



St. Benedict Medal



San Domiano Crucifix



Dominican Cross

## What are the Differences Between Religious Orders?

The differences between religious orders are fewer than one might initially expect. For someone who is beginning their discernment process, this may come as a surprise, as it is easy to feel a little overwhelmed at the number religious orders in existence today (Franciscans, Benedictines, Dominicans, Carmelites, Trappists, etc.). However, they all bear common features that are the hallmark of religious life, such as; community prayer (primarily the Divine Office), community meals, labor/work, private prayer, meditation, study, and of course religious vows (typically the vows of the evangelical counsels; poverty, chastity, and obedience). There also may be similarities in the formation process as well, which is often divided into five "stages"; observant/aspirant, postulant, novice, simply professed, and solemnly professed (or perpetual vows). The discernment process usually continues for about 5-8 years until solemn profession. A person is free to leave any time prior to solemn profession (It is important to note that although these external similarities exist, much still depends on the "personalities" of each community, how they observe their rule, religious fervor, etc.)

The schedules of religious communities may also share basic similarities. An example horarium (daily schedule) of a contemplative community may look something like the following;

5:00 AM, Rise  
5:30 AM, Office of Readings (Matins) / Morning Prayer (Lauds)  
6:30 AM, Holy Mass  
7:45 AM, Breakfast  
9:30 AM, Morning Chores / Classes  
12:50 PM, Mid Day Prayer (Terce/None)  
1:30 PM, Lunch (with spiritual readings)  
2:30 PM, Free Time / Siesta  
4:30 PM, Vespers, Meditation  
6:00 PM, Private Study  
7:30 PM, Supper / Free Time  
8:30 PM, Night Prayer (Compline)  
9:30 PM, Lights Out



Benedictine Monk of Le Barroux

Typically, orders that are more "*contemplative*", such as the Benedictines, tend to allot more time to community prayer, and have a more fixed schedule (as shown above). Conversely, orders that are more "*active*", such as the Dominicans, tend to allot more time to an apostolate (serving the community in some capacity). However, whether a religious community is more active or contemplative, they all share this fundamental component, that is; heart of their life is prayer; dedicated to a life of self-conversion and renunciation for the sanctification of the Church. Every religious community in the world recites the same prayers of the Divine Office each day, breathing together in the same rhythm of prayer. According to Saint Therese, the existence of religious communities are so vital that, if one were to draw an analogy to the Mystical body of Christ, they would be considered the *heart*. Saint Faustina confirms this reality; "*I learned that the world's existence is maintained by chosen souls; that is, the religious orders.*" -*diary 1431* (This reality is all the more disconcerting for us today, with the number of religious sisters in the US plummeting by a figure of 120,000 just in the past forty years!)

At first glance, such a schedule as the one shown above may seem repetitive and constricting. For those of us living in the world and still influenced by our utilitarian society, we may be tempted to think that nuns and monks are wasting their time. One might hear the argument; "*Prayer is important, yes, but what are they doing to help the world?*" (as if the value of life is determined by what one can do, apart from any spiritual reality). The saints tend to respond by noting that prayer and sacrifice is more efficacious than external works. As Our Lord told Saint Faustina, more souls are saved through prayer and sacrifice alone than through missions and preaching. And it is precisely behind the walls of the enclosure that enables religious to accomplish this work of Christ, whether active or contemplative. It is in this rhythmic exchange of prayer, labor, and rest, that religious are liberated from the distractions of the world, and are able to devote themselves wholly to God alone. As Our Lord said, it was not Martha who chose the better part, occupying herself with many concerns,

but Mary, sitting at the feet of her Jesus, lost in His gaze (*Lk 10:42*). This is the life of chosen souls, of alter-Magdalene's, always looking up in the gaze of Our Lord, adoring Him in the silence and solitude of the heart, and ready to die to self-love by degrees through the vow of obedience and a thousand small sacrifices for the salvation of souls. In this sense the schedule itself is a perpetual sacrifice of great merit, since the religious is bound to it by the vow of obedience, and cannot deviate from it unless given permission do to so. Sacrifice is, by design, inherent in the life of a religious, who unbeknownst to her, may live her life without ever seeing the fruits of her merits, or the countless souls she saves.

