

Our Identity as a Secular Franciscan

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout this manual you will see glimpses of the Secular Franciscan identity in all the topics presented. Identity cannot be separated from the Secular Franciscan *person*. Identity is the essence of our humanity.

Identity as a person is impossible to define definitively because each one that God creates is unique and unrepeatable. God calls us by name, and one of the sweetest sounds to anyone's ears is the sound of their name.

Expressions of personal identity will vary. When asked who we are, any number of answers is possible. We might mention our faith, the values we hold dear, our passions, what we do, who we are related to, our associations and countless other attributes. The answers we give to the question of personal identity define what is important to us. Yet, although identity differs from person to person, for Secular Franciscans there exist common *identifying* threads. The identifying threads can be woven into a collective name—Secular Franciscan.

When we refer to ourselves as Secular Franciscans, our name identifies our relationship within the Franciscan family and the word *Order* after our name connects us to the Catholic Church. *Secular* binds us to a large group of people called by God to live the Franciscan charism in ordinary daily lives. A fraction of these people we know, but many more we will never meet in this life. When we use the *name* Secular Franciscan, we reveal an identity to others that tells them quite a lot about who we are and to whom we are related. If this name plays a major role in our identity, it will affect everything we do.

SECULAR FRANCISCAN IDENTITY IN BROAD STROKES

Despite the elusiveness of the term, let us consider a general definition of what a Secular Franciscan identity might be. A possible definition is Catholic Christians, living their vocation in a secular state as members of the Franciscan family.

As Catholic Christians, “[We] have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism . . .” In our secular state, “[we] go forth as witness and instrument of her mission among all people proclaiming Christ by [our]

life and words.”¹ We are to be the leaven in the dough, the salt for the earth, the light for the world. We are to show that God is in the world and the Gospel can be lived.

As members of the Franciscan family we hear the call to rebuild the church in union with the religious and priests . . . “we recognize that [we] are called to follow Christ in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi.²

Reflecting on the way the Franciscan charism can be lived by secular persons, I quote Anselm Romb, OFM Conv., who seems to have captured the essence of Franciscan spirituality in one short paragraph. He writes:

St. Francis would insist we stand against our times and take the Gospel at the full and really trust God . . . Francis would tell us to accept the crosses we cannot reasonably escape and emphasize the Spirit over legislation and policies . . . to prefer the poor and realize [our] effectiveness derives from grace and not [our] own efforts . . . and to love the Church in order to preserve the community of faith.”³

This is the *face* we present to the Church, the world and the Franciscan family.

A Little Soul Searching

Before we become **specific** concerning our Secular Franciscan identity, consider some general identity questions in light of our Catholic faith.

Who am I? God created us human being—a little less than angels. Individually, we are born into a particular family and culture. We have unique gifts, hopes, dreams, needs and personal wounds. All these elements influence our Christian identity. When God calls a person into being, God has a purpose for that particular life. That is who I am.

Who are we? We are the Church and we are instruments to be used by the Church to make Christ known to all people. We make up the body of Christ by using our individual gifts for the good of all.

What is my purpose? We are to proclaim that Christ is present among us through our behavior and our words. We are to be faithful stewards of creation in all its

¹ Article 6, SFO Rule

² Article 1, SFO Rule

³ The Franciscan Charism in the Third Millennium p. 26

forms. Further, our call is to build a world that is capable of allowing the kingdom of God to break into it.

To whom do I belong? Ultimately, we belong to God. We came from God and will return to God. We belong to the Catholic Church, which we promised to serve. We belong to the Franciscan Family as a vital and indispensable branch of the family tree. And we belong to those we love; our family and friends and those we serve as secular persons.

The Franciscan dimension of the equation unites the family as sisters and brothers. When we know who we are called to be, what our purpose is, and to whom we belong, we are able *to go forth as witnesses and instruments of [the Church's] mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by [our] life and words and [building] a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively.*⁴

Obviously these are not the only answers to the question of Franciscan spiritual identity. You might wish to consider the four questions—Who am I?—Who are we?—What is my purpose?—To whom do I belong? Allow your personal memories and experiences reveal your unique identity.

