

8. History of the Franciscan Movement (1)
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THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

8.1 The Franciscan movement is an evangelical option which is open to persons from all walks of life. St. Francis is considered to be the founder of the First Order of friars, the Second Order of contemplative sisters, and the Third Order, made up of male and female religious (Third Order Regular) as well as seculars (Secular Franciscan Order).

8.2 The history of the origins of the Franciscan movement shows that these three Orders were born together, and that they are a sign of Francis' unique understanding of the signs of his times. We shall give an overall view of the history of the Secular Franciscan Order and present its charism for today's world.

The Order of Penitents

8.3 From the early centuries of Christianity, the Order of Penitents was the institutional medium of penitential practices which were either imposed by the Church or else were chosen freely as a way of evangelical perfection. The "*Ordo Poenitentium*" was quite popular in the middle ages. It was made up of various categories of penitents, such as oblates, hermits, recluses, pilgrims. The centuries immediately preceding St. Francis are marked with a particular tendency towards the penitential life, which was common in the great reforms of monastic and eremitical institutions. Let it suffice to mention St. Romuald (+ 1027), St. Peter Damiani (+ 1072), St. John Gualbert (+ 1073), the reform of Cluny, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153).

8.4. The penitential movement became very popular after the Gregorian reform at the end of the 11th century. It was a spontaneous movement, and was widespread among the laity. Its characteristic notes were an apostolic life, expressed through poverty, popular preaching, penitential practices and acts of mercy towards outcasts, lepers, etc.

8.5. The spontaneous nature of the penitential movement was instrumental in its development, but was also an occasion for heretical tendencies. The official structure of the Church, the Papal curia, the bishops, the monasteries, were often disinterested in noticing the great evangelical upsurge coming from the laity. This lack of direction was one of the causes of the spreading of heresy. Such was the case of the Cathari in France and Italy, for example.

8.6. The need for genuine reform in the Church was providential in prompting the direct intervention of the Pope in order to secure the orthodoxy of the lay penitential movements. From the beginning of the 12th century the Popes were taking under their protection various groups or guilds who lived a penitential life. In 1195, when Francis of Assisi was still a teenager, a group

of penitents known as Umiliati was established in northern Italy. Innocent III approved their way of life or "*Propositum*" in 1201. In 1208 he approved the "*Propositum*" of the Poveri Cattolici and in 1210 that of the Poveri Lombardi. Note that this is the same year in which Innocent III orally approved the "*Propositum vitae*" of the Friars Minor.

Francis of Assisi as a penitent

8.6. In his Testament Francis states that the Lord called him to embark upon a life of penance. From the very beginnings Francis considered himself to be a penitent on the road to conversion. He became an oblate in the church of San Damiano (1 Cel 9). After renouncing his inheritance in front of bishop Guido and his father Pietro di Bernardone, Francis was clothed in the habit of a poor hermit (L3S 25, 27). The first name which the friars assumed was that of "*viri poenitentiales de civitate Assisii oriundi*" ("*penitents from the town of Assisi*" L3S 37).

8.7. The original inspiration to live the Gospel was intimately linked with a penitential form of life, as these texts from the Franciscan Sources eloquently show:

"Francis, therefore, the most valiant knight of Christ, went about the towns and villages announcing the kingdom of God, preaching peace, teaching salvation and penance unto the remission of sins... Men ran, and women too ran, clerics hurried, and religious hastened that they might see and hear the holy man of God who seemed to all to be a man of another world ("*homo alterius saeculi*")... Many of the people, both noble and ignoble, cleric and lay, impelled by divine inspiration, began to come to St. Francis, wanting to carry on the battle constantly under his discipline and under his leadership. All of these the holy man of God, like a plenteous river of heavenly grace, watered with streams of gifts; he enriched the field of their hearts with flowers of virtue, for he was an excellent craftsman; and, according to his plan, rule, and teaching, proclaimed before all, the Church is being renewed in both sexes, and the threefold army of those to be served is triumphing. To all he gave a norm of life, and he showed in truth the way of salvation in every walk of life" (1 Cel 36-37).

