

## From “Order of Franciscan Penitents” to “Secular Franciscan Order”

### Novitas Franciscana

The *Novitas Franciscana*, or Franciscan Novelty, was that through divine inspiration St. Francis of Assisi began a new form of religious life, the apostolic one. To the decentralized structure of the existing religious life (hermitic, monastic, canonical), Francis added the centralised Franciscan model (minister general, provincial ministers, guardians) directly at the service of the Universal Church: **an apostolic Fraternity for the whole world**, a movement, not bound by territory and directly dependent on the supreme Pontiff.

All the orders that have been founded after the IV Lateran Council (1215), with some small exceptions in the monastic world, depend on the Franciscan rule.

The apostolic life of St. Francis and of his first companions started from their experience of “conversion”. Conversion that is expressed in a personal pledge of interior transformation and in a gift of illumination for others: to convert oneself and to preach conversion. For Francis, to convert oneself interiorly is to recognize the universal paternity of God over all creation and to recognize the universal fraternity of humankind with all creation. Initially, Francis and his companions were known as “the penitents of Assisi”.

Almost 800 years ago, Francis exactly anticipated, so to speak, the contents of the II Vatican Council by recognising the relevance of the ‘Theology of the Laity’ in his day. In drawing from the evangelical purity of the origins (Christ and the apostles), Francis restored the Church giving full citizenship to all components of the human family and the “Church” (clerics, men and women, religious and laity) for assuming responsibility for spreading the Gospel of Christ.

The Crucifix of San Damiano entrusted Francis with a **mission**: “Francis go, repair my Church, which, as you see, is all in ruins.” In order to pursue the mission Christ inspired him to give life to a triple militia /host (FF1031). All three Orders generated by Francis, are in fact heirs of the mission and of the charism to accomplish it. The *raison d’être* for Francis and his spiritual family is this mission, as Paul VI affirms, “*The vision of Innocent III of Francis which holds up the Lateran Basilica, that is, the Church, the mystical body of Christ, in its historical and central expression, hierarchical and Roman, has foretold the vocation and the mission of the great Franciscan family.*” (General Chapter OFM, June 23 1967).

St. Francis was confronted with an unprecedented experience as the First Order (*apostolic*) had to be built from scratch, while for the Second Order (*monastic*) and for the “Third” Order (*penitential*), he re-animated and characterized what already existed. The new penitents wanted to tie their penitential renewal to the name and spirituality of St. Francis. The new Order of Franciscan Penitents bloomed in the hands of St. Francis.

Consequently, the Franciscan penitents (and therefore the Secular Franciscans of today) are the lay faithful of Christ pledged to the Gospel, applying the Gospel to life and life to the Gospel daily. This requires a full response to the call to follow the humble Christ, poor and crucified, exactly as the brothers of the First Order and the sisters of the Second Order, each one in his/her own state of life.

In the final analysis, St. Francis has given his three Orders (the Franciscan Trilogy) only one rule: a more perfect observance of the Gospel, according to their condition of life.

Secular Franciscans, though not religious in the strict sense, pledge themselves to a true and authentic “religious” Profession to give testimony by their living example, to the salvation bearing novelty of the Gospel. They associate themselves to the apostolate of the Brothers of the First Order and to the contemplation of the religious Clares.

## The Order of Franciscan Penitents

It is believed that St. Francis gave a simple verbal rule to a group in Poggi Bonzi shortly after he returned from receiving approval for his way of life from Pope Innocent III in 1209. In 1975 it was shown that, in fact, the First Letter to the Faithful (*Recensio Prior*) written in 1215 is our first written rule. For this reason it was inserted into our current rule as a prologue.

It contains five fundamental elements to lead a true penitential life entirely dedicated to God:

1. To love the Lord.
2. To love one's neighbour.
3. To hate sins and whatever is against the spirit.
4. To receive the Body of the Lord.
5. To bear worthy fruits of penance.

In 1221 Cardinal Ugolino (future Gregory IX) introduced the *Memoriale propositi*, addressed to "Brothers and sisters of Penance living in their own homes". (It was never formally approved by the sovereign Pontiffs).

The *Regula Bullata* of 18 August 1289 emanated by the first Franciscan Pope, Nicholas IV is the Rule to which we refer as **Supra Montem**.

The early Rule prohibited the bearing of arms. John Michael Talbot in his book "The Lessons of St. Francis" has said that if the Nobel Peace Prize has been available at the time St. Francis would have won it hands down for ending feudal wars by this rule. Lino Temperini TOR has demonstrated that while the Brothers and Sisters of Penance may have refused to bear arms for the defence of their city or Lord, they did not turn their backs on other civic responsibilities. In Bologna, for example, tertiaries maintained the bridges over the ditches in and around the city; others helped with the financial administration, paying wages and acting as treasurers. Some carried out religious duties: ensuring that a light was kept burning before the image of the Madonna in the commune's chapel; lighting the candles for Mass; buying incense and candles to be given to the mayor and people's captain along with their families on 2nd February, the feast of Our Lady's purification (Candlemas).