SECULAR FRANCISCAN IDENTITY IN MORE PRECISE STROKES

I. THE SECULAR DIMENSION

Secularity is Good

All human being begin life as secular persons. We are born into this world. Subsequently, through baptism, we are born again and become Christians.

Scripture tells us that God created the world; God provided light to separate day from night. On subsequent days God created the sky, the earth and seas, the sun and moon. Continuing His creative work, God provided living creatures in the seas, on the earth, and in the sky. Finally, God created man—male and female—in God's own image He created them. *God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.*⁵

God calls the world “very good.” With gratitude to our good God, we embrace that portion of our identity, and we call it very good. Further, as secular Franciscan, we

⁴ Article 15, SFO Rule

⁵ Gen. 1:31-emphasis added

are responsible for taking care of the “good” earth because the Spirit of the Lord created us for this purpose.

The identity of the Secular Franciscan is rooted in our secularity. St. Francis brought the practice of gospel life out of the monasteries into the world of the family and society. This was, indeed, very good. Deeply spiritual and generous men and women, who could not abandon family responsibilities, now had a way to follow the Lord in the manner of St. Francis.

The Rule identifies the world as the place where the brothers and the sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity, *in [our] own secular state.*⁶ The world is our home and our mission field, and we are stewards of its resources and responsible for its care.

Sacred or Secular?

To consider our lives and our actions either sacred or secular is to create an unnatural duality in our lives. Secular life is sacred when we offer the work of our hands and the desire of our hearts to the Lord. Obviously it is easier to **sense** the sacred in liturgies and retreats. However, our Rule tells us in Article 16 that work is a gift and a sharing in the creation, redemption and service of the human community. God placed us in the world for a reason. We are meant to carry God’s presence by word and action to every highway and byway we travel. We are to live our lives with enthusiasm and carry out our tasks for the Lord—not for human masters.⁷ Delivering mail, typing memos, caring for the sick, etc., are all sacred acts when we do them for the good of others and the glory of God.

As Scripture says, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.”⁸ One day the world will be restored to its original purity. Until then, the weeds may grow with the wheat, but only the wheat fulfills its purpose and provides nourishment for the hungry. Scripture say we provide light, salt and leaven for the world to which I add we also provide wheat.

Secularity is Necessary

One area of our secular identity that is crucial to the continuance of humanity is family life. Without procreation, human beings simply would cease to exist. Our roles in the family constitute a huge portion of our identity. We are mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, husbands, wives, etc. How often is our conversations peppered with

⁶ Article 2, SFO Rule

⁷ Cf. Ephesians 6:5-8

⁸ Psalm 24:1

statements such as, “I am the youngest of seven,” or “My family has farmed this area for a hundred years,” or “we’ve been married for 35 years.” If we agree that the world is good, then it follows that we need committed people in the world to maintain it. Further as Secular Franciscan, we add a vital spiritual dimension to family life.

In addition to the family, our secular dimension allows us access to areas of public life—places where; perhaps, the religious might not be involved. We have occupations, communities, associations, etc., where we bring our gospel values to the world simply by living our identity. We bear witness by who we are.

Anselm Romb states that, “. . . the original twelve followers of St. Francis came from many walks of life—lawyer, priest, businessman, soldier, peasant. Having known the world, they were better adapted to transform it.”⁹

Too often we neglect the part diocesan clergy play in the Secular Franciscan Order. Anselm Romb’s description of the original twelve, points out that the SFO is *home* to many dedicated secular clerics. Often they assist us as spiritual assistants but their identity remains secular.

Society is where we live. Isn’t it logical that we would be in the forefront of social justice issues—“worldly” affairs? Our secular nature gives us a forum to witness to our Christian and Franciscan values. We take stands against exploitation and discrimination. We protest reckless and evil disregard for human life. We work to protect our environment. And as people of peace, we bring the essential ingredients of prayer and peace to penetrate society. With no conscience, society and civility deteriorate. It is our responsibility to provide that conscience.