8.8 "(Francis) became an example to those who followed Christ perfectly. We have plenty of reason to be firmly convinced of this. First of all, there is the mission which he had received 'to summon all men to mourn and lament, to shave their heads and wear sackcloth' (Is 22,12) 'and mark the brows of those that weep and wail with a cross' (Ez 9,4), signing them with the cross of penance and clothing them in his own habit which was shaped like a cross" (LegMaj, Prologue).

Francis, founder of the Order of Penitents

8.9. We have already noted that the Third Order of Penitents was not a personal invention of St. Francis, but rather a personal initiative with the aim of grouping into a stable form of evangelical life the various groups of Penitents among the laity.

8.10. The Franciscan Sources are quite clear regarding the beginnings of the Order of Friars Minor and the Order of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. The beginnings of the Order of Penitents instituted by Francis of Assisi are not so clear.

8.11. According to 2 Cel 38, a certain lady of Cortona came to the hermitage of Le Celle, and asked Francis to help her to live a life of penance in her married state. The Legend of Perugia 34 mentions the spirit of penance and conversion of the inhabitants of Greccio. But it is in L3S 60 that we find an explicit reference to the Order of Penitents: "Not only men, but also women and unmarried virgins were fired by the brothers' preaching, and, on their advice, entered the prescribed convents to do penance; and one of the brothers was appointed as their visitor and guide. Married men and women, being bound by the marriage vow, were advised by the friars to dedicate themselves to a life of penance in their own houses". Julian of Speyer in his Life of St. Francis, 14, states: "The third (Order) is known as the Order of Penitents. This Order is not marked by a lesser perfection than the other two. It is open to all clerics and lay, virgins, 'continentes', married couples, and both men and women can join it for their own salvation".

8.12. In the LegMaj IV,6, Bonaventure states: "Carried away by the force of his preaching, great numbers of people adopted the new rule of penance according to the form instituted by St. Francis which he called the Order of the Brothers of Penance".

8.13. The Anonymous Legend of Perugia, 41, says that the Order of Penitents was approved by the Pope. This is a note which certainly cannot refer to the early years of the history of the Third Order.

8.14. According to the Fioretti, chapter 16, it was in the Umbrian Valley, near Cannara, that Francis gave a way of life to those lay persons who wanted to live the Gospel more radically. But this late source cannot be taken to refer to the founding of the Third Order.

8.15. Popular tradition has indicated a certain wealthy merchant from Poggibonsi, called Luchasio, together with his wife Buonadonna, as the first Franciscan Tertiaries. Luchasio died on 28 April 1260, and is even venerated as a "*beato*", whose cult was approved by Pius VI. This tradition lacks historical foundation. We can only say that the Order of Penitents began to be known as such in 1221 with the "*Memoriale Propositi*".

8.16. The form of life given to the Penitents by Francis of Assisi is now universally accepted as being included in the First Version of the Letter to the Faithful.

The Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance

8.17. Esser suggested that the beginnings of the Order of Penitents were quite similar to those of the Order of Friars Minor. The Earlier Rule of 1221, in the case of the First Order, was the result of a progressive elaboration of various chapters responding to the new issues which the Order faced in the period 1210-1221, that is, between the oral approval of the primitive "*Propositum vitae*" by Innocent III and the final draft of the "*Regola non bullata*". In the case of the Order of Penitents, the First Version of the Letter to the Faithful represents the primitive nucleus of the way of life of the Penitents. The same Letter has a Second Version, which deals with the same themes in a more detailed way.

8.18. The key word of the Letter to the Faithful is "*penance*". It is not important to know whether or not the Order of Penitents was officially instituted by Francis at some date before 1221. The

document certainly comes before this date, and is a proof that Francis gave a way of life to lay persons who wanted to live the radical call of the Gospel adapted to their needs. The style of the Letter is that of an exhortation. The contents concern the barest essentials of the penitential life, namely, the commandment of love of God and neighbour, the rejection of sin, participation in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of penance, acts of mercy as a proof of a penitential life. All this is seen against the background of a Trinitarian spirituality, and of a discipleship of Christ in the threefold relationship of spouses, brothers and mothers. The reverse side of the picture is that of the person who does not embark upon a life of penance. Francis describes the death of this person in a very crude but realistic way. The style is simply that of a few words of exhortation to those brothers and sisters who wanted to live the evangelical "*metanoia*" in a more radical way. They form the core of the way of life of the Order of Penitents.