Given their vow to live by gospel principles, Franciscan penitents were often responsible for honesty in the workplace: verifying weights and measures; weighing the grain brought to the mill and sealing the sacks of flour after checking to see that their weight was the same as the original cereal; overseeing public works and reporting to the mayor on the construction and maintenance of roads and bridges. In Sienna penitents worked as customs officers and looked after the public fountains. As price watchdogs in Ferrara they ensured that customers were not overcharged for oil, salted meat or cheese. They also ensured that produce was not hoarded unjustly and that citizens received a fair share according to their circumstances.

As followers of Francis of Assisi, penitents were expected to be peacemakers. In January 1246, for example, Innocent IV, hoping to bring peace to the Italian provinces in the interests of a common crusade, wrote to the fraternity in Florence ordering them to get actively involved in bringing peace and unity to the city. Local governments, too, presumed on this ideal. Penitents appear among citizens chosen to represent them in peace negotiations with their enemies and, sometimes, the papacy. For example, in 1276 the city of Pisa chose a merchant-penitent, Ugolino Gatti, as its ambassador in peace negotiations with the Emperor and his supporters in the Guelph League and also to act as negotiator with a powerful group of political exiles. In Imola, in 1279, the penitents were given the responsibility of dealing with the Roman Curia on the commune's behalf. A year later, Brother Bonmercato di Pietro defended the interests of both the city and its surrounding countryside before Pope Nicholas III. In August 1288 Perugia was under excommunication and two penitents, John de Montesperello and Elimosina di Techabene, were sent to discuss the matter with the papal authorities.

St Margaret of Cortona(+1297) was a peacemaker with a strong sense of social justice. Having lived for nine years with a young noble and having had a son out of wedlock, her conversion followed the sudden death of her partner and the shock of discovering that her father and step-mother had no place for them in the family home. She found refuge with two pious women of Cortona and set about earning her living as a midwife. Although her acts of penance, including rubbing her face with soot and attempting to disfigure her face by breaking her nose with a stone may sound strange to modern ears; although a mysticism, that included conversations with the crucified Christ, may be difficult for the contemporary mind to grasp or appreciate; her actions on behalf of the poor and marginalised are not.

Space forbids further examples but if one thing is clear from the early history of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, it is the variety that characterized their living out of the Franciscan charism. For some, that diversity also included living in community.

### **The “Third Order”**

The name “third order”, began to be used at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Franciscan penitents never loved this definition and resisted it.

In 1489 Pope Sixtus IV, with *Romani Pontificis Providential*, submitted the brothers and sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis to the regime of the Friars Minor. This meant the end of autonomy and the beginning of “obedientiality”. The Pope granted “superiority, power and authority on the minister and on the friars of the third order of penance”, even though this was contrary to the origin, the history and the nature of the Order of Penance and of the Order of Friars Minor and to the will of St. Francis, father and founder of both Orders. Thus the new name of “third order” assumes its entire meaning of accessory of dependence, of appendage of the First Order.

THIS PAPAL BULL HAS REGULATED ALL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FIRST AND THE THIRD ORDER UNTIL THE TIME OF THE RULE OF PAUL VI (1978).

Leo XIII belonged to the Third Order Secular from 1882 when he was Archbishop of Perugia. He believed that, just as the early penitential movement had contributed to the renewal of society, so could the third Order of his day. His conviction was that:

*Only the Franciscan Third Order, lived in its genuine spirit, could have saved a society afflicted by so many individual and social problems.*

In 1883 Leo XIII introduced a new Rule, *Misericors Dei Filius?*, which was designed to attract as many people as possible. In the introduction to the Leonine Rule he says:

“The Third Order is adapted to the multitude, and the records of past ages as well as the Order itself show how greatly it can promote just, honest and religious habits.”

This new Rule placed few burdens on members, dress was to be modest, people were to be attentive to the suitability of their choice of reading and other forms of entertainments, they were not to swear and they were to pray regularly, to consume moderately, to keep the prescribed fasts and to be loyal to the church and their faith. It was hoped that fraternities would develop in every parish.

The new rule led to a great increase in the number of tertiaries but there was little in it to make members aware of a Franciscan or penitential identity. However it encouraged members in the practice of their personal faith. According to the training manual *Call to Commitment in the School of Saint Francis*, the purpose of the Third Order was “one of sanctification of interior progress in the spiritual life of its members... ‘The Church provided this institution to enable you to attain a complete and balanced holiness proper to your own lay state...to maintain and spread Christ’s kingdom by setting before others a pattern of holiness’”.

From Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) to Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) there was an uninterrupted series of seven Secular Franciscan Popes. Over this period of time the Apostolic See assumed an essential and prophetic role in working towards recovering the true nature, mission and charism of the Order.

## **The Rule of Paul VI**

The II Vatican Council prompted the examination of religious ways of life, encouraging all Orders to go back to the inspiration of their founders. Consequently, the Rule of Leo XIII came under scrutiny.