We have a responsibility to show the temporal world that the gospel and the Franciscan charism can be lived in any age, under all conditions and in every stage of life. It follows, our identity as secular people—people in the world—is indivisible from the other components of our identity and we should “wear” our secularity with gratitude to the One who bestowed it upon us.

II. THE FRANCISCAN DIMENSION

Before we examine the particular spiritual emphasis of the **Secular** Franciscan, we must remember that we are one branch of a single family. We are united with our

⁹ Franciscan Charism for the Third Millennium, Anselm Romb p.98

brothers and sisters who profess a religious life. Without our brothers and sisters of the First Order, Second Order, and Third Order Regular, our family would be incomplete. We are a single family united by our founder and our history.

The spiritual emphasis for the First Order is minority. The spiritual emphasis for the Second Order (Poor Clares) is poverty. The spiritual emphasis for the Third Order Regular and the Secular Franciscan Order is conversion (penance).

The roots of our Secular Franciscan identity begin in the penitential movement that St. Francis joined and influenced in the early 13th Century. Conversion for St. Francis meant turning away from self-centeredness and turning to Christ. He abandoned his self-centered desires and lived for Christ. It is the same for us. Secular Franciscan conversion is being conformed to Christ. It means we love and serve Christ's Church, Christ's world—all that is created through the Word of God, Jesus the Christ.

Article 13 of the General Constitutions

1. Rule 7 Secular Franciscans, called in earlier times "the brothers and sisters of penance," propose to live in the spirit of continual conversion. Some means to cultivate this characteristic of the Franciscan vocation, individually and in fraternity, are: listening to and celebrating the Word of God; review of life; spiritual retreats; the help of a spiritual adviser, and penitential celebrations. They should approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation frequently and participate in the communal celebration of it, whether in the fraternity, or with the whole people of God.¹⁰

Our identity as **Franciscan** Penitents begins shortly after St. Francis was given the gift of penance by the Lord and became a penitent himself. Quoting from his *Testament*:

The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body; and afterward I lingered a little and left the world.¹¹

¹⁰ Ordo Poenitentiae. Praenotanda 22 ff.

¹¹ The Testament, paragraph 1

From this portion of the *Testament*, we understand that St. Francis considered penance a gift from God—the Lord granted it to him. Further, we can be assured that just as the Lord led St. Francis to embrace conversion and conformity to Christ, God will do the same for us if this is our desire. St. Francis experienced a radical interior change—a change in thinking, a change in feeling, a change in values, and a change in the way he perceived God, the world and himself. For St. Francis and for us a radical interior change is reflected exteriorly in ministry and apostolic action. St. Francis left the world as he knew it before his conversion and entered into a life of penance.

Quoting Article 7 of The Rule of 1978:

United by their vocation as brothers and sisters of penance, and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls conversion. Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily.

Article 7 of our Rule points us to the sacrament of reconciliation as *the privileged sign of the Father's mercy and the source of grace*. The meaning underlying these words is that this sacrament is not to be entered into without serious commitment to change. It is spiritual immaturity to “confess” and expect interior cleansing without serious reflection and desire to be conformed to Christ and the gospel. Nor is this a sacrament to be ignored or neglected as is all too evident in our church today.

To emphasize how important the Sacrament of Penance was to St. Francis and to his early followers, let me quote from various sources.

In his Later Exhortation (Second Letter to the Faithful, 4:22), St. Francis states, *We must, of course, confess all our sins to a priest and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ from him.*¹² St. Francis revered and respected priests profoundly because they were the ministers of divine pardon.

¹² Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful, 4:22

In the *Memorale Propositi* of 1221 we have a more juridical wording of St. Francis' exhortation to penance.¹³ Chapter V.1 states, *Let them confess their sins three times a year and receive Communion on the Nativity of the Lord, Resurrection Sunday and Pentecost.* This exhortation is repeated in the Rule of 1289, Chapter 6.