The "*Memoriale Propositi*" (1221)

8.19. This date is universally accepted as the official beginning of the Third Order (cfr. Chronicle of the XXIV Generals, in *Analecta Franciscana* III,27; Bartholomew of Pisa, Book of Conformities, in *Analecta Franciscana* IV,360-361). There is an English translation of the "*Memoriale Propositi*" in the *Omnibus of Sources*, pp. 165-175.

8.20. The "*Memoriale Propositi*" was written by Cardinal Hugolino, Protector of the Order of Friars Minor, and given to the Order of Penitents. It was orally approved in 1221 by Pope Honorius III, and marks the first legislative text of the Third Order of St. Francis. The Rule is presented as "the memorial of what is proposed for the Brothers and Sisters of Penance living in their own homes". It is made up of 8 chapters, dealing with (1) the daily life of the Penitents, regarding their dress, and prohibition to take part in public entertainment; (2) rules of abstinence; (3) rules of fasting; (4) prayer and the divine office; (5) sacramental practice, prohibition to carry arms and to avoid oaths; (6) the Eucharist and meeting of the fraternity once a month; (7) visiting the sick, burying the dead and offering prayers for them, obligation to make the last will, rules regarding the reception of new members in the fraternity; (8) the visitor and disciplinary rules, election of the officials of the fraternity.

8.21. The "*Memoriale Propositi*" is built upon the notion of fraternity. The Penitents are truly Brothers and Sisters, bound together by mutual charity. The prohibition to carry arms was a courageous witness of evangelical peace in a quarrelsome society, and it certainly dealt a blow to the feudal regime and to the petty quarrels between rival Comuni in the Italian peninsula. The acts of charity and mercy, including burial, and assisting the sick and lepers, were aimed at eradicating poverty and misery. The spirit of sharing of resources and the obligation to make the last will were a defence against hatred and violence between rival families or even between individuals within the same family. The Penitents were often persecuted for their evangelical witness of peace. Gregory IX had to intervene on 30 March 1228 with the Bull "*Detestanda*", in which he defended the Penitents' right not to carry arms and to be free of military service. In this Bull the Order of Penitents is called Third Order for the first time.

Prominent figures in the early years of the Third Order

8.22. The Third Order of St. Francis, today known as the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO), was a

school of sanctity from the very beginning. It is truly amazing how many persons of renown joined this movement and became saints. We shall here present a short note about some of the most important saints of the Third Order during the 13th and 14th centuries.

8.23. The patron saint of the SFO is St. Elizabeth of Hungary. Born in 1207, she was a princess, the daughter of the king of Hungary. When still very young she was engaged to, and subsequently married, Louis, the son of the landgrave of Thuringia. Theirs was a holy marriage. Elizabeth was free to dedicate her time and energies to the poor and lepers, as well as to her husband and four children. She built a large hospital at Eisenach. In 1227 her husband Louis went on a crusade, sent by the Emperor Frederick II. While he was still in Italy he died. Elizabeth began her calvary of suffering. She was a widow, but Louis' relatives drove her and the children out of the royal palace. Elizabeth finally settled down in Wartburg. After caring for her children's education she decided to embark upon a life of penance. So she left for Marburg, where there was a Franciscan church. In this city she found the spiritual assistance of Friar Conrad, who introduced her to the Order of Penitents. She spent the rest of her life practising penance and offering her whole existence for the poor and the sick. Elizabeth herself died on 19 November 1231, when she was still 24 years old. Gregory IX declared her a saint in 1235. She was declared patron saint of Secular Franciscans.

