

## **“CAN DOMINICANS REALLY BE LAY PEOPLE?”**

BY VIVIAN GILBREATH

An exciting age challenges us by a new human consciousness in secular society and in the church to articulate new identities and relationships. The emergence of the laity in contemporary Catholicism is part of a global movement -- an eruption of common, ordinary people as shapers of history. Lay persons are emerging within Christianity as determining Christian history and articulating Christian spiritual experience on an unprecedented scale.

Precisely what, however, is the unique value of the lay vocation in the church, and how does Vatican II describe it? How does belonging to the Dominican order develop the lay vocation described by Vatican II?

Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church* says the special role of the laity is characterized precisely by their secular nature and by their apostolate within the ordinary circumstances of life:

The laity are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth. Thus, every layperson, through those gifts given to him or her, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the laity's proclamation of Christ by word and the testimony of life "acquires a specific property and peculiar efficacy because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world" (CC 35). All Christians are "in but not of the world," and yet the laity are in a unique position to "contribute to the sanctification of the world as from within, like leaven" (CC 31). "This is the special work and responsibility of lay people that no one else can ever properly supply for them . . . many cannot hear the Gospel and come to acknowledge Christ except through the laypeople they associate with."<sup>2</sup>

In their commemoration of the fifteenth anniversary of the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, the U.S. Catholic bishops noted that the laity feel themselves "called to exercise the same mature interdependence and practical self-direction which characterize them in other areas of life" and that "adulthood implies knowledge, experience and awareness, freedom and responsibility, and adult mutuality in relationships."<sup>3</sup> The laity's secular way of being in the world complements the religious and clerical states; and "adult mutuality in relationships" with clergy and religious, when it happens, benefits the whole church.

One reason for the lack of adult maturity in the laity has been the absence of a sufficiently developed lay spirituality in the church. A spirituality focused on the sanctification of the secular order is just as important as one focused on the institutional church. Most people need a spirituality that makes a prayer of their daily experience, that recognizes what they do as valuable to the creation of the reign of God, and that allows them to reflect on the meaning of what they do every day.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, many people who have taken to heart the message of the gospel and the spirit of Vatican II and who desire a more intense following of Christ find that the spiritual, intellectual, and apostolic life in many parishes does not encourage these needs and aspirations, and so they become frustrated in the call to maturity and coresponsibility in the church. Some find in the lay branches of religious orders the encouragement and method needed for spiritual, intellectual, and apostolic growth. They find rich resources of the heritage of the church and of community not

available on the parish level. They find in the orders a focus and discipline for spiritual growth, a unified vision in the order's charism, and a structured identity with a spiritual family in a living tradition in the church. Thus nourished, they can then become more effective in the parish and in the church at large, exercising the "prophetic role which is given to the laity."<sup>5</sup>

## **CALL TO FOLLOW A CHARISM**

Some may object that belonging to a religious order actually draws lay persons away from their authentic vocation described by Vatican II. Does it not make lay people into "mini religious"? The answer lies in the difference between post-Tridentine and post-Vatican II concepts of the laity. To many people in the post-Tridentine church, it seems the religious state was perceived as the highest calling, and only priests and religious were called to seriously pursue holiness and the apostolate. The contemplative or apostolic life was not for the laity, whose job was to raise families and money. The next best thing the laity could do was join a "third order" and approximate the religious state, including a spirituality for religious, which, although inappropriate for laity, was the only choice. The adaptation of this spirituality to lay life was awkward but functional; and although many lay persons achieved sanctity by that means, it nevertheless supplied for a missing theology and spirituality of the laity, which is only now beginning to develop from a new appreciation of the lay vocation.

