



HOLY ORDERS FOR LAY PEOPLE



Following in the Footsteps of St. Peter Nolasco —THIRD ORDER MERCEDARIANS—

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This year, the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy is celebrating their 800th anniversary. The Mercedarians were founded by St. Peter Nolasco in 1218 in Spain to redeem Christian captives who were in danger of losing their Faith while held for ransom in Moslem captivity. Just as Jesus gave “His life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45), so Peter and his companions were prepared to offer their lives as a ransom for the sake of their fellow Christians.

As the centuries went by and the Mercedarians moved to other continents, their charism led them to work for the redemption of those enslaved by other forms of captivity. Pope St. John XXIII, quoting Pope Benedict XV, said: “Today’s slavery is greater and worse than the slavery of seven centuries ago.” Pope St. John Paul II described them as looking “attentively at the various forms of slavery present in human life today, with its moral and spiritual poverty.” In a letter to Mercedarians in 1998, the Holy Father hoped that the Mercedarians would be renewed in “the necessary zeal and enthusiasm to follow Christ the Redeemer and, sustained by His grace, to ‘preach good news to the poor ... proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are

oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord’ (Lk 4:18-19) in new contexts and countries.”

Bringing this work into sharp focus is the unique fourth vow that Mercedarians profess to “always be gladly disposed to give up their lives, if it is necessary, as Jesus Christ gave up His for us.” Many communities, in addition to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, profess a fourth vow, such as the Little Sisters of the Poor (*Hospitality*), the Poor Clares (*Enclosure*) and the Franciscans of the Primitive Observance (*Total Consecration to Our Blessed Mother*).

The Mercedarian Third Order shares in the graces and patrimony of this venerable order and in their own situations strive to bring people to know the freedom that comes from being beloved children of the Father. “From the beginning,” as it says in their Constitutions, “lay people have participated and collaborated in the exercise of our redemptive mission” (117). Lay people are offered “the possibility of knowing and cherishing the spiritual treasure of our Order, so that, while maintaining their lay character, they may realize the Mercedarian ideal” (120). The Order began as lay religious institute and



today includes religious women, lay associations and the Third Order, all who share in the redemptive spirit present in the Mercedarian family.

In Peter Nolasco’s time, the despicable practice of trading captives between Christians and Moslems (or Moors and Saracens as they were known in Spain at the time) was big business. As a young man growing up near Barcelona, Peter learned the art of trading from his father, little knowing that the skills he learned as a merchant dealing in worldly goods would be used one day to trade for something far more precious—the life of a fellow Christian!

A letter dating from 1311 gives us an idea of the magnitude of the crisis. King James II of Aragon informed Pope Clement V that there were 30,000 “wretched” Christian captives in the Moslem-held kingdom of Granada and that “500,000 renounced their Catholic faith and

embraced the Mohammedan sect locally.” The life of a captive was essentially the lot of a slave—forced labor, mistreatment and often death. But in the eyes of their fellow Catholics, the most heartbreaking aspect was the understandable temptation of these captives to renounce their faith to regain their freedom.

Peter Nolasco had a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, spurred on by a profound experience at Our Lady of Monserrat’s shrine. On the night of August 1, 1218, the Feast of St. Peter in Chains, his work as a layman took a decidedly different turn when the Blessed Virgin Mary made it known to him that he was to found a religious order for the redemption of Christians. Within ten days, the new order was formally approved, and Peter and eight other laymen professed religious vows and received from the bishop their white habit with the distinctive red insignia.

Their official name combines two of Peter’s favorite images—*Christ our Redeemer* and *Mary the Mother of Mercy*. Pope John Paul II, reflecting on their devotion to the Blessed Mother, said: “The very title of your Marian dedication which also gives its name to the Order, constitutes in itself a marvelous plan of life which speaks of mercy, redemption, conversion and forgive-



ness: the same values through which the Son of God came into the world, became incarnated and gave His life for us.” It is interesting to note that the Latin root of the word “mercy” means “payment.” Hence, in Spain, the title Our Lady of Mercy is synonymous with the title “Our Lady of Ransom.” Through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus ransomed us from sin and death in His infinite mercy, paying for our sins through His death on the Cross.

Mercedarians take to heart the words of Jesus, “I was in prison and you came to me” (Mt 25:36). And the words in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you are also in the body” (Heb 13:3). Peter always welcomed those who came to him in distress, caring for the imprisoned, hungry, thirsty, naked and homeless that exist in all times and places.