8.24. The Secular Franciscans have another patron, this time a male saint. He is St. Louis IX, King of France. Louis was born at Poissy in 1215. His mother was queen Blanche, who is also considered a member of the Third Order. When Louis was only 12 years old he was crowned king. His mother continued to govern until he was an adult. In the meantime he was educated also by the Friars Minor and joined the Order of Penitents. As a king Louis was very keen on taking part in a crusade to free the Holy Land. He left on a crusade, but only captured Damietta before he himself was imprisoned by the saracens. Louis was also a holy father. He had 11 children and we still possess the spiritual testament he wrote to his eldest son, in which he shows himself a fervent Christian. Louis is also famous for the veneration he gave to the crown of thorns, for which he built a special chapel in Paris. He went on a second crusade in 1270, but died on the way on 25 August, during a plague epidemic. Boniface VIII canonised Louis IX in 1297.

8.25. Another famous Penitent of the Third Order is St. Margaret of Cortona. She was born in 1247 at Laviano, near Cortona, in Italy. She had a troubled childhood, suffering persecution from her stepmother. When she was 16 she left her family's home in search of a better life. For 9 years she was deeply in love with a young man from Montepulciano, called Arsenio. She lived with him without marrying him. One fine day Margaret found her lover murdered. It was the turning point of her life. She went to Cortona and began a penitential life near the Franciscan church. In vain she asked to be admitted to the Order of Penitents, because people were judging her for her sinful past. At last she was admitted as a penitent in 1277, under the spiritual assistance of Friars Giovanni di Castiglion Fiorentino and Giunta Bevegnati. She worked hard in favour of the poor and sick, and for them built the hospice "*della misericordia*". She spent the rest of her life as a recluse in a solitary cell on top of the hill of Cortona. She died on 22 February 1297. Pope Benedict XIII declared her a saint in 1728.

8.26. The Order of Penitents is indeed renowned for its female saints. This example of sanctity

which we shall present was also a great mystic, Blessed Angela of Foligno. Angela was born in 1248 at Foligno, near Assisi. She was also a wife and mother. As a widow who lost even her children she began thinking about her past life, and resolved to do penance under the guidance of her confessor. During a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Francis in Assisi, in 1291, she underwent a profound mystical experience, which she continued to feel through her life. She joined the Order of Penitents. Upon advice of Friar Arnaldo, a Franciscan who lived at the Sacro Convento in Assisi, she began to write her mystical experiences. These experiences are recounted in her autobiography, and cover the period 1285-1296. As a penitent Angela became famous for her charitable services to the sick and lepers of her hometown. She died on 4 January 1309, and was beatified by Innocent XII in 1693.

8.27. A last example of sanctity in the early years of the Franciscan penitential movement is offered by the Blessed Ramon Lull. Born on the Spanish island of Maiorca in 1233, he became a page at the royal court, and was a highly educated man. At a certain moment he felt the desire to do penance. So he left his post in the royal court and dedicated his energies as a penitent to the founding of missionary colleges for the Friars who went among the saracens of North Africa. He insisted that it was useless to go on missionary expeditions among the saracens without an adequate knowledge of Arabic language and culture. He was a philosopher and travelled widely to Rome, Avignon, Paris, Vienne, Montpellier. His aim was to encourage the Pope and the authorities of the Church to found missionary colleges. When he was well advanced in years, in 1314, he himself wanted to go as a missionary to North Africa. He had been there before, in 1293, and was beaten and driven out by the Muslims of Bougie. His courage led him to address the Council of Vienne regarding the evangelisation of the saracens in 1312. The last time he went to Africa Ramon was an octogenarian. The Muslims of Bougie recognised their old enemy. They beat him to death in the public square. He was taken on board a ship by Genoese merchants, but died when his ship was in sight of Maiorca. He was buried at Palma di Maiorca. Pope Leo X beatified him as a martyr in the beginning of the 16th century.

The Rule of Pope Nicholas IV (1289)

8.28. The year 1289 marks the date when the Third Franciscan Order was given a new Rule by Pope Nicholas IV, who issued the Bull "*Supra montem*" in the town of Rieti. Nicholas IV had been a Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor. He was Girolamo da Ascoli Piceno, Minister General from 1274 to 1279.