Saint Faustina, diary, 1933, ¶.61: "O life so dull and monotonous, how many treasures you contain! When I look at everything with the eyes of faith, no two hours are alike, and the dullness and monotony disappear. The grace which is given me in this hour will not be repeated in the next. It may be given me again, but it will not be the same grace. Time goes on, never to return again. Whatever is enclosed in it will never change; it seals with a seal for eternity." [...] "My life is not drab or monotonous, but it varied like a garden of fragrant flowers, so that I don't know which flower to pick first, the lily of suffering, or the rose of love of neighbor, or the violet of humility."

## Contemplative Orders

"Contemplative orders" (such as Benedictines, Carmelites, Trappists, Carthusians, Cistercians, etc.) are those who primarily focus is inward conversion; to grow in union with Our Lord for the love of God and the salvation souls. Such communities typically have little interaction with the world, so that they may devote themselves to prayer and penance for the sanctification of the world. As the angel said at Fatima; "*Penance, penance, penance! [...] Make everything you do a sacrifice, and offer it as an act of reparation for the sins by which God is offended, and as a petition for the conversion of sinners*". Saint Faustina, who spent her life isolated from the world behind the walls of a convent, describes this life of toiling and battling for souls as a preeminent and necessary function.

diary, November 1935, ¶.539: "By prayer and mortification, we will make our way to the most uncivilized countries, paving the way for the missionaries. We will bear in mind that a soldier on the front line cannot hold out long without support from the rear forces that do not actually take part in the fighting but provide for all his needs; and that such is the role of prayer, and that therefore each one of us is to be distinguished by an apostolic spirit."

*Author's Note; The following summaries were compiled as general overviews of some of the more prominent religious orders. The content is not intended to be exhaustive, but only provide a basic introduction to some religious orders. We have thus excluded organizations that do not take consecrated vows, such as priestly societies, and lay organizations.*

- **BENEDICTINES:** Saint Benedict is considered the founder of Western monasticism (rule founded ca. 525 A.D.).<sup>1</sup> The Benedictine monks were one of the first monks to live in community (see [cenobite](#)). Prior to this time, monks typically lived as hermits, or [eremites](#) (known as *Desert Fathers*). Traditionally, Benedictines are cloistered; living within an enclosure with very little to no interaction with the world. Being a cenobitic order, their "world" is the monks around them, which they interact with frequently (community meals, community prayer, community work, etc.). The Benedictine "motto" is *ora et labora*; Prayer and Work. It is thus that outside of the Divine Office, a monks time it usually taken up with some sort of work, not allowing time for idle hands. Traditionally, one is not likely to find Benedictines reciting the Rosary in common, Divine Mercy Chapet, or other such devotions. Their day is mostly occupied by the recitation of the complete Divine Office (all seven offices, and complete psalms), though many Benedictine communities today have broken from these customs. Benedictines are also noted for their excellence in Gregorian Chant and the liturgical action. Unfortunately, over the past fifty years, many Benedictine monasteries have become increasingly secularized, losing their fervor and spirit of prayer and relaxing certain traditions. These communities have suffered greatly due to lack of vocations, and in fact, the average age of a monk in a Benedictine monastery today is typically over fifty. However, in recent times there appears to be a new groundswell of orthodox communities forming, dedicated to restoring many of the abandoned traditions, principally with regard to stricter discipline and fidelity to the liturgy and sacred music.
  - **Cistercians:** The Cistercians [O. Cist.], (today known as the "*Order of Cistercians of the*



Carthusian Monks

*Common Observance*"), branched out from the Benedictines in the 11th century as a reform. They believed that the Benedictine order had undergone too many developments over the years, and thus sought a more literal application of the Benedictine rule. Today, however, one might not find much difference between a Benedictine and Cistercian monastery (however, this depends on the individual community).