An important distinction must be made between the vocation to a life-style (marriage, single, religious) and the vocation to a particular charism within the church (a deep identity with the spirit and charism of an order). One can receive, for example, the grace of the Dominican vocation without being called to religious life or the priesthood; but neither does one have to be a Dominican to be a priest or religious. They are separate vocations. There are two distinct calls: one to a way of life, and one to a particular spiritual family or charism. Both religious and laity receive these two calls in their respective lives. The grace and strength of the Dominican vocation is just as real for lay persons as for religious, and they are graced with the same Dominican charism within their lay state of life. The careful process of vocation discernment and formation is just as essential for secular as for religious Dominicans. Lay Dominicans make profession to the master of the order, and the graces of commitment by profession and of the contemplative and apostolic life are as powerfully real for Dominican laity as for Dominican religious. There are even specific charisms within the lay Dominican vocation, such as lay contemplatives and lay preachers. The living out of the Dominican charism is not limited to institutional religious life; the Dominican life is no less fully lived as a lay secular experience. The elements of prayer, study, preaching, and community life are real and effective in lay Dominican life, even though these elements are lived out in the context of secular, rather than religious, institutions.

For Dominican lay people, the proclamation of the gospel is manifest in both ecclesial and non-ecclesial circumstances, but mostly in the "ordinary circumstances" and structures of society which constitute secular existence in the world. Preaching the truth of the gospel by the witness of one's life and by word happens constantly for committed lay Dominicans in the business and professional world, and in social, family, political, ecumenical, and leisure groups. It is in these places that the laity physically and spiritually feed the hungry, clothe the naked, strengthen the weak, bandage the wounded, cure the sick, raise the dead, seek the lost, and preach the good news. The former master of the order, Father de Couesnongle, said: "Dominican laity are not members of a pious movement, purely spiritual. Their vocation is an essentially apostolic vocation, like that of the brothers and sisters . . . and real cooperation needs to be established between the religious and laity of the Order by some structural participation in apostolic activities, in co-responsibility . . . [for] Dominican life is either apostolic or it is non-existent."<sup>6</sup> With special emphasis on preaching,

the apostolic life is the charism of Dominic. It is this apostolic life that is being rediscovered and lived anew by Dominic's family, and is the perennial source of attraction for Dominican laity who have "fallen in love with the idea of the Order" (Tugwell).

Dominic was given the "office of the Word." The Dominican approach to the apostolic life is reflected in the elements of the charism which all branches of the order share: the love for truth and its serious study, especially in Scripture; the pursuit of the contemplative life from which the Word is born in the soul; loyalty to the church and the vicar of Christ; the joyfulness of faith and creative openness to the Holy Spirit; and community life bonded by the shared charism and overflowing in the preaching of the word of God. These elements of the charism are shared equally by the Dominican laity who live and express them in the secular state of their Dominican vocation and find in them the effective means for all the people of God to grow in holiness and love.

## **THE DOMINICAN LAY RULE**

Dominic founded his order in response to the need of the people of God to hear the word preached. The thirteenth century saw the rise both of the mendicant orders and of a lay apostolic spirituality based on Christ's apostolic commission to his seventy-two disciples: a return to gospel poverty and an urgent need to proclaim with power the gospel demands for conversion (Luke 10:1-20). The religious aspirations of the people needed to be met within the church, and the gospel needed to be proclaimed intelligently and sensitively. A conflict arose, however, which pivoted on the right of lay people to preach. The issue of lay preaching was in effect squelched, but the movement toward a radical, evangelical life-style persisted. The apostolic life, rediscovered in the Gospels, offered an alternative to monastic spirituality; and many lay people inspired by the gospel ideal sought support and encouragement from the innovative friars who based their whole life on it. The prudence and interest of the friars were able to channel these lay people's energy into an order of penance where their zeal received spiritual direction and some formation.

In 1285 the master of the Dominican order assured the laity's association with the order under the friars' jurisdiction in the formulation of the first lay rule. However, in response to the general lack of education and the dangers of heresy inherent in the times, this rule in effect reinstated the monastic ideal of holiness as the norm for the lay branch of the order. The inestimable value of monastic practices for spiritual development cannot be questioned; but because of its somewhat different focus, the monastic ideal was not adequate for a lay apostolic spirituality. The lay branch was considered a true branch of the order, united to its life and mission; but, with notable exceptions such as Catherine of Siena, the lay branch's full intellectual and apostolic potential was not realized because of the problems of the period.