8.29. The Rule of Nicholas IV does not add any new material to the "*Memoriale Propositi*" of 1221, but it gives a more legislative style to this document. Nicholas IV made use of the "*Memoriale Propositi*", as well as of a Rule for Penitents written by a certain Friar Caro, a minorite from the convent of Santa Croce in Florence, who was also a visitor to the Franciscan and Dominican Penitents in 1284. For the first time in its long history, the Third Order was given a Rule included within a Papal Bull. The Rule is addressed to the Brothers and Sisters of the Order of Penitents.

8.30. We shall take a brief look at the contents of the Rule, with the aim of presenting the structure of the penitential life of the Franciscan Tertiaries during the late 13th century. Let it suffice to note that this Rule had a long history, which arrives at the end of the 19th century, and

therefore it regulated the life of the Third Order for centuries.

8.31. The Rule has 20 chapters. The contents of the individual chapters are as follows:

1. The Order of Penitents, its catholicity and obedience to the Church.
2. The reception of novices. Obligation of reconciliation with one's neighbour. A public profession binding the penitents to the observance of the divine commandments. Married women need permission of their husbands to join the Order.
3. The penitential clothing of the penitents.
4. Prohibition to take part in public entertainment and feasts.
5. Penitential practices of fasting and abstinence, with insistence upon the Franciscan penitential seasons, but also with the evangelical liberty to eat whatever is presented to them. Pregnant penitents freed from obligation of fasting.
6. The reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist on Christmas day, Easter and Pentecost.
7. Prohibition to carry arms and to render military service.
8. The reciting of the canonical hours of the Divine Office, according to the Franciscan style. Participation in the liturgy in cathedral and parish churches.
9. Obligation to draw up one's last will.
10. The Ministers' role to ensure that the Brothers and Sisters give witness of peace.
11. Recourse to ecclesiastical authority to be defended against molestation by civil authorities.
12. Prohibition to take oaths, without authorisation of the Apostolic See.
13. The daily Eucharist. The monthly meeting of the fraternity, including the celebration of the Eucharist, the preaching of the Word of God, charity to poor and sick members of the fraternity.
14. Visiting the sick Brothers and Sisters once a week. A decent burial and prayers for the deceased members of the fraternity.
15. The role of the Minister of the fraternity.
16. The Visitor of the fraternity, a member of the Order of Friars Minor, with the power to correct the shortcomings of the fraternity and to expel those who rebel against obedience.
17. An exhortation to avoid the scandal of division in the fraternity.
18. The Ordinary or Visitor can dispense individual members of the fraternity from the ecclesiastical norms of abstinence.
19. The disciplinary measures to be taken in the case of disobedient members of the fraternity, including expulsion from the Order.
20. Conclusion. The obligatory nature of the Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance.

The Third Order from 1289 to the 20th century

8.32. The Rule of Nicholas IV had the aim of establishing an intimate and juridical relationship between the First Order and the Third Order. This process, beneficial though it was in the early years, subsequently led to an overdependence of the Third Order upon the First Order.

8.33. The Third Order entered into a period of crisis during the 17th and 18th centuries. Innocent

XI, with the Bull "*Ecclesiae catholicae*" of 28 June 1689, commented and adapted the Rule of 1289 to the times. Although the document defends the autonomy of the Third Order, it still gives broad powers to the Visitor.

8.34. Gradually the Third Order was losing sight of its own identity. During the 17th century it described itself in ambiguous terms: institute, religion, confraternity, company, college, seraphic institute, tertiary institution, fraternity of devotees! There were also problems related to the juridical status of the Tertiaries, who were considered as a kind of middle way between the "*regulares*" (religious) and the "*saeculares*" (seculars).