- **Trappists:** The Trappists are also known as the "*Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance*" [O.C.S.O.]. As the name implies, the Trappists grew out of the Cistercians as another reform in the 17th century. Like the Cistercian reform, the first Trappists strove to follow a stricter observance to the Benedictine Rule. Like most reforms, however, it gradually evolved with time. While Trappists today tend to be stricter in external observances (abstinence from meat, stricter separation between religious and laity, recite the complete Divine Office [however not necessarily chanted, or in latin]), internally they have suffered the same influences of secular society as most other religious communities. Trappists have also become noted for working off the fruits of their labors in an effort to be more self-supportive; fruit cakes, beer, coffee, honey, etc.
- **CARTHUSIANS:** The Carthusians were founded in the 11th century, and unlike the orders listed above, they are not a branch of the Benedictines. They started independently by Saint Bruno, who was renowned for his austere aestheticism. The Carthusians are a paradox of sorts, in that they are a "community of hermits". Not only are they isolated from the world, but they are also isolated from one another. They do not eat meals in community, like most other religious orders, nor do they ordinarily perform manual labor together. Most of their time is spent in solitary, within their cell, in which they eat, work, sleep, and pray (it is for this reason that many Carthusian cells are quite spacious, sometimes even with multiple floors). While they only leave their cell for community prayer, this should not give the impression that Carthusians have much free time, as their day is strictly regimented. It is said that the principle form of penance in a Carthusian monastery is not the cord, nor fasting, nor other corporal mortifications, but rather, the bell. The Carthusian, it is said, lives by the clock and ultimately dies by the clock.

The Carthusians tend to be the strictest order in terms of their isolation from the world, which has also allowed them to remain relatively unchanged throughout the centuries (as a result, they tend not to adopt new devotions, such as the Divine Mercy Chaplet). For this reason, many young men just beginning their discernment tend to be attracted to them, though it has been estimated that about 9 out of 10 leave within the first year. There may also be some variance within the order from charterhouse to charterhouse, specifically in the degree of poverty and austerity.

- **CARMELITES:** The origins of the Carmelite order has been under debate since the fourteenth century, as some believe it can be traced, at least in spirit, to the prophet Elijah of the Old Covenant, while others maintain it was a contemporary to the Franciscans in the 12th century. <sup>[nb., [Origin](#)]</sup> While their original way of life was eremitic, the Carmelites eventually took on a more mendicant character. Thus, it is not uncommon today to find a mix among communities, with some that pray and eat meals in common, while others take meals to their cells where they pray in solitary; and some that beg for food, while others remain self-sustained. Compared to the Benedictine orders, Carmelite monks (rather, friars or hermits) traditionally tend to place more emphasis on solitude and contemplation. The original rule, written by Saint Albert, states; "*Let each one remain in his cell, or near it, meditating day and night on the law of the Lord and keeping vigil in prayer, unless occupied with other lawful duties.*" As such, the Carmelites might be considered a middle-ground of sorts between the eremitical life of the Carthusians and the community life of the Benedictine orders (however the male branch tends to be less strictly enclosed than the female branch, likely due to the necessities of the priestly office).

The Carmelites are also known for their deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Some of the greatest mystics in the Church were Carmelites, such as Saint Theresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Therese of Lisieux, etc, the first two of whom are regarded as pioneers in Mystical Theology (specifically, the study of the union of the soul with God), for it was through their writings that lifted the veil of a subject that, at the time, was unknown and obscure, even to most clerics. <sup>[nb., [Mysitcal Theology](#)]</sup> A blueprint of Carmelite spirituality may be observed by reading; "*The Interior Castle*"-- which details the ascent of the soul to perfection--and "*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*".

Unfortunately, like most orders today, the Carmelites resemble little of their original glory, as many of their rich traditions, religious zeal, and spirit of penance have been lost. However, there seems to be renewed interest in Carmelite spirituality, and returning to the original spirit of the rule as Vatican II called for. Today, the Carmelites are divided into two main branches; the Discalced Carmelites [O.C.D] (founded by St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross), and the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance [O. Carm.].

- **POOR CLARES:** The Order of Saint Clare is an order of religious women founded by Saint Francis of Assisi and his loyal companion Saint Clare of Assisi. It can be said that Saint Clare complimented Saint Francis, but not in the way that most would expect. Where Saint Francis was a contemplative at heart, Saint Clare was a zealous missionary at heart. Ironically, Our Lord called the contemplative to the marketplace, and the missionary to the convent. (This should be no surprise, however. According to the Saints, to live in a convent, is to live in the very heart of the missionary life of the Church). Thus the Poor Clares today tend to be cloistered contemplatives. As a basis for understanding Poor Clare spirituality, it is necessary to first understand Franciscan spirituality, since both are closely related and mutually illuminating [see section on Franciscans below]).