In 1923 the rule was modified to conform to the 1918 Code of Canon Law. The language changed, but the essentially monastic spirituality remained; again, the rule was written entirely by the friars for lay members. Paternalism was strengthened, and the ideal became that of the Tridentine religious congregation -- not that of Dominic, Catherine, and the apostolic life. With the exception of some illustrious groups, such as the New York Dominican tertiaries under Fr. Francis Wendell, O.P., the next fifty years held essentially no change; and, although many lay Dominicans achieved sanctity under this rule, the lack of a developed lay spirituality can nevertheless be seen throughout the rule's history.

In 1967 the rule was revised once more with input from the laity and was put on an experimental basis for six-year intervals. In 1980 the first U.S. National Dominican Laity Council was held in Oakland, California, at St. Albert's Priory, where representatives from all four U.S. provinces discussed the

rule in light of the needs of our times and what was happening in various parts of the country. It was agreed that there is indeed “new wine” but we need “new wineskins.”

## **DESIRES OF DOMINICAN LAITY**

The period since the 1980 meeting of the Dominican Laity Council in Oakland has been one of effort to rediscover the essentials of the Dominican charism for contemporary needs and observe the signs of the times in order to discern the most effective forms the “new wineskins” might take. In the lay branch of the order, the instruments for renewal do exist, not as built-in elements of the rule, as in the friars’ constitutions, but in the documents of Vatican II, in the experimental 1976 rule, in the friars’ constitutions, in the Acts of the General Chapters of 1968 to the present, in the continuing statements of the masters of the order, and in the needs of the people themselves.

As the Dominican Laity Council has listened and observed, one of the most revealing factors has been the characteristics of many lay Dominicans in the U.S. which reflect the maturing laity in the church at large.

1. They are looking for real community of faith and sharing. They come from a secular world where this is happening in many groups, such as prayer groups, study, catechetical, hospital, university, or political groups, where they have experienced true friendship and genuine warmth in the presence of Christ in each other. They are willing to risk the intimacy of sharing themselves and prayer together at a deep human level, and they are looking for strong forms of community in the order. The Dominican family attracts them in concept, but so far only rarely in its present reality.
2. They hunger for study, especially for Scripture. The sound study of Scripture is one of the surest tests of our credibility as Dominicans, and they know that renewal in the church and the order comes from study of Scripture, study of the signs of the times, study of the founder, and openness to the Spirit. Karl Barth says theology is done with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. These people are very aware of this, as they seek to find gospel answers to the urgent problems of contemporary society.
3. They express deep interest in prayer: contemplative, communal, liturgical, and what former Master de Couesnongle calls the “prayer of the streets and the newspapers.” Their prayer is less devotional and more scriptural.
4. They seek simplicity of life-style. They are attracted by that voluntary poverty of the gospel — that of “no walking staff, traveling bag, or sandals.” Poverty and preaching are inseparable. Poverty gives clout to the message and is a terrible sign of authenticity.
5. They desire a rediscovery of the true meaning of Catholic tradition in the church and in the order. They find in the essentials of Catholicism the rich heritage of faith and practice of centuries of spiritual wisdom, the eternal beauty which St. Augustine praises as “ever ancient, ever new.” Their attempt to rediscover and restore essential Catholic tradition must not, however, be confused with the champions of a frantic orthodoxy or “the single-minded mania of the self-professed ‘Traditionalists’ who wish to restore the status quo ante 1960.”<sup>7</sup> Rather, they wish to rediscover the essentials of the gospel, of the heritage of the church, and of St. Dominic and his apostolic mission, and to manifest that mission to the contemporary world.

6. The General Chapter of Quezon City urged the universal order to find new places and new ways of preaching. This challenge of new ways and places of preaching has a direct relevance for Dominican laity who live in a society that has for the most part either rejected institutional religion or is grasping at fundamentalism. At the Dominican Family Symposium in Bologna, the master of the order was insistent that only candidates committed to the apostolate be accepted as lay Dominicans. The need to go beyond the traditional parish and classroom is evident, and many lay Dominicans are already involved in often surprising lay preaching apostolates within the very circumstances of their lives.

