

Frequently Asked Questions about Canons Regular of Saint Augustine #1

We are Canons Regular of Saint Augustine from the abbey (or Monastery or Canonry, as you like) of Klosterneuburg, Austria, founded in 1114 by Saint Leopold.

Just as we, your new priests, are interested in getting to know you and the great traditions of our new parish families, we want to help you get to know us and learn about our religious community and its traditions. Hopefully, this FAQ sheet will be an informative and amusing way of exposing you to our history. If you have any questions, please let us know. God bless!

What is a Canon Regular?

The word canon comes from the Greek (*kanon*) originally meaning a reed or a cane, often used as a measure; eventually it came to mean a rule, especially in ecclesiastical settings. Canon Law, for example, refers to the legal code governing internal Church matters. Canons were originally priests who lived in a common following a rule of life. The term “canon”, even in church usage, has a bewildering array of meanings. Today, simply put, canons regular are priests living in common under a rule.

Are there irregular canons?

You can decide that after you get to know us! Actually, the term “canon regular” is somewhat redundant, because “regular” (from the Latin, *regula*, rule) has more or less the same meaning as “canon”. “Regular” as a descriptive term now refers to those who are understood to be “religious” or members of a religious order; that is, men or women who take vows upon entering a community; diocesan priests, on the other hand, make promises – more on that some other time. There are other types of Canons – Secular Canons, Cathedral Canons – popular in Europe and some other parts of the world who are not members of a religious order. There has never been a tradition of secular or cathedral canons in the United States, and religious Canons are relatively rare here.

Are we monk?

No. While there are many similarities between monks and canons – common prayer and common meals – the basic difference is that monks are called to a life of contemplation (more or less) removed from the world; canons are hopefully contemplative too, but engaged in more active ministries. While it is not essential to the monastic vocation to be a priest, it is an integral part of the canonical vocation.

Are we Augustinians?

No! With all due respect to the good friars of Villanova, we are not Augustinians; we are Canons. The Order of Saint Augustine (O.S.A.), which was originally known as the Order of Hermits of Saint Augustine, began as a mendicant (begging) order, similar to the Dominicans and Franciscans and was founded in the 13th Century. A reform of the Augustinians in the late 16th Century led to a foundation of another group, the Augustinian Recollects. Our tradition is the oldest form of common life in the Western Church, based on the short but spiritually and psychologically insightful rule which Saint Augustine wrote to govern the Common Life, the principle elements of which are common prayer, common meals, and common property. Hence we are called Canons Regular of Saint Augustine.

What does one call a Canon?

Our official title is (and I'm not making this up): *admodum reverendus dominus* – or “very reverend lord”. From “*dominus*” comes the traditional English form of address for canons and for some monks (e.g., Benedictines) of the title: *Dom*. This is similar to “Don” as used in Italian and Spanish. This is also more or less the equivalent of the title “Monsignor”, which means “my Lord”. In Austria, we are addressed as “*Herr*” which means both “Mister” and “Lord”. In fact, in Austria and other parts of the German-speaking world, priests are never addressed as “Father”, a very sad state of affairs.

Tempting as it might be to be called “Lord”... we are all much happier being addressed as (and being) Father once again. While we will keep the traditional usage of “Dom” for some official purposes and also for those member of the Community who are not yet priests (like Dom Gabriel, the really tall canon who was here in Lent and will be visiting soon) we are delighted and humbled to be called Father, followed by our **religious names**: as many communities, when one enters, one is given a new name to symbolize a new beginning. We don’t exactly get to choose our new names, but rather give the Provost (superior of the Community) a list of three names, from which (usually) he chooses one, although he can give us any name he wants. Fortunately, he usually spares us the more obscure German Saint’s names like Chrodegang or Gaucherius or Ottokar. So we are Father Daniel (please, please, please – **never** Father Dan!), Father Elias and Father Bruno.

What’s the funny white thing you wear?

The long, narrow strip of highly-starched white linen which we wear over our black cassocks and sash is the distinctive sign of some Canons and is an integral part of our daily religious habit. It is called a “Sarozium” (from the Latin: *sacrum rochetum* – the sacred rochet); the rochet is a white vestment with narrow sleeves and usually trimmed with lace (similar to the white surplice which altar servers and priest wear over their cassocks.) The rochet is, however, reserved to canons and bishops; it is the garment worn in choir (when singing or reciting the Divine Office, the official prayers of the Church) and, as such, a constant reminder of our obligation to pray. In the High Middle Ages, canons were required to wear the rochet constantly, which was quite inconvenient as you might imagine, and, in the course of the centuries, the sleeves were removed and, eventually, the rochet strank down to its present form. The Sarozium is worn by the Canons of only four Abbeys – three in Austria and one in Switzerland. And now, happily on Long Island.