

Francis Of Assisi: Spiritual Father And Guide

by Thérèse A. Ream, S.F.O.

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Francis was born in the Umbrian valley in the city of Assisi, Italy. His parents were Pietro (Peter) and Pica Bernardone. The exact date of his birth is unknown; he was born either toward the close of 1181 or the beginning of 1182. Francis was born while his father was on a business trip to France. Pica had her son baptized with the name "John" in the church of San Rufino. When Pietro returned from his trip, he named his son Francesco (Francis). It is said that Francis celebrated the feast of his patron saint, Saint John the Baptist with special devotion.

Francis grew through the years and then joined his father in the family cloth merchant business. He enjoyed spending his money and having fun with his friends.

Francis would buy himself lavish clothing and treat his friends to wonderful feasts. It is said that he wasted his life until he reached his twenty fifth birthday. (See Englebert, Omer. (1965/1979). *St. Francis of Assisi: A biography*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books).

During Francis' late teens and early twenties, he was involved in many battles of the city to defend its freedom. In 1202, Francis was captured in a battle and taken prisoner to Perugia, a neighboring town and Assisi's rival. He was held captive for approximately one year. Upon his return to his home, he experienced a change. Francis found that the glamour of the armor was not enough, that something was missing.

One of the first conversion stories recorded concerning Francis took place when he was about twenty five years old. He was disgusted by leprosy and tried to stay away from people afflicted with this condition. Francis was riding one day and came upon a person with leprosy. His heart was moved with compassion and he dismounted and embraced the leper. He was filled with great joy and his bitterness turned into sweetness. Francis would later find out that conversion is not limited to a once only experience, but that everyone is called to daily conversion, the turning away from selfish desires and being open to doing God's will. It means that people's hearts are changed and they enter into a closer relationship with God.

In 1206 Francis entered the small chapel of San Damiano located outside the city walls of Assisi. He knelt before the Byzantine icon crucifix and began to pray. As he was deep in prayer, the figure of Christ on the crucifix spoke to him, "Francis, go repair my house, which is falling in ruins." Francis took the words of Jesus literally and went to his home and gathered bales of cloth. He took the cloth to Foligno and sold it. He also sold his horse, so that he had to travel the ten miles back to Assisi on foot.

Francis went to the priest at San Damiano and tried to give him the money from the sales. The priest was leery of the change in Francis and did not want to be party to his practical joke, so he did not accept the money. However, the priest did allow Francis to stay with him.

Pietro learned of his son's spending spree and was furious. He went to find Francis at San Damiano, but Francis went into hiding. He stayed in hiding for about a month and then decided that he must face his father. Francis went into town and when Pietro heard his son, he grabbed him, drug him into the house where he chained him and threw him into a dungeon. Pica tried to sway her son into behaving as a cloth merchant's son, but Francis remained inflexible. When Pietro was gone from the house, Pica went to Francis, removed the chains and freed her son.

When Pietro returned home and found that his son was gone, he went to the Bishop of Assisi and demanded that his son return the proceeds of the sales to him. The Bishop summoned Francis to come before him and Francis complied. Francis gave the purse of money to his father and also the clothes which he wore. Francis declared that since he now served the Church, he would not say, "My father, Pietro Bernardone," but "Our Father who art in heaven. . ." The Bishop covered the almost naked body of Francis with his own cloak. Being angry and unhappy, Pietro withdrew from his son. This seems to have been the end of Francis' relationship with his parents. Nothing is recorded to the contrary.

Francis took the next two or three years to rebuild and repair some of the churches around Assisi. One church in particular was extremely special to Francis, the Portiuncula, which means "The Little Portion." It was here on the 24th of February 1206 that Francis learned from the reading of the Gospel that he should "Go and preach the message" and to "live according to the Holy Gospel." This cradle of the Franciscan Family is the place where it first began!

The Little Poor Man (Il Poverello) began to understand that God wanted him to preach the Gospel. Francis set about his work joyfully and greeted everyone with a greeting Francis said was revealed to him by God: "The Lord give you peace!" This is a common greeting among Franciscans and one that reminds all of us that we have our roots in the Gospel as peacemakers and bearers of God's peace to everyone. Because of Francis' simple way and his love for his brothers and sisters, he started to have followers who wanted to live a life of prayer and penance. They saw how happy Francis was and how much he loved God and they wanted to be a part of this wonderful experience.