Vatican II says that “among the tasks of this apostolate [that is, renewal of the temporal order], Christian social action is pre-eminent. The Council desires to see it extended today to every sector of life, not forgetting the cultural” (DAL 7). The laity are called to evangelize secular culture from within it. In 1976 Pope Paul VI, in *Evangelization in the Modern World*, made it clear that evangelization is not limited to formal preaching or ecclesial ministries, but identifies the scope of evangelization with the transformation of humanity: “It is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, humankind’s criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the word of God and the plan of salvation.”<sup>8</sup>

## **WHERE DOMINICAN LAITY MINISTER**

Some lay Dominicans are, or have been, on the “fringes” of the institutional church and are part of an emerging new Catholic “intelligentsia” who are unknown or invisible to the institutional church leadership, but whose influence in the secular world is strongly Catholic in substance if not in explicit definition. Tugwell reminds us that Dominic was “passionately devoted to the Church and to the truth of the Gospel, but also sensitive to the real values which could be found in movements on or beyond the fringe of the official Church.”<sup>9</sup>

Lay Dominicans are involved in cultural-transformation ministries, such as artists, writers, and scholars at secular as well as Catholic universities; medical professionals who have direct Catholic influence on medical ethical values; Catholic lawyers working for the poor and minorities; ministry to victims of violence; ministers in the gay community, especially to those struggling with self-acceptance and the church’s teachings; builders of grassroots justice-and-peace communities; political educators among minorities; and always those many who labor at tasks in the marketplace and professions who preach the good news in subtler ways.

There are also lay Dominicans who work more directly with the institutional church in such capacities as members of diocesan justice and peace commissions, diocesan retreat directors, journalists and media specialists, associates of Dominican preaching teams, lay advisors to the NCCB, parish RCIA directors and eucharistic ministers, adult education specialists, lay contemplatives gifted with apostolic prayer and inner healing, and those gifted with promoting relationships among the Dominican family itself.

At the Bologna Dominican Family Symposium, in addition to new ways of preaching, the master of the order encouraged new models of Dominican community and new forms of commitment. The order and the National Dominican Laity Council are seeing new forms of community life and new forms of relationship and commitment to the order among new groups, especially those which are in dialog with other branches of the Dominican family. Surely, “new wineskins” will emerge that will

benefit the whole Dominican family as we become more truly brothers and sisters in the service of the Word. Tugwell reminds us that “Dominic was not primarily concerned to find a way of life which would be convenient or even safe for himself, nor was he concerned to realize any dream of his own perfection: what he wanted was to preach the Gospel where it was needed most, in whatever way would make it most effective.”<sup>10</sup> A recent event which reflects this spirit was the meeting of the first Southern Province USA Dominican Laity Council in November, 1984, at Rosaryville retreat center in Louisiana. There, representatives from traditional chapters and from a variety of new informal groupings from all over the South came together and shared what the Holy Spirit is doing among them. They explored possibilities for new forms of relationship and commitment to the order from a common vision of the urgent needs of the church and society today. They experienced a bonding in the recognition of something new being born among them in this sharing -- something which is also happening in the order in other places of the world. They dared to create minimal facilitating structures as the Holy Spirit leads them in the evolution of the Dominican family in their province. It was significant that the council represented many nationalities, and that it elected an executive committee of leadership equally balanced between men and women to help develop these hope-filled beginnings.

The same gospel call to the apostolic life that fired thirteenth century laity to identify with the Dominican order is heard today in the hearts of lay Dominicans. The richness of the Dominican charism has nourished the people of God uniquely in every age, and no less today does the Lord promise: “See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you not see it? I am putting water in the wilderness to give my chosen people drink. The people I have formed for myself will sing my praises” (Isa. 43:18-21).

## NOTES

1. Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Church, no. 33. Henceforth this document will be cited in the text in parentheses thus: (CC 33).
2. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, no. 13. Henceforth this document will be cited in the text in parentheses, thus: (DAL 13).
3. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity*, 13 November 1980, p. 3.
4. See Gregory F. Pierce, “A Spirituality of St. Joseph the Worker,” *America*, 1 June 1984, p. 418.
5. Fundamental Rule for Dominican Laity, I, 5a.
6. International Dominican Information, no. 212 (1984).
7. Andrew Greeley, “American Catholicism: 1909-1984,” *America*, 30 June 1984, p. 491.
8. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, 8 December 1975, no. 19.
9. Tugwell, *St. Dominic and the Order of Preachers* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1981), p. 14.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 4.