Poor Clare Nun (day of S.P.)

*Author's Note:* When discerning religious life, it is important to bear in mind the fact that no two communities are alike. Even within orders, the differences can be significant. No two Benedictine communities are exactly alike. No two Franciscan communities are exactly alike, etc. One may even find a Benedictine community spending more time in an apostolate than a Franciscan community. Or one may find a Trappist community to be more lenient than a Benedictine community. Suffice to say, this is why it is important to visit communities first hand, in order to get a more accurate sense of their life.

## Active Orders

"Active" orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, Missionaries of Charity, etc.) are those who tend to have more direct interaction with the world than contemplative orders. In addition to prayer, active orders may devote some of their "work" time to external apostolates (teaching, preaching, soup kitchens, missions, youth retreats, media apostolates, etc.) rather than to self-supportive ends (gardening, bee farming, candle making, etc.). In this sense, they tend to follow Scripture in a more literal way; to "feed the hungry", "give drink to the thirsty"; to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. Active orders tend to be less bound by the walls of a monastery, and may reassign its members to different locations abroad. They are generally called mendicant orders, meaning; they live off of the charity of others, rather than trying to be self-supportive (note; Carmelites and Poor Clares are technically mendicants as well).

### It is really "Active-Contemplative"

It may be worth noting most active orders are not "active" in the strictest sense of the word. Rather, they are more precisely *active-contemplative*, comprising a relative balance between prayer and their apostolates. Saint Thomas Aquinas suggested that these *mixed* orders (orders that have both an active and contemplative dimension) are the most perfect form of religious life, to which there is none higher--though it is also important to stress the wide variance among such orders, with some placing more emphasis on prayer (closer to a strictly contemplative life), while others placing more emphasis on work (closer to an active life), and everything in between. Much depends on the community; in how much religious fervor they possess, and how well they guard themselves against the spirit of the world, which is all the more influential in active life. As Saint Francis of Assisi noted, one cannot be in the world without getting "a little dust on his shoulders". It is thus that mixed orders need to be all the more vigilant in keeping prayer in its first place. Padre Pio, for example, was a Capuchin friar--the most "active" branch of the Franciscans--and yet he spent much of his free time in prayer; even skipping meals to remain in prayer. It was through prayer that he was able to draw on the graces of God, and go out into the world to distribute those graces according to the needs of souls. Even Saint Francis retreated to the mountains to be alone in prayer. In this sense, the heart of the life of every religious--whether active or contemplative--is prayer. As Saint Maximilian Kolbe said; *"only prayer obtains the grace of conversion" [...]* *"All the fruit of our labors directed to the conversion and sanctification of souls depends on prayer"*.



Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate

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religious orders. We have thus excluded organizations that do not take consecrated vows, such as priestly societies, and lay organizations.

- **FRANCISCANS:** The Franciscans were founded in the 13th century by Saint Francis, who, in a vision, was charged by God to *rebuild My Church, which as you see is falling into ruin*. Franciscans are typically characterized by their lives of simplicity, penance, poverty, and love for the poor. In a testament written by Saint Francis, the very first sentence contains the following; *"The Lord granted me, Br. Francis, to begin to do penance in this way"*. It is thus fitting that the Franciscan order be regarded as the Order of Penitents. The Franciscan school teaches Marian *maximalism*, that is; it attributes the highest possible glory to the Blessed Virgin short of divinity (St. Bonaventure, Bl. John Duns Scotus, Ven. Mary of Agreda, etc.). Being a mendicant order, the Franciscans live solely off of the generosity of others, entrusting all to the hands of God. Like the Benedictines, the Franciscans also underwent a number of reforms throughout history, but were consolidated in 1897 into three main bodies; Friars Minor, the Conventuals, and the Capuchins. Some Franciscan communities may be more contemplative in nature, similar to that of monastics. Venerable Mary of Agreda, for instance, a 17th century cloistered Franciscan nun and mystic, received messages from Our Lady on how to live out her religious state;

