

NATIONAL MINISTER'S MESSAGE

by Jan Parker OFS

WHO WE ARE

Three years ago, I made a Visitation to Tau Cross Regional Fraternity. Something happened during that visit that made quite an impact, and I have remembered it ever since. Our ongoing formation topic that day was the OFS Rule. I was interested in what the Rule meant to those gathered, so I handed out blank postcards and asked everyone to write down three words – *just three words* – to describe the Rule. After a few moments, I collected the cards, and then chose some to share with the group.

As I looked through the cards, there were many good responses. One said:

Gospel. Life. Penance.

Someone else had an interesting take and wrote:

Spiritual. Orderly. Concise.

But one card stood out among all the others. In large letters it simply said,

Who we are.



I smiled, because to me those three words describe our Rule perfectly. Ever since that day, I have kept that card inside my little red Rule book as a reminder that this is my goal – to make the Rule “who I am.”

This year the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) is celebrating a remarkable anniversary. The year 2021 marks the 800th anniversary of *Memoriale Propositi*, a document that was inspirational at the beginning of our way of life. We share this anniversary with our dear brothers and sisters of the Third Order Regular (TOR).

I must admit that when I first heard of the anniversary of *Memoriale Propositi*, I had to think twice. I recalled that it is mentioned in our Rule,¹ but what *is* this document? How do you even pronounce it? And what exactly does it have to do with our way of life? A brief search on the CIOFS website brought me to a collection of videos and articles that helped answer those questions. I invite you to view those videos and study the articles for yourself, as these resources have certainly deepened my appreciation of this anniversary.²

In the first CIOFS article I read, I learned the historical framework of *Memoriale Propositi*. It was in looking at that history that I realized anew the great debt of gratitude we owe to our founder. What led up to the birth of the first Franciscan order of penitents is interesting. Clearly, the penitential movement in the Church had existed since ancient times, but it was not without struggle. Prior to St. Francis, the movement underwent many reforms and renewals, often in reaction to difficult situations that existed within the Church. Sadly, penitent reformers tended to promote attitudes in opposition to the Church, at times even advocating heretical beliefs.

¹ OFS Rule: Article 3: “The present rule, succeeding “*Memoriale 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...”

² To access the resources from the International Council, go to www.ciofs.info. Type “*Memoriale*” in the search bar, then click *on the photos*. You will need to return to the search results to access each offering.

St. Francis' approach was different and original. Laity were attracted to his example, and many came to embrace his "*propositum vitae*" – this new way of life, based on the exhortations summarized by Francis in his Letter to All the Faithful. They joined together, while not necessarily living together, to form fraternities of both genders, married or celibate, to support each other in living this life of conversion. The members of these penitential

A Most Luminous Proposal

It will be the extraordinary human and religious example of St. Francis of Assisi that will bring to an end the long process of renewal of the penitential state. "In him it is possible to grasp at the same time the summit of the most authentic human and Christian aspirations for the laity and the most luminous proposal for a solution..." (Fr. Prospero Rivi, OFM Cap., Francis of Assisi, p. 72.)

From the CIOFS 1st Contribution on the *Memoriale Propositi*

groups did not exclude contact with the outside world, but, like Francis, they embraced the world, performed works of mercy, spread the joy of the Gospel, and delighted in the intimacy of relationships with the Lord and with each other.

The Church took notice and in 1221 issued the **Memoriale Propositi**, the name of which can mean "document for a project of life." Although this is a generic document that was given to penitents for all time, it truly is the inspirational document of our current OFS Rule. This document outlines the spiritual life of the first brothers and sisters of penance.

We need only look at the text of the *Memoriale Propositi* to find the similarity with our current Rule. The *Memoriale* describes what daily life should look like and how we should pray along with the Church and partake in the Sacraments. It describes the monthly meeting and calls all to practice works of mercy. It delineates the formation process and how one is to be received into the Order. Lastly, it has a section on the holding of offices, the correction of members, and dispensation of obligations. The parallels with our current Rule are amazing to be sure.³

How to Celebrate the 800th Anniversary of *Memoriale Propositi*?

- (1) Read, study, and live the Rule. Begin with the Prologue, for there we hear from Francis himself. Francis was meticulous in avoiding distractions. Let's focus on who we are called to be and be careful about making excuses.
- (2) Ongoing formation. There are at least six different "ready to go" exercises on the OFS Rule posted on our website.⁴ Check in with your Regional Formation Director (RFD) as well. The National Formation workshop, held in August 2021, focused on the Rule, and your RFD will have additional resources that were shared at that time.
- (3) Join with our worldwide Secular Franciscan Order in making this a year-long celebration. Join the OFS-USA as we gather for a grand finale of this anniversary at the 2022 Quinquennial Congress. You won't want to miss it!

Memoriale Propositi makes a connection between what motivated the earliest Brothers and Sisters of Penance and what should motivate us. Our rule today continues to propel us on this beautiful trajectory, a way of life that has flourished for 800 years. This truly is God's project. Our OFS Rule that we hold in our hands, and in our hearts, is our life. It is, as was shared on that postcard, "who we are."

It's been an amazing 800 years, but what is ahead for "who we are"? The future of the Secular Franciscan Order is in our hands.

³ To see the text and analysis of the *Memoriale Propositi*, go to www.ciofs.info. Type in "Reflections on Memoriale," then click on the photo that appears, and scroll down to "Text and Analysis"

⁴ Go to www.secularfranciscansusa.org. On the home page, click on Resources, then Formation, then Ongoing Formation, then "OFS Rule Formation Materials." You might also check with your Regional Formation Director. The National Formation Director workshop held in August 2021, focused on the Rule, and additional resources were shared at that time.