



OFS-USA

NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER-USA

National Minister's Message

by Jan Parker, OFS

The OFS Rule: A Gift, a Call, an Inspiration, a Tool

Our General Minister Tibor Kauser has written a letter addressed *“To my sisters and brothers in the Secular Franciscan Order, all over the world”* and *“To all YouFra members, all over the world.”* Tibor’s letter was written in celebration of the 40th Anniversary of our Rule. We share his letter with great joy, and agree with our sister Mary Stronach, who translated it into Spanish: *“Every word, every thought touched me and helped me strengthen my vocation.”*

May our study and reflection on this letter bring us a deeper understanding of our Rule and renew our dedication to live what we have professed.



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Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

To all my sisters and brothers in the Secular Franciscan Order, all over the world

To all the Youfra members all over the world

My dear Sisters and Brothers!
May the Lord give you his peace!

This year we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, approved by Pope Blessed Paul VI on June 24th 1978, with his letter 'Seraphicus Patriarcha'. It is the right time to set the question: what is the Rule for me, in my personal life? What is the Rule for us, as an International Fraternity, on its all levels? What does it mean for us to 'celebrate this anniversary', to celebrate the Rule?

The Rule is a norm of life for us, Secular Franciscans, but it is an inspirational document also for the Youfra members, who want to follow Christ in the footsteps of St. Francis. Therefore I address this letter not only to my sisters and brothers of the Secular Franciscan Order, but also to our young sisters and brothers in the Youfra.

I ask you to let me begin with a personal reflection: for me the Rule is a gift, a call, an inspiration and a tool.

A gift

Before all, the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order is a treasure, a gift of God, that shows how much God and the Church loves the Secular Franciscan Order. It is something that cannot be bought, cannot be merited. As Pope Saint John Paul II told us: "It is a real treasure in your hands, it is in accord with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, and it responds to what the Church expects of you"¹. Therefore we have to give thanks for this gift; give thanks to God and give thanks to the Church.

Like every gift, it is somehow bearing the imprint of the giver, showing us how beautiful and rich life God wants us to live. Each and every article of the Rule reflects on the infinite richness of God, and is like a gemstone that puts light on various aspects of our identity and of our life. When we now celebrate the 40th anniversary of our Rule,

¹ Discourse of Pope Saint John Paul II to the members of the General Council of the OFS, September 27th 1982.

we have to remember, that it is not the gift itself, what we celebrate, but the giver, who is God himself. Let us live therefore this celebration by being grateful to Him and by giving thanks to Him with our prayer, with our love, with our entire life.

A call, an invitation

"The Lord continues to call others to live with him and to follow him in a relationship of particular closeness. He continues to call others to serve him directly. If he lets us realize that he is calling us to consecrate ourselves totally to his kingdom, then we should have no fear! It is beautiful – and a great grace – to be completely and forever consecrated to God and the service of our brothers and sisters."²

This call is echoing in the Rule, and we have to respond to this call with generosity, without fear. God is calling us as we are. We are imperfect and weak, never mind, but we shall not be deaf and blind! We know, how "the glorious confessor of Christ, Blessed Francis, the institutor of this order, showing the way to ascend to the Lord both in word and example, instructed his own sons in the sincerity of his own faith, and he wanted them also to acknowledge it themselves, to hold it constantly, and to fulfill it similarly with work, so that walking soberly by means of its path, they may, after the workhouse of the present life, merit to be possessors of eternal beatitude."³

This call of God has been put in a form in our Rule: Be "possessors of the eternal beatitude", so, be Holy! Live in a manner that leads you to holiness! Observe the Rule, that helps you to follow Christ in every moment of your life, in all the aspects of your life! "We come to a full sense of the dignity of the lay faithful if we consider the prime and fundamental vocation that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. ... It is ever more urgent that today all Christians take up again the way of gospel renewal, welcoming in a spirit of generosity the invitation expressed by the apostle Peter "to be holy in all conduct" (1Pt 1:15). ... The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities."⁴ This call to holiness obliges us to respond affirmatively. The very positive call of God needs our very positive response. Let us be those who will transmit this call of God to others, let us call others to God, so that "as many as possible be called back to the praise of Christian sanctity by Our timely invitation"⁵.

