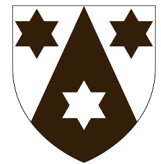
1978. Today, there are approximately 430,000 Secular Franciscans present and active in over 130 countries throughout the world; 12,500 live in the United States where they gather in over 600 fraternities. “In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of Saint Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church” (*Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS)*, article #2). All the members of the great Franciscan Family – laity, religious and clergy – recognize that “they are called to follow Christ in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi. In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church” (*OFS Rule*, article #1).



It would not take long before other religious orders would recognize the need to honor the spiritual friendship that existed between their foundations and their local community of supporters or benefactors. In 1285, **the Brothers and Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic** came about. These local groups, which followed the spirituality of St. Dominic, were also known as fraternities. They were formed under the direction of a local Dominican priest and wore a habit of black and white. Today, Lay Dominicans “are fully incorporated members of the Order of Preachers and live out their Dominican vocation in the world. They are accordingly distinguished both by their own spirituality and by their service to God and neighbor in the Church. As members of the Order, they participate in its apostolic mission through prayer, study and preaching according to the state proper to the laity.” (*The Rule of the Lay Fraternity* #4).

**The Third Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel** was established in 1476.

Originally, the *Rule* of this new Order was that of the Carmelite friars, with some adaptations given to one’s state in life. In the 1670s, the Prior General of the Carmelites revised the Third Order *Rule*. Among the practices prescribed were a half-hour meditation every morning and evening, and fasting on all Fridays and on Wednesdays and Saturdays from September 14 until Easter. Today, members of the Lay Carmelite Order, responding to a special call of God, freely and deliberately commit themselves “to live in the following of Jesus Christ” according to the charism, traditions, and spirit of Carmel under the authority of the Prior General of the Carmelite Order. The members, though not in Religious Life, choose to live out their baptismal commitment according to the spirit of the Carmelite Order. Members are brothers and sisters of the Carmelite Family and sharers in the same call to holiness and in the same mission of the Carmelite Order. Lay Carmelites, filled with the spirit of the Order, seek to live their own vocation by silently listening to the Word of God (*Lectio Divina*). According to the constant tradition of Carmel, they will especially cultivate prayer in all its forms. The members of the Lay Carmelites follow the charism of the Order that takes its inspiration from the figures of Our Lady and the Prophet Elijah. In the midst of their normal family lives, in the work place, in their social commitments and relationships with other people, Lay Carmelite members seek out the hidden image of God. They try to live in the spirit of the Beatitudes, humbly and consistently exercising the virtues of honesty, justice, sincerity, courtesy and fortitude, without which no Christian or human life is possible.



The Catholic Church also recognizes a number of other Third Orders, but the authors have chosen to describe only three: Franciscans, Dominicans and Carmelites since these are the three most well known in the Church today.