One example of a heroic tertiary is the life of Bl. Mariana of Jesus who was born in Spain in 1565. She endured mistreatment from her stepmother who tried to remove her from the family home through an arranged

marriage. Mariana refused, for she had chosen Jesus as her only spouse. Seeking someone who would understand her spiritual sufferings, Mariana found a confessor in a Mercedarian priest. Eventually freed from her family, Mariana moved near a Mercedarian monastery where she spent her life in prayer, penance and works of charity. Ill health prevented her entrance into religious life but she did make her profession as a Mercedarian tertiary. Known as the co-patroness of Madrid, her incorrupt body can be seen in the Mercedarian convent of Don Juan de Alarcón. When Mariana once told the Lord that a tabernacle was purer and more beautiful than she was, the Lord said to her: “But it does not love Me.” Not as we can do!

St. Gaspare del Bufalo (1786-1837), founder of the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood, was a tertiary as was Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922) who granted an indulgence to those who invoked Mary as the Most Compassionate Mother of Mercy. St. Vincent Pallotti, founder of the Pallottines, always wore the Mercedarian scapular.

Mercedarians accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World, dedicating themselves “in these remote lands to another lofty kind of redemption; it liberates souls from the deception of the devil and it redeems so many of them that it is impossible to know their number.” Their first house in the United States was established in 1921 in Ohio. Today, they also have houses in Pennsylvania, New York and Florida.

The sorry plight of Christians that moved Peter Nolasco to act so many centuries ago, is sadly not a distant memory today. In 2015, the Order of Mercy joined with the Arch-



diocese of Erbil in Iraq to provide prayers, increased awareness of and material support to those persecuted for their Christian faith. Speaking to the Mercedarians during their Chapter meeting, Most Rev. Mashar Warda, Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil, told them: "There is a real sale of Christian slaves, especially women and children, that they take to sell in markets. The Christians that do not flee must either convert to Islam, or pay a heavy tax. Many times, however, they are killed."

Today, the Mercedarian Third Order carries on the work of St. Peter Nolasco by helping Christians who are in danger of losing their faith because of social, political or psychological captivities. They may pray for victims of human trafficking; offer assistance to those suffering from natural disasters or lack of means; pray the Rosary for an end to immorality, abortion and euthanasia; and assist the friars and sisters with their works of mercy across the land.

As is true for all Third Orders, members of the Mercedarian Third Order, whether lay people or diocesan clergy, have the fundamental vocation to strive for holiness in their own lives as part of their baptismal call. They avoid luxury and are chaste according to their state in life. The lay people seek to evangelize and infuse a Christian spirit into their homes, jobs and society. As part of the Mercedarian family, they promise to love our Blessed Mother under her title of Our Lady of Mercy, pray the Rosary, honor Our Lady of Mercy on Saturdays, frequently receive the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, pray for captives, and read Scripture and works by Mercedarian spiritual writers. Those



in remote locations may participate in formation classes online.

Mercedarians continually ask the question: what are the forms of captivity today? An example of a new branch on the Third Order tree has arisen in Georgia to serve Latino immigrants who are living in the shadows and leaving the Church in droves. Going door to door, the tertiaries meet people who are eager to welcome Our Lady of Mercy into their lives. The fruits are reception of the

Sacraments and reconciliation with Christ and His Church.

Another new endeavor is the Mercedarian St. Raymond Nonnatus Foundation for Freedom, Family and Faith, directed by a Third Order Mercedarian. Their mission is to reach out and accompany individuals, children and families impacted, affected, or wounded by divorce and help them sustain (or reconcile) their redemptive relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church.

"Remembering what it was that moved your fathers and where it led them, do your best to follow in their footsteps," said Pope Francis. "They were able to remain as hostages beside the poor, the marginalized, those cast out by society, bringing them comfort, suffering with them, completing in their own flesh what was lacking in Christ's passion (cf. Col 1:24)....Following them is accepting that, to set free, we must make ourselves small, joining the prisoner, in the certainty that in this way not only shall we accomplish our goal of redeeming, but we too will find true freedom, because in the poor and in the prisoner we recognize the presence of our Redeemer."✠

MERCEDARIAN THIRD ORDER

Founder: St. Peter Nolasco in 1218

Motto: "He sent redemption to His people" (Ps 111:1)

External Sign: Our Lady of Ransom scapular

Spirituality: Imitating and following Jesus Christ the Redeemer

Mission: To visit and free those Christian captives who, by circumstances contrary to the dignity of the human person, find themselves in danger of losing the faith.

Formation Stages: *Postulancy* (12+ months), *Novitiate/First Promises* (1+ year), *Final Promises*

Websites: OrderofMercy.org or MercedarianSisters.org