A document of inspiration

Our Rule is not only a normative or legislative text, but also (and mostly) a spiritual text. It is to be read often not only because we have to keep some norms or do some pre-written prayers, but also and mostly because it is our treasure, that helps us to fulfill our vocation. It has to inspire us! We, Secular Franciscans, have everything in our Rule, that can give us enough inspiration to walk along the way of our vocational journey.

To celebrate our Rule is to make it live, only this way will we be faithful to the proposal of Jesus, who invites us to love one another as brothers. Francis of Assisi has given us the example of the grace of conversion as a great gift, which commits us to continue to follow the Franciscan path with courage and love. Our Rule, a truly Franciscan one, helps us to discover, how shall we live our vocation on a daily basis, what should our everyday life be like. We are not 'Sunday Franciscans' or 'afternoon Franciscans'. The Rule has to inspire each moment of our life, so that we get to a kind of behavior, a habit.

As the religious brothers and sisters wear a habit, we also shall have a habit that characterizes us, that makes us visible and recognizable. But this habit is not visible in that sense. We do not have a sewn and tailored habit. We have a habit of our behavior, of the way we live our life in the family, in the Church, in the fraternity, at work, or in our free time. Our habit shall be our kindness, our visible love to God and to one another, our readiness to serve, our simple manner of life, our real freedom of the children of God. Our habit is our prayer, our sacramental life, our commitment to the Order, and thus to the fraternity. Our habit is our Franciscan way of life, that we live "going from gospel to life and life to the gospel"⁶.

² Message of Pope Francis for the 55th World Day of prayer for vocations 2018

³ Supra Montem, Pope Nicholas IV., August 18th 1289.

⁴ Christifideles Laici 16-17

⁵ Misericors Dei Filius, Pope Leo XIII., May 30th 1883.

⁶ OFS Rule 4

The life of a secular Franciscan is not a uniform life. We are different. We have to raise our heads, open our eyes, and look around: how beautiful and rich this life is, that God offers us to live according to our vocation! I invite all of you to discover your talents and find inspiration from the Rule, how your daily life should be lived. Discover the richness of God, the richness of our vocation! Some of us feel certain articles of the Rule closer to him, while others feel others. For some of us certain articles seem to be easier to live than others. Yes, the Rule does not want to uniform us but to unite us in the diversity.

Go out, and find how can you live your vocation in the Church, in the society, among the poor, among the needy, among our neighbors in the family, at work, in the fraternity, in free time, in different ways reflecting on the same charism and the same vocation. Be inspired, so that you can inspire others!

A helping tool in the everyday

The Rule is an empty text if we do not turn it into life. We have to use it. "Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey"⁷. Certainly, the Rule has very concrete regulations, since we are facing very concrete situations in our everyday life, so that we may keep to the right direction of our life. "The Church consigns it to you as a norm of life."⁸

In the English language the word 'rule' is the root of the word 'ruler', a tool for schoolboys, schoolgirls, teachers, engineers, architects, draftsmen. Let me bring this example to you: Rule is like a ruler, you can draw a straight line only with a ruler. But the goal is not to draw a nice straight line. The goal is to have a drawing, a plan of a house, that will be built and will be a home for someone.

The Rule is not a goal by itself, knowing the Rule is not a goal, the letter-by-letter application of the articles of the Rule is not a goal by itself either. The goal is to become holy, to show God's love to the world, to make the life of others better, to get closer to God and to bring others closer to God. The Rule is like ruler, an instrument for us, that helps us to become holy, that helps us to keep the straight line, also whenever we have difficulties in life, when we lose the horizon from our sight. In this sense, the Rule is a tool. It is something that is always at hand, what we can always turn to.

The words of the Rule have to be put in practice, and our practice has to be controlled, evaluated in the light of the Rule. We have to use it by often and careful reading, by talking about it among ourselves and with others, by living according to its values, "because the values contained in it are eminently evangelical"⁹. Similarly, we also have to be good tools in the hands of God. We have to make us available so that God can use us as tools, instruments of peace, joy, and the love of God.