Francis and his followers were moved by such simple, but profound symbols of their and our Catholic faith. For example, when Francis prayed before the crucifix at San Damiano, he would meditate on Jesus and give him praise in these words:



**MOST HIGH AND GLORIOUS GOD,
BRING LIGHT TO THE DARKNESS
OF MY HEART!
GIVE ME RIGHT FAITH,
CERTAIN HOPE,
AND PERFECT CHARITY.
LORD, GIVE ME INSIGHT AND WISDOM
SO I MIGHT ALWAYS DISCERN
YOUR HOLY AND TRUE WILL. AMEN!**

Upon entering a church or passing any type of crucifix or cross or anything even remotely resembling a cross, Francis and his followers would recite the following words:



**WE ADORE YOU, O LORD JESUS,
HERE AND IN ALL THE CHURCHES
OF THE ENTIRE WORLD
AND WE BLESS YOU,
BECAUSE BY YOUR HOLY CROSS
YOU HAVE REDEEMED THE WORLD. AMEN!**

All Franciscans and those who have a devotion to Saint Francis should feel free to adopt these prayers and pray them frequently. Francis wrote wonderful prayers in many forms which should be reflected upon, studied, and prayed (see Armstrong, Regis J., & Brady, Ignatius C. (Trans.). (1996). *Praying with St. Francis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing).

Francis' deep devotion to the Scriptures and his love for Jesus in the crib and on the cross led him to be called as a deacon for the service of the Catholic Church. His life was one of service to his brothers and sisters and therefore he presents us with a wonderful example of being a "servant leader," a person called forth from the group to minister to others as Jesus ministered to his followers.

As a deacon, Francis taught by his example and used words when necessary. The statement that has been credited to him holds that we should "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." His belief was that all people must love God and be willing to change their hearts so that they can more faithfully do God's will. Francis spent a lot of time with his followers and told them stories about his own life experiences and how he grew into the understanding of knowing what God wanted of him. This could be equated with initial formation. Francis was always conscious of his responsibility to inform his followers of their obligations and responsibilities concerning the Order and was therefore a good steward of the gifts with which God had blessed him.

When at the beginning of formation, a person learns the basics about the Secular Franciscan Order and the wider Franciscan Family. The foundation of the Secular Franciscan Order is *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* based on the Gospel. The way of life proposed by *The Rule* is explained in more detail through the *General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order* and *National Statutes of the National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States of America*. All of these resources are tools that should be used to help you understand the way of life which the Secular Franciscan Order espouses. If you are a professed Secular Franciscan, they can help you deepen your living out of your vocation. If you are exploring the possibility of a vocation to the Franciscan life, they will help guide you and the sponsoring fraternity's discernment process concerning your pathway in life.

On-going formation was also a vital component of Francis' life. He challenged himself and his sisters and brothers to ask God for guidance and be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Each day was a new opportunity to grow in the knowledge of God and grow closer in our relationship with our heavenly Father. Secular Franciscans must take this commitment to on-going formation as seriously as Francis did in his time. Francis loved God so much that he spent every day trying to find new ways to become closer and closer to his Father in heaven following the example of Jesus. In time he was able to conform himself perfectly to the image of Jesus. This was why Francis was blessed to receive the Stigmata (the five wounds of Jesus) on or about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14th) in 1224, just two years before his death. Today, the Franciscan Order celebrates the feast of the Stigmata of our Holy Father Francis on September 17th. All people, especially Secular Franciscans, need to understand that as people called to daily conversion, we must open our hearts to the Word of God and be willing to study and pray so that Christ may be reflected more perfectly in our daily lives.

In this brief reflection a little background has been provided concerning Francesco Bernardone and the early part of his life. Ask yourself what it was or is that draws you to Francis of Assisi. Look into your heart and remember the stories and the feelings that are present to you when you reflect upon the Little Poor Man of Assisi. Share some of those stories and feelings with members of your fraternity or others who are journeying with you during your time of discernment. Find out how your life parallels that of Francis. Ask God to open your heart so that you will know the will of the Father. It is also important to read and study a biography of St. Francis of Assisi, to come to understand and appreciate Il Poverello in his own time and in his own culture.