In conclusion to this section on our penitential nature, I quote Fr. Lino Temperini, TOR, who said:

“The term Penance in Franciscanism is equivalent to the biblical meaning of metanoia, understood as an intimate conversion of the heart to God, as a vital attitude, a continuous state of being. It is not a question of doing penance but of being penitent.”¹⁴

The cornerstone or emphasis of the Secular Franciscan identity is a life devoted to self-transcendence (self – Transformation) — a life radically changed through repentance — a life that leads us into the likeness of Christ. Persons committed to personal conversion assume responsibility for their actions and the consequences of those actions. But personal conversion is not the end. It is the means. We take the fruit of conversion and distribute it to a hungry and broken world.

In the Prologue to the Rule of 1978, we read in the Exhortation of St. Francis to the Brothers and Sisters in Penance:

All who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength (cf. Mk 12:30), and love their neighbors as themselves (cf. Mt 22:39) and hate their bodies with their vices and sins, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance:

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, because “the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them” (cf. Is 11:2) and he will make “his home and dwelling among them” (cf. Jn 14:23), and they are the sons of the

¹³ Although written within St. Francis' lifetime, because of its juridical style, the *Memorale Propositi* is considered to have been composed by Cardinal Hugolino.

¹⁴ Penitential Spirituality in the Franciscan Sources, p. 41 <°)))><

heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45), whose works they do, and they are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50).

It is obvious from the first two paragraphs of the Earlier Exhortation, St. Francis does not begin by urging us to do external penances—no strict fasts, no hair shirts, no flagellation. What he asks us to do is positive: (1) love God totally, (2) love our neighbor as ourselves, (3) hate our sinful tendencies, (4) receive the body and blood of Christ in a worthy manner, and (5) produce good fruits of penance.

Conversion in the Rule of 1978 and the Earlier Exhortation

The Rule of 1978 is an inspirational document, which expresses who we are, our reason for being, and to whom we belong, and it points us to the Gospel and love of God, neighbor and creation as a way of life.

If we view each article of Chapter II — The Way of Life through the lens of the Prologue, we will see that each article relates to one or more of the five exhortations; love of God, love of neighbor, conscious avoidance of sin, worthy reception of Eucharist, and commitment to living the gospel in daily life, so that *worthy fruits of penance* result from our actions. Each article in Chapter Two, points out specific areas of our lives that call for continual conversion.

Authentic conversion is holistic. It impacts our intellect, emotions, morality, spirituality, and our socio-political convictions. I find the following definition of these five aspects of our humanity useful when examining my conscience. Unfortunately, I do not know the source.

EMOTIONAL — *How Blessed are we when we responsibly face our own disordered emotions and strive to cultivate a healthy emotional life.*

INTELLECTUAL — *How Blessed are we when we responsibly face our own disordered mind and commit to critically examining our values and beliefs in dialogue with others.*

MORAL — *How Blessed are we when we responsibly face our own disordered moral system and commit to living by ethical norms and ideals that make the ultimate claim upon us.*

RELIGIOUS — *How Blessed are we when we responsibly face our own disorder. Then we accept God's self-revelation of love given in Jesus and accept the consequences of following Jesus' teaching.*

SOCIO-POLITICAL – *How Blessed are we when we responsibly face our own disorder. Then we commit to collaboration with others in the reform of unjust social institutions.*

Continual Conversion and Identity

Because of human frailty, the conversion process is ongoing. And for this reason, our Rule tells us that conversion must be carried out daily.

We know that St. Francis read and meditated upon the Word of God until it was integrated into his very being. In body and soul, St. Francis was altered by the gospel. His identity changed as he became conformed to the likeness of Christ. St. Francis went beyond imitation. He became one with the beloved. Francis proved that the gospel could be lived. It was a process for him. It continues to be a process for us. It is what our Rule calls ongoing conversion. If we wish to be changed in the process, we must become one with the Lord.

One of my favorite Scriptures comes from the first three chapters of the prophet Ezekiel. The prophet hears the voice [of the Lord], and the voice tells Ezekiel to eat the scroll handed to him. After he has eaten the scroll, Ezekiel is told to speak God's word to the house of Israel. *Ezekiel had to assimilate the scroll—actually eat it—before he could call the people to repentance. It had to be digested by him.* That was the wisdom of St. Francis. This is what he did. This is what we must do—assimilate the Word and then let go of whatever stands in the way of gospel values.