Beauty and joy

Like a spring in a green forest, the Rule is always fresh and ready to give new life. It has been so for centuries. Yet years are coming and going by, the Franciscan charism is still the same, it is still valid, and has to be lived more than ever. As Pope Blessed Paul VI wrote: "We are happy that the "Franciscan Charism" today is still a force for the good of the Church and the human community, despite the infiltration of doctrines and tendencies that alienate people from God and from the supernatural. With praiseworthy initiative and with common accord the four Franciscan families have striven for ten years to prepare a new Rule for the Franciscan Third Order Secular, or as it is now called, the Secular Franciscan Order. This was necessary because of the changed conditions of the times and because of the teaching and encouragement given them by the Second Vatican Council."¹⁰

More than 800 years have passed but the beauty and the joy of the Franciscan life is still the same. 40 years have passed since these sentences of Pope Paul VI, but the beauty and the joy of the Rule have not faded. We can speak about the beauty, because the life we are called to and inspired by the Rule is beautiful. All the aspects - prayer, contemplation, gospel reading, family life, work, and many others - reflect on the beauty of the life inspired by God, and lived by Saint Francis, giving us an example. And we can speak about joy, too, because the virtues in the Rule, like simplicity, obedience, justice, fraternal spirit, give us a joyful life. If we put these virtues into our daily practice, we will experience the joy of the Gospel.

⁷ Evangelii Gaudium 127

⁸ Letter of the four Ministers General on the occasion of the approval of the Rule

⁹ Discourse of Pope Saint John Paul II to the members of the General Council of the OFS, September 27, 1982.

¹⁰ Seraphicus Patriarcha, Pope Paul VI, June 24, 1978

The Rule shall be a spring that refreshes the life in our fraternities, which also have a role "that the Christian life be more diligently exercised in them, as in a certain gymnasium".¹¹ These fraternities are a home and a primary place for us to study, love and live the Rule.¹² Both living our vocation here, and also fulfilling our missionary call to go out to the world, can be fostered by experiencing the beauty and joy of our vocation, reflected to in our Rule, and we have to share this beauty and joy. I invite and encourage all of you: go out, and share this beauty and joy! The authentic Christian message is not coming from books. It goes from person to person. Your testimony, our testimony is essential to the renewal of our Order and of the entire Church. Every time you read the Rule and decide to live or act accordingly, you make one more step ahead to fulfill this vocation and mission.

Credits

We have to remember those, who had worked so much for this renewal of the Rule, which meant also a renewal of the Order. Those sisters and brothers, who have initiated this renewal, first of all Manuela Mattioli, who was the first General Minister of the OFS, those Ministers General of the Franciscan First and Third Orders, who had always been supporting this work with prayer, dedication, time and resources. We have to give thanks to those sisters and brothers who worked on the text of the Rule and also those who helped to make it arrive to all the sisters and brothers: the translators, the secretaries, the ministers of the different levels of the Order. We have to keep the awareness of how they intended to "seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue."¹³ This dialogue has been developed into a wonderful text, full of inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In the Bible, forty years meant often a time period that separated two distinct epochs. I pray these forty years behind us will serve as a time of renewal, as a beginning of a period of time when both the Order as a unique one as also the individual sisters and brothers will live their identity more sincerely, follow their vocation more committed, and accomplish their mission in the Church and in the world more visibly, day by day with "that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls conversion."¹⁴ May this year be a year of renewal, and may this celebration help us all to a better understanding of our Rule, so that we can live our vocation more authentically and more faithfully.

And I entreat God, that He, who is Omnipotent, Triune and One, bless all those teaching, learning, having, remembering and putting these things into practice as often as they return to and do those things which have been written here for the salvation of our soul, - and I beseech all with a kiss on the foot, to love much, guard and remember these things.¹⁵

With my deepest fraternal love to all of you. Your minister and your brother

Tibor Kauser
CIOFS Minister General



¹¹ Misericors Dei Filius, Pope Leo XIII., May 30, 1888.

¹² Discourse of Pope Saint John Paul II to the members of the General Council of the OFS, September 27, 1982.

¹³ OFS Rule 19.

¹⁴ OFS Rule 7.

¹⁵ RNB XXIV