Mystical City of God, Book VI, Chp V: "But I...find so few who console with me and try to console my Son in His sorrows....Consider then thy duty, my dearest, and raise thyself above all earthly things and above thyself; for I am calling thee and choose thee to imitate and follow me into the solitude in which I am left by man....Flee from the dangerous intercourse with creatures....I remind thee that there is no exercise more profitable and useful to the soul than to suffer....Therefore, my daughter, embrace the cross, and do not admit any consolation outside of it in this mortal life. By contemplating and feeling within thyself the sacred Passion thou wilt attain the summit of perfection and attain the love of a spouse."

- **Friars Minor:** The Order of Friars Minor (O.F.M.) were the result of a large consolidation of various branches (Observants, Discalced, Recollects, Riformati, etc.) by Pope Leo XII in 1897. Today the Friars Minor compose the largest body of the Franciscan order, and are criticized as being the most lenient and divorced from the spirit of Saint Francis--an unfortunate exigency considering the OFM's prominent place in the history of the Franciscan order; with roots dating back to first years of the order through the aggregation of the Observants.
- **Friars Minor Conventual:** Next to the Observants, the Conventual Franciscans were one of the first reforms of the Franciscan order. They desired to apply the Franciscan spirit to new applications (such as urban city apostolates, rather than remaining in rural areas). As such, the Conventuals were granted various dispensations to relax certain rules in order to carry out specific apostolates. The conventuals tended to take on a more academic spirit than, say, Capuchins for instance. Today, the Conventuals have also suffered from a spirit of laxity, as most communities. However, there have also been great fruits that originated from Conventual communities, such as St. Joseph of Cupertino, St. Bonaventure, and Saint Maximilian Kolbe, known for his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The most notable Franciscans to grow out of this renewal are the Franciscans of the Immaculate, who take a fourth vow of total consecration to Our Lady.
- **Friars Minor Capuchin.** The Capuchin reform (O.F.M. Cap.) dates from 1525, and not unlike the first Observants, they also desired a return to a stricter observance of the Franciscan rule--though, like most reforms, certain elements of its initial fervor declined with time. The Capuchins are more likely to be seen feeding the poor or street evangelizing, rather than writing a book on liturgics or studying mystical theology. Today, the Capuchin Franciscans tend to be considerably more divorced from their origins. However, there also exists renewed efforts to restore the original spirit of the order. In 1968, the Capuchin saint, Padre Pio, wrote a letter to Pope Paul VI in which he stated; *"I pray to God that [the Capuchin order] may continue in its tradition of religious seriousness and austerity, evangelical poverty and faithful observance of the Rule and Constitution, certainly renewing itself in the vitality and in the inner spirit, according to the guides of the Second Vatican Council"*. We have yet to see if such a renewal, which is so desperately needed in all orders., will take root or not.



Franciscan Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth

**Author's note:** Like many of the major religious orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans have suffered greatly in recent times. It is not uncommon today to see friars watching television, or going to the movies and eating ice cream on a Friday night. The spirit of victimhood, a hallmark of religious life, has largely been obscured over years, as the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction to a kind of secularized love, absent of any austerities. However, like the Benedictines, the communities of lax traditions tend to be dying away, as new young communities take their place, devoted to a more authentic renewal that Vatican II called for.

- **DOMINICANS:** The Dominican Order (or "Order of Preachers") was founded by Saint Dominic in the early 13th century, who saw the need for greater education and engagement of society. As the name implies, the charism of the Dominicans is primarily preaching and teaching "to combat heresy and propagate religious truth". Saint Dominic possessed a great love for Our Lady, and is considered the founder of the Holy Rosary. He was also renowned for his theological disputations against heretics, particularly the Albigensians, to which he won many to the faith. In fact, his preaching was so effective, that the enemies of the Church soon resorted to insults and threats, seeing that they were unable to refute his arguments. During this time the Inquisition was also established, for which the popes appointed mostly Dominicans as Inquisitors due to their superior theological training and impeccable virtue. It is thus that the spirit of Saint Dominic takes on a proactive scholastic--and almost apologetic--character; not for the sake of knowledge in itself, but rather, for the defense of the Church in the modern world and the building up of the body of Christ. Saint Dominic teaches us the power that words can have