Franciscan Identity Expanded

I have given considerable attention to conversion because it is the spiritual emphasis and origin of the SFO. Yet to be a fully individuated Secular Franciscan, we must not ignore the other aspects of our identity that we hold in common with the entire Franciscan family.

The year 1965 was the beginning of a process to bring the Secular Franciscan Rule into harmony with the changed conditions of the modern world. The previous rule was approved in 1883. This Rule was to be more positive, more evangelical and thoroughly Franciscan. In 1969 the Assisi Congress gathered to focus on the revision of the Secular Franciscan Rule. The work of the committees was presented as motions. Motion 9 essentially guided the process for Chapter II of the Rule of 1978. Motion 9 lists seventeen essential elements of Secular Franciscan Spirituality.

1. To live the gospel according to the spirit of St. Francis
2. To be converted continually (metanoia)
3. To live as sisters and brothers of all people and of all creation
4. To live in communion with Christ
5. To follow the poor and crucified Christ
6. To share in the life and mission of the Church
7. To share in the love of the Father
8. To be instruments of peace
9. To have a life of prayer that is personal, communal and liturgical
10. To live in joy
11. To have a spirituality of a secular nature
12. To be pilgrims on the way toward the Father
13. To participate in the apostolate of the laity
14. To be at the service of the less fortunate
15. To be loyal to the church in an attitude of dialogue and collaboration with her ministers
16. To be open to the action of the Holy Spirit
17. To live in simplicity, humility and minority¹⁵

It would take a lifetime to understand all the implications and layers of meaning contained in these essential elements and another lifetime to incorporate them into the core of our being. We must be content to continue in the process of ongoing conversion until the day when we see the Lord face to face.

III THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEING AN ORDER

As we begin this portion, “the significance of being an order, we must acknowledge the amazing grace and treasure of our vocation. It is an unmerited gift from God. Words cannot express our gratitude for this wondrous gift. Faithfully living the ideals of our charism is all we have to offer our good God.

¹⁵ *De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam*, The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation, Robert M. Stewart, OFM, p. 250

What Constitutes an Order?

Chapter I of the Rule best defines what constitutes an Order and, in particular, the Secular Franciscan Order. Take some time to read and meditate on these three articles with particular emphasis on Article 2. Article 2 contains all the essential elements of an Order. It is a movement led by the Spirit. It is an organic union of Catholic fraternities throughout the world. Its people strive for *perfect charity* in a secular state. They profess to live the gospel in the manner of its founder, Francis of Assisi.

- The Franciscan family, as one among many spiritual families raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church, unites all members of the people of God--laity, religious, and priests-- who recognize that they are called to follow Christ in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi. In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.
- The Secular Franciscan Order holds a special place in this family circle. It is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful. In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of St. Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church.
- The present rule, succeeding *Memorale Propositi* (1221) and the rules approved by the Supreme Pontiffs Nicholas IV and Leo XIII, adapts the Secular Franciscan Order to the needs and expectations of the Holy Church in the conditions of changing times. Its interpretation belongs to the Holy See and its application will be made by the General Constitutions and particular statutes.

What can we know about ourselves as an Order from these three articles?

- The SFO has a specific place in the Church and in the Secular Franciscan Family; *it is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful.*¹⁶
- We have a responsibility to make present the charism of our common Seraphic Father St. Francis in the life and mission of the Church.
- At all levels of fraternity we form Christian communities that are animated and guided in accordance with the tradition and values of St. Francis.
- God is the origin of our vocation. It is not the work of our hands.
- We are called to grow in holiness through the vocation we have received. Led by the Spirit—striving for perfect charity—in a secular state.
- The secular branch of the Order is a necessary part of the Franciscan family tree because its milieu is the world. Its complementary nature to the ministry of its religious brothers and sisters makes whole the Franciscan charism.
- In a secular state and by a profession of a Rule approved by the Church, Secular Franciscans pledge to live the gospel in the tradition and ideals of St. Francis.
- Article 3 tells us that our current Rule is only the third revision in eight hundred years.