8.35. During the 20th century the Third Order of St. Francis began a process of renewal. This was partly the result of social reform, in the aftermath of the French Revolution and with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Pope Leo XIII, famous for the "*Rerum novarum*" and social reform in a Christian context, took to heart the renewal of the Franciscan Third Order. In his encyclical letter "*Auspicato*" (1882), he announced that he wanted to give a new orientation to the Third Order of St. Francis. In a letter written to Fr. Bernardino dal Vago da Portogruaro, Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, the Pope expressed his ardent wish to renew the Third Order in its genuine Franciscan spirit, in order to help him in his efforts at social reform. He even gave the Third Order a new Rule, with the Bull "*Misericors Dei Filius*" (1883).

8.36. Pope Pius X, who was himself a member of the Third Order, wrote the letter "*Tertium Franciscalium Ordinem*" (8 September 1912), in which he asked the Friars of the First Order to take spiritual care of the Third Order with the aim of promoting genuine social reform. This document, however, had the misfortune of making the Third Order depend excessively upon the First Order. Again the exact identity of the Third Order was being questioned. This process led to a growing awareness of the need for a more autonomous nature to be given to the Third Order of St. Francis. Luckily this process was realised in the aftermath of Vatican Council II.

The Rule of Paul VI and the Secular Franciscan Order

8.37. During the international congress of the Third Order in 1950, many voiced the need for an updating of the Rule of Leo XIII. They were of the opinion that it lacked the evangelical impetus which should be at the roots of Franciscan legislation. In 1957 the Third Order was given new General Constitutions, with the aim of renewing the contents of the Rule and giving the Order a spiritual, social and apostolic orientation.

8.38. Vatican Council II was the turning point for radical reform in the Third Order. In 1966 work was begun on a new Rule for the Third Order of St. Francis. The process was a long one. Various commissions worked upon new proposals. At long last, on 24 June 1978, Paul VI formally approved the new Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order with the Apostolic Letter "*Seraphicus Patriarca*".

8.39. The new Rule proposed a new name for the Third Order of St. Francis: Secular Franciscan Order (SFO). Its structure includes a prologue, in which we find the Exhortation of St. Francis to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. In this way the Rule of the SFO goes to the roots of the evangelical and penitential life of Secular Franciscans.

8.40. The Rule of the SFO is made up of three chapters. We shall briefly present the structure of the Rule with the aim of noting the characteristic elements of the charism of the SFO in the world today.

Chapter I - The Secular Franciscan Order

1. The SFO as an expression of the charism of St. Francis in the Church.
2. Definition of the SFO as a family of Catholic fraternities living the Gospel in the style of St. Francis.
3. Brief note about the legislative history of the SFO.

Chapter II - The Way of Life of Secular Franciscans

4. The life of the Gospel.
5. Christ present in the Brothers and Sisters, in Scriptures, in the Church, and in the Liturgy. The grace of Baptism.
6. Union with the pastors of the Church. Creative apostolic vocation.
7. Penitential dimension of the Franciscan life. Conversion and sacrament of reconciliation.
8. Life of prayer, in the sacraments, the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours.
9. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.
10. The evangelical counsel of obedience.
11. The evangelical counsel of poverty and humility. Itinerant nature of the Franciscan life.
12. The evangelical counsel of chastity in the secular state.
13. Spirit of fraternal love and respect towards all persons.
14. Social commitment to the world in a spirit of evangelical service.
15. Promotion of justice, in the sphere of social life.
16. Value of work as a service to the community.
17. Peace and respect of life. Witness of genuine love between married Secular Franciscans.
18. Love and respect for all creatures.
19. Commitment to work for peace, through dialogue and forgiveness. Encounter with "*sister death*" in a true spirit of faith.

Chapter III - The Life of the Fraternity

20. Local, regional, national and international fraternities. Way of life contained in the Rule and General Constitutions.
21. The fraternity council and the Minister of the fraternity.
22. Canonical establishment of the local fraternity.
23. Process of acceptance of new members in the SFO. Rite of initiation, initial formation, profession of the Rule.
24. Meetings with other Franciscan groups, especially with young people. Prayers for deceased members of the SFO.
25. Economic administration of the fraternity.

26. The role of the spiritual Assistant of the fraternity, who must preferably be a member of the First Order of St. Francis. The pastoral visitation and the fraternal visitation.

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