on people, especially when they are supported by prayer and sacrifice. Although he practiced many austere penances to the bewilderment of his followers, he also loved heretics deeply and sought to understand their positions in order to effectively combat them. As the Catholic Encyclopedia tells us; *"If he abominated heresy and laboured untiringly for its extirpation, it was because he loved truth and loved the souls of those among whom he laboured. He never failed to distinguish between sin and the sinner. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, if this athlete of Christ, who had conquered himself before attempting the reformation of others, was more than once chosen to show forth the power of God."* Today, unfortunately, much of the apostolic spirit of Saint Dominic has largely been obscured within the order, as the Dominicans are no longer distinguished as zealous defenders and promoters of the Church (indeed suffering the same lot of most religious communities of our time). However, there are still signs of hope within the order, especially among the female branch, who have devoted themselves to the education and catechetical formation of the young. It is not uncommon to find such Dominicans within the context of the school system as teachers and professors, or even furthering their own higher education toward this end. It is worthy to note that these communities have been especially flourishing with many new vocations, often more than the walls of the enclosure can contain. While most Dominicans are active, some some communities may also live a strictly cloistered life.

- **JESUITS:** The Jesuits (or the Society of Jesus) was founded by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in 1540 A.D. The original name of the Jesuits was the "Company of Jesus", to denote the soldier-like spirit of the order. Due to its rigorous and orthodox formation system, it had quickly grown in reputation by the holiness and well-grounded faith of its fathers. In fact, the Jesuits merited such high repute, that their priests became the most revered and respected of all priests, and were regarded by the saints as masters of spiritual direction. Saint Teresa of Avila even once said that she would not even consider a woman entrance into the Carmelites unless she had been directed by a Jesuit priest. And later, she stated; *"They are my fathers, and it is to them, after Our Lord, that my soul owes all the good it possesses."* Many saints in fact have been formed under the spiritual direction of Jesuit priests. The Jesuits used to also take a fourth vow of fidelity and service to the pope, and were once regarded by many as the "black popes", due to their prestige. The Jesuits were also known for their missionary work, spreading the faith to many countries almost single-handedly. And yet, despite its radiant history of such lavish fruit, this magnificent order has fallen further than all the others, to where it is now but a faded glimmer of its former splendor. (For those seeking to better understand the foundational spirit of the Jesuits, we suggest reading books authored by Jesuits prior to ~1920's, as books of the 1930's, 40's, and 50's, increasingly became influenced by the seeds of Communism and Freudian psychology.)

- **MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY:** The Missionaries of Charity was founded by Mother Teresa, who in 1948, received permission to leave her convent to serve God among the "poorest of the poor". Mother Teresa began working in the slums of Calcutta, India, to care for the needs of the sick, crippled, and lepers, and in 1950, established the Missionaries of Charity. In addition to the three vows (poverty, chastity, and obedience), the missionaries take a fourth vow to give "Wholehearted and Free service to the poorest of the poor". In an interview, Mother Teresa stated; "The fruit of prayer is love, the fruit of love is action, the fruit of action is peace." The Missionaries of Charity seek to satiate the thirst of Christ for souls by putting love into action through the external work of service to the poor. For more information on the spirit of Mother Teresa and her sisters, it is recommend to view the documentary produced by the Petrie sisters, which contains hours of actual footage of Mother Teresa over the course of many years [see [here](#)].
- **SISTERS OF LIFE:** The Sisters of Life are a community of female religious, founded in 1991 by Cardinal O'Connor. As the name suggests, their charism is namely for the protection of the sacredness of human life, and the promotion of the culture of life in our society. This unique charism directs their efforts towards working with such ministries as pregnancy care centers, pro-life rallies and lobbying, etc.. The sisters also host many retreats and conferences on related topics [see [Sisters of Life](#)].

*Please note; There are other orders that have been excluded from the list above. Please use this webpage as a general primer/guide only, for conducting further research.*

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