

A Brief History of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites* by John Leidy, OCDS

The origin of Secular, or Third, orders is usually traced to St. Francis of Assisi. Francis responded to the desire of his secular supporters to join in his way of life by composing a Rule for them around the year 1221. Even before this Rule was written it appears that some benefactors and secular followers had been treated as lay “brothers” and “sisters” of the Order, sharing to some extent in the monks’ and nuns’ prayers and penances. This practice seems to have been followed in other Orders as well, particularly the Mendicant orders of the thirteenth century, and over the years these orders also began providing Rules for the benefit of lay followers.

Prior to the reforms of St. Teresa of Avila, Bl. John Soreth issued the first Rule of the Third Order of Carmel in the year 1455. This Rule was based on the Rule of St. Albert and involved a life that was more “monastic” in that the laity lived communally, wore a full habit, and said the complete Office. When Teresa inaugurated her reforms in the sixteenth century, she had many interested lay benefactors and supporters, as had Francis two and a half centuries earlier. On some of these supporters Teresa apparently conferred a small brown scapular.

When the Discalced were officially made a separate Order in 1593, the Superiors retained the power to organize lay members as was granted to the parent Order by Pope Nicholas V in 1452. However, in the early years of the new order the Superiors forbade the admittance of lay members to the Discalced vocation, as in the Constitutions composed by Fr. Gracian in 1576. This policy was continued in the Constitutions of 1581 and 1592. In 1600 the Discalced Carmelite Order was divided into two Congregations, the Spanish and the Italian. Both Congregations maintained the policy against organizing groups of tertiaries (seculars), however they did continue the apostolate (Confraternity) of the brown scapular among lay friends of the Order, and such friends were the recipients of prayers and penances offered on their behalf.

In the late 17th century, some movement toward the development of a Discalced Carmelite Third Order was begun, first in Belgium and then in France and Italy. In 1699 a Rule was privately published (with Provincial approval) in Liege, Belgium. And in 1708 in Marseille, France a complete Rule was published for Third Order Secular women. This Rule can be considered the first known true Secular Rule of the Discalced Order. Interestingly, this document recognizes Third Orders that were apparently already in existence in France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and Spain. This Rule seems to have had as its intention the desire to bring some uniformity to a number of independent secular groups in various locations.

In addition to teaching on mental prayer, a spiritual Directory, and a Ceremonial, the 1708 Rule contained the following main duties for Third Order members: daily Mass, the daily Office (or 82 Our Fathers and Hail Marys, a common custom to accommodate those who could not read), an hour of mental prayer daily (half in the morning and half in the evening), observance of certain days of fasting and abstinence, and the doing of works of charity -- especially on behalf of members who were ill.

In 1883 the Definitior General of the parent Order imposed a version of this Rule on all Third Order Secular congregations. However, attempts to seek Vatican approval for various versions of a secular Rule did not meet with success. In 1911 Fr. Elia of St. Ambrose composed a revision of the Rule. This Rule was approved by the Definitior General and was published in Rome in 1912 as the first official Manual/Rule of the Third Secular Order. It was approved by the Holy See in 1921, and remained the official Rule until after Vatican II, when the Rule of Life was approved in 1970 (translated into English in 1982).

The 1970 Rule, based as it was in Vatican II, was the first to focus on the lay character of the vocation, and it also introduced the First Promise. Prior to this Rule, “vows” of chastity and obedience had been made following a one-year novitiate. Subsequent to the 1970 Rule of Life, the Church introduced new documents on the vocation of the laity, as well as the new Code of Canon Law, and by the late 1990’s it was felt that another revision of the Rule was called for. In the wake of this new vision for the laity, our current Constitutions were approved by Rome in 2003.

*This sketch is primarily based on Fr. Otilio Rodriguez’ “The Third Order of the Teresian Carmel; Its Origin and History.”