A concise summary might be, our Order is formed as an organic union of all the Catholic fraternities whose members, moved by the Holy Spirit, commit themselves through profession to live the Gospel in the manner of St. Francis, in their secular state, following the Rule approved by the Church.

A Backward Glance at Our Recent History

Pope Paul VI approved the SFO Rule we profess on August 24, 1978. The Ritual that appears on the International website and in the *Essential Documents of the Secular Franciscan Order* was approved March 9, 1984. The revised General Constitutions were approved on December 8,

¹⁶ Article 2, SFO Rule

2000. The International Statutes were revised and approved in 2009. Thus all the legislation of the Secular Franciscan Order is up-to-date and approved by Rome.

On November 22, 2002, Pope John Paul II, exhorted Secular Franciscans to look to the future and set out into the deep. *Duc in Altum!*

Pope John Paul II said, and I quote in part:

The Church expects from the Secular Franciscan Order, one and only, a great service in the cause of the Kingdom of God in the world of today. The Church desires that your Order should be a model of organic, structural and charismatic unity on all levels, so as to present itself to the world as a "community of love" (*Regola OFS* 26). The Church expects from you, Secular Franciscans, a courageous and consistent testimony of Christian and Franciscan life, leaning towards the construction of a more fraternal and gospel world for the realization of the Kingdom of God.

The reflection, carried out during this Chapter, on "*The vital reciprocal communion in the Franciscan Family*" pushes you to commit yourselves evermore in the promotion of meeting and understanding especially within your Order, then before other Franciscan brothers and sisters and finally, with maximum care, as St. Francis wished, in your relations with the hierarchical authorities of the Church.

Your **renewed legislation** gives you optimal instruments for carrying out and fully expressing the unity of your Order and its communion with the Franciscan Family within precise coordinates. In it there is, above all, provision for the service of animation and guidance of the Fraternities, "co-ordinated and connected according to the norm of the Rule and the Constitutions"; such service is indispensable for communion between the Fraternities, for the coordinated collaboration between them and for the unity of the Secular Franciscan Order (cf. *General Constitutions SFO* 29.1). Also the "spiritual assistance as a fundamental element of communion", to be carried out collegially on the regional, national and international levels is important (*General Constitutions SFO* 90.3). Of decisive importance is finally the collegial service of the *altius moderamen*, "entrusted by the

Church to the Franciscan First Order and to the Third Order Regular", to which the Secular Fraternity has been attached for centuries (cf. *General Constitutions SFO* 85.2; 87.1).

The SFO—An Integral Part of the Catholic Church

Before we look at where we are now in the Church, let's continue to look back at where we began. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the relationship between Francis and the Church in a general audience on January 27, 2010. In part, this is what he said.

[At the time of St. Francis] Innocent III was a powerful Pontiff, who possessed profound theological culture as well as great political power, but it was not he who renewed the Church. It was the 'small and insignificant' friar, it was Francis, called by God. Yet it is important to recall that **Francis did not renew the Church without the Pope or against the Pope, but in communion with him.** The two things went together: Peter's Successor, the bishops and the Church founded on apostolic succession, and the new charism that the Spirit had created at that moment to renew the Church.¹⁷ [Emphasis added]

In the same address Pope Benedict said:

It is also true that at first Francis "did not wish to create a new order" with all the due canonical procedures. However, not without disappointment, **he came to understand "that everything must have its order and that the law of the Church is necessary to give form to renewal.** Thus he entered ... with all his heart into communion with the Church, with the Pope and the bishops".¹⁸ [Emphasis added]

From a Category to an Order

In Canon Law the Secular Franciscan Order falls within the category of a Public Association of the Faithful.

¹⁷ AG/FRANCIS OF ASSISI/...VIS 100127 (1040) 1/27/10

¹⁸ AG/FRANCIS OF ASSISI/...VIS 100127 (1040) 1/27/10

Canon 303 of the Code of Canon Law defines all third orders as:

Associations whose members share in the spirit of some religious institute while in secular life, lead an apostolic life, and strive for Christian perfection under the higher direction of the same institute are called third orders or some other appropriate name.

The SFO General Constitutions, further define our status in Article 1.5 and states:

The Secular Franciscan Order is a public association in the Church. It is divided into fraternities at various levels: local, regional, national, and international. Each one has its own juridical personality within the Church.

The Secular Franciscan Order differs from other Third Orders in significant way, and it is important that we be aware of the characteristics specific to the SFO.

- The SFO shares a common **founder** with the First and Second Order—St Francis of Assisi.
- The SFO is not associated or affiliated with the First Order or TOR—it is **autonomous** and **self-governing**.
- The SFO shares in **vital reciprocity** with the other branches of the Franciscan family and has **equal dignity**.
- The SFO was given the **same charism and mission** as the other branches of the Franciscan family. In our secular state, we, too, continue the mission of St. Francis to rebuild God's Church.
- Our Rule and Constitutions are **approved by the Holy See** and not by the Ministers General of the First Order and Third Order Regular.
- Members of other third orders may belong to more than one third orders. **Secular Franciscan may not.**

*Rather than repeat the information contained in the section entitled *The Nature of the Secular Franciscan Order* contained in the International Formation material, I suggest that you reserve some time to read and digest this material.*

Conclusion:

In this conclusion we will turn to the document some believe to be our First Rule of Life, the Earlier Exhortation of St. Francis to the Brothers and Sister in Penance (circa 1209-1215).¹⁹ This document is considered so important to the identity of Secular Franciscans that it was placed in our Rule as its Prologue. In the exhortation, St. Francis tells us what our identity must be if we are to be true to our calling.

First, we must love God with our entire being: hearts, souls, minds, strength (cf. Mk 12:30), and love our neighbors as ourselves (cf. Mt 22:39). Immediately following the great command to love, St. Francis says we must despise our sinful ways. How do we despise our sinful way? We turn from sin and temptation and choose to be conformed to the image and likeness of Christ. We do penance. If we do this, as surely as night follows day, we will be what God intended us to be, his beloved children. Then, we will produce worthy fruits through this conversion process.

God gave us many gifts when we embraced a penitential identity? God gave us joy, a hallmark of Franciscan spirituality. Further God gave us “the spirit of the Lord [to] rest upon [us]” (cf. Is 11:2) and to make “his home and dwelling among [us]” (cf. Jn 14:23). But to receive these gifts, we must remain faithful to our vocation.

Becoming more specific, Francis tells us that when we embrace this vocation we become sons [and daughters] of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45), whose works [we] do, and [we] are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50).

What does it mean to be a spouse, a brother or sister, and a mother to Christ? Imagine your soul united to our Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine being brother or sister to him by fulfilling the will of the Father. Imagine being mother to him through divine love and a pure conscience. And imagine giving birth to Christ through a holy life that is light to others.

Continuing his exhortation, St. Francis tells us that we are intimately wrapped in the Trinity. Francis says, “Oh, how glorious it is to have a great and holy Father in heaven! Oh how glorious it is to have such a beautiful and admirable Spouse, the Holy Paraclete! Oh, how glorious it is to have such a Brother and such a Son, loved, beloved, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all: Our Lord Jesus Christ, who

¹⁹ Also called Letter to All the Faithful, Earlier Exhortation, Primitive Rule, Volterra text.

gave up his life for his sheep (cf. Jn 10:15)." We possess all three persons: a holy Father, an admirable spouse, the Holy Paraclete, and a self-sacrificing brother, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are immersed in the Trinity from which our identity flows.

And finally St. Francis ends his exhortation by praying to the Father for us saying in the words of Jesus:

"O holy Father, protect them with your name (cf. Jn 17:11) whom you gave me out of the world. I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me and they received it. They have known that in truth I came from you, they have believed that it was you who sent me. For these I pray, not for the world (cf. Jn 17:9). Bless and consecrate them, and I consecrate myself for their sakes. I do not pray for them alone; I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word (cf. Jn 17:20) that they may be holy by being one as we are (cf. Jn 17: 11). And I desire, Father, to have them in my company where I am to see this glory of mine in your kingdom" (cf. Jn 17:6-24).

We have quite an identity —

quite a lot to live up to —

quite a lot to be thankful for —

and we are blessed.

May the Lord grant us peace.