The change that was to be agreed, in the form of the Pauline Rule, was to prove radical. What emerged was that the Order was to become largely self-governing and self-animating with the support of the First Order and Third Order Regular but, in a manner specified in Article 26.

“As a sign of communion and co-responsibility, the council on various levels, shall ask for suitable and well prepared religious for spiritual assistance...(from) the superiors of the four religious Franciscan families.”

## **The Rule:**

The prologue is the Earlier Exhortation of Francis.

Chapter One is concerned with the identity of the Order and its place in the Church and within the Franciscan family. The interpretation of the Rule belongs to the Holy See.

Chapter Two sets out the way of life.

- Article 4 is about the observance of the gospel, following the example of St. Francis, centred on and inspired by Christ. There is then a paragraph on the Trinity and the exhortation for members to read the gospel carefully and live it.
- Article 5 is about encountering the active person of Christ.
- Article 6 concerns commitment to the church and its mission
- Article 7 brings in the penitential nature of the Order, which is to be understood correctly, and includes the need for daily conversion
- Article 8 addresses the centrality of prayer and contemplation throughout life
- Article 9 is about Mary as a model Christian
- Article 10 expresses a Franciscan understanding of Christ's obedience and poverty
- Article 11 addresses attitudes to possessions and earthly security
- Article 12 calls for purity of heart
- Article 13 is about the acceptance of all people as equal, as brothers and sisters but with a preference for the various poor in society
- Article 14 calls for a more fraternal and evangelical world
- Article 15 encourages participation in movements for justice
- Article 16 esteems work
- Article 17 speaks of responsibilities within families
- Article 18 is concerned with stewardship and respect for creation

- Article 19 is about being bearers of peace through dialogue and prayer but also by example. It addresses the attitude of members to death.

Chapter three is devoted to the administration and structure of the Order. The radical nature of the change from Leo XIII's Rule can be seen from

- Article 20 which introduces the different levels of fraternity: local, regional national and international.
- Article 21 which stipulates that members form councils to guide and animate members.

Fraternities are established canonically as a visible sign of a community of love in the Church.

There are also articles about the process of entry and the support fraternities provide to the organization.

### Observations

The Secular Franciscan Order attracts members throughout the world and with over 450,000 members is one of the largest Christian organizations today. There are about 1,000 members in Great Britain. It is open to lay people and to diocesan clergy. It is diverse, made up of independent and autonomous fraternities, each of which belongs to a regional fraternity, a national fraternity and the international fraternity. The Rule asks members to observe the gospel following the example of Saint Francis.

It seems that the Church has had great expectations of Secular Franciscans. Pope Leo XIII stated:

*“I am thoroughly convinced that by the work of the Third Order and the diffusion of the Franciscan spirit we will be able to save the world.”*

*“The Third Order, just as it did at the time of Saint Francis, must now spiritually regenerate mankind.”*

Pope Pius XII: ...to be...

*“a school of Christian perfection, of genuine Franciscan spirit, of prompt and courageous action for the edification of the Body of Christ.”*

Pope John Paul II, in 1982:

***“The Rule is an authentic treasure in your hands, faithful to the Spirit of the II Vatican Council and fully responding to what the Church expects of you. Love, study and live this Rule of yours, because the values it contains are eminently evangelical. Do live these values in fraternity and live them in the world, in which, for your own vocation, you are deeply involved and rooted”.***

The influence of the Order has fluctuated, in its outward presence and in the significance of its role within the Church, at times quite influential and at other times virtually hidden. In recent times, although Secular Franciscans take on parish roles and bear witness, through their example in their working and social lives, they do not instinctively draw attention to their Franciscan identity, which no-one outside the Order would necessarily know. Members receive a discreet badge, which can be worn around the neck or on a lapel. Often members prefer to wear the wooden Tau that is not unique to the Order. It is not compulsory to wear any emblem of identity.

The Rule is inspirational and challenging. It is a work in progress for members to rise to the challenge of how radical the new Rule is when compared with the Leonine Rule. It has transformed the structure and administration of the Order as we are now autonomous and responsible for working together more on an equal basis with the First, Second and Third Order Regulars.

One of our Fraternity ministers recently wrote:

“The importance we give to the significance of our profession and, thus, our membership of a real lay Order, is likely to depend on three factors:- the age at which we were professed, the depth of the formation which we received and the length of time since our profession. For some of the older members, it would appear that becoming a Secular Franciscan had no more significance than joining any other parish confraternity and the importance of formation and life-long commitment were not given much emphasis. However, those who have been professed in more recent years have received far better formation and, consequently, their commitment is much more deeply rooted at the heart of their Christian life.”

Within the National Fraternity of Great Britain, there are regions and individual fraternities that have responded positively, seizing the opportunity to review the content and structure of their meetings and incorporate a range of different sorts of materials with members ready to contribute wholeheartedly. Yet there are fraternities that carry on exactly as they had done before, that is, meeting to share some devotional reading and structured prayers.

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