My prayer for you is that you will come to know in your heart and in your mind the path which God wants you to take. May you be faithful to the call of God! And everyday may you experience the joy and peace that Francis of Assisi felt as he followed his heavenly Father on the journey home. Francis died on October 3rd, 1226; the Franciscan Family and the whole Church celebrate the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi on October 4th.

The Lord give you peace!



Saint Clare Of Assisi: A Mother And Model For All Franciscans

by Deacon David D. Ream, S.F.O.

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Saint Clare of Assisi begins her *Testament* with these words: “In the name of the Lord. Amen! Among the other gifts that we have received and do daily receive from our benefactor, *the Father of mercies* (2 Corinthians 1:3), and for which we must express the deepest thanks to the glorious Father of Christ, there is our vocation, for which, all the more by way of its being more perfect and greater, do we owe the greatest thanks to Him. The Son of God has been made for us *the Way* (cf. John 14:6), which our blessed father Francis, His true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example” (*Testament of St. Clare* 1-3, 5).

Perhaps you have been a Secular Franciscan for awhile, or perhaps you are inquiring whether or not the Lord is calling *you* to live our way of life, to follow the *Rule of Life* given to us by the Church “to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and center of his life with God and people” (Article #4, *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*). Since we have been called to follow Jesus in the footsteps of Saint Francis, you may be wondering why this reflection on Saint Clare has been written. I hope that a response to this question may become apparent for you as this brief reflection unfolds.

Available today are many well-done biographies of Saint Clare as well as critical editions of her writings and a number of books which explore essential aspects of her spirituality and spiritual legacy within the Franciscan tradition. Father Benet Fonck, O.F.M., begins the introduction to one such work with these words:

The whole worldwide Franciscan Family has concluded its celebration of the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Clare of Assisi, the co-founder of the Franciscan Movement and mother of the nuns of the Second Order of St. Francis (Poor Clares). Clare, who calls herself “a handmaid of Christ” and “a little plant of our holy Father Francis” (*Testament of St. Clare* 5, *Rule of St. Clare* 1:3), is considered the feminine incarnation of the evangelical life in the Franciscan tradition and the paradigmatic traveling companion and sister pilgrim on the journey toward holiness for the members of this worldwide spiritual family in the Church. . . . **As much as St. Francis** [emphasis added], Clare of Assisi is the model, mirror, and mentor of Franciscan living. (Fonck, 1996, p. ix)

Father Benet’s words serve to bring Saint Clare’s importance to us into proper focus. While it would be historically inaccurate to refer to Saint Clare as the co-founder of the Secular Franciscan Order *per se*, she is certainly the co-founder of the broader Franciscan Movement of which the S.F.O. is a valued and indispensable portion. And while Saint Clare is technically the mother only of the Poor Clares within the Franciscan Family, there are few if any Franciscans today who would take issue with us if we were to call upon Clare as our *spiritual* mother. Although none of her biographers make explicit mention of Tertiaries (as Secular Franciscans were known in those days) having visited Clare at San Damiano as some of the friars did, it seems entirely reasonable for us to assume that, although Clare lived an enclosed life with her sisters at San Damiano, at least some of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance (also an early name for

us) might have sought her spiritual advice and counsel as well as the powerful intercession of her prayers from time to time.

Historically and for a variety of reasons, the central role played by Saint Clare in the development and unfolding of the Franciscan story was not always recognized or celebrated. This sad fact of our history changed, however, with the advent in our own day of Franciscan scholarship which has unlocked for us the treasury of Clare's writings and spirituality. A major impetus for this development was the 1993-1994 observance throughout the Franciscan world of the eighth centenary of Saint Clare's birth. Many authors and scholars have especially made Clare and her ideals available to us; a representative listing is included at the end of this article. The introductions to any of these works will provide you with a good background of what is known about the life of Saint Clare and her important place within the Franciscan Family. I strongly recommend that you include some reading about the life, writings, and spirituality of Saint Clare of Assisi as a part of your Franciscan formation, both initial and ongoing.

Ask any Franciscan what most impresses her or him about Saint Clare and you are likely to receive as many different replies as people you ask! For the remainder of this brief reflection on Saint Clare, I would like to share with you my own response to this question, especially with an eye toward offering you my understanding of the way in which she can be a model and mentor of Franciscan Gospel living for us today.

The first outstanding quality of Clare was her capacity to be a great and generous lover of God and of God's people. All that we have learned about Clare testifies to this aspect of her personality. Even as a child (she was probably born in 1194) she evidenced a most passionate love for God which found an outward expression in her sincere compassion for suffering humanity. Her great devotion to our Lord present in the Holy Eucharist (Clare is often pictured holding a monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament) is further evidence of her love for the Lord. It was to Clare and her community of sisters, the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, that Saint Francis came for care while in the throes of his final illness in 1225-1226. Clare herself was ill for most of her adult life (she died on August 11, 1253). Even in her own infirmity she still sought every possible opportunity to care for her spiritual daughters at San Damiano. She provides us with a concretely realized example of our ability to live the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, that it is in dying to ourselves that we are able to live more fully for God and for others.

A second quality of Saint Clare's life particularly worthy of admiration and imitation was her absolute determination to remain faithful to her ideals as God had made these known to her. Her parents, Favorone di Offreduccio and the Lady Ortolana (her mother would one day join her at San Damiano), would have had her marry at an early age, but she refused all suitors. She knew that her heart belonged to the Lord alone. She defied her parents when she left the family home forever on Palm Sunday 1212 to meet Francis at the Portiuncula (the little chapel of St. Mary of the Angels which Francis had restored) where he cut her golden hair and received her into religious life.



Her strength of spirit and firm determination to remain true to God's will also revealed itself in her life-long struggle to secure from several Popes "the privilege of supreme poverty" for herself and her sisters. It seems that the Cardinal Protectors of the Franciscan Order (Hugolino, Raynaldus) and the Popes themselves (Gregory IX, Innocent IV) loved Clare and her community very much and wanted to make their lives easier for them. But Clare insisted - reverently but firmly - that she

must remain faithful to this Gospel ideal of radical dependence on God alone for sustenance, an ideal she shared with Francis and which she largely kept alive in the Franciscan Movement after his death. Clare's *Rule*, which contained her provision about poverty, was officially promulgated by Pope Innocent IV on August 9, 1253, just two days before she was embraced by Sister Death and entered heaven's glory!

A final quality of Saint Clare's life which has always impressed me has been her appreciation of the value of contemplation. In her *Third Letter to Agnes of Prague*, written sometime around the year 1238, Clare wrote: "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation" (as found in Armstrong, 1993, page 45). Most Secular Franciscans are not called to a life of pure contemplation cloistered away from the world and its concerns. Even though our vocation calls us to an active life of living in the world, serving as a leaven of Gospel values to help transform our world after the mind and heart of Christ, we also are to have a contemplative dimension to our spirituality. As our model and exemplar of Franciscan Gospel living, Saint Clare who remained as engaged as she was able in the world of her day can teach us much about being an "active contemplative" in today's world.

I hope that this brief introduction to the life of Saint Clare of Assisi will have whetted your appetite to learn more about this extraordinary woman and her continuing importance in the life of the Franciscan Family and - hopefully - in your own life. In their 1991 letter on Saint Clare (pages 3-4), the four Ministers General of the Franciscan First Order and Third Order Regular recalled the words Pope John Paul II spoke on the occasion of his March 1982 visit to the Proto-monastery of the Poor Clares in Assisi. Our Holy Father said: "... It is truly difficult to separate these two names, Francis and Clare; these two phenomena, Francis and Clare; these two legends, Francis and Clare. . . There is between them something very profound, which cannot be understood outside the criteria of Franciscan, Christian, Gospel spirituality. . . In the living tradition of the Church, of all Christianity, of humanity, there remains not only the legend. There remains the way in which Francis saw his sister; the way in which he became united to Christ. He saw himself in her image, a bride of Christ, a mystical bride with whom he shaped his holiness. He saw himself as a brother, a poor little man, in the image of the holiness of this authentic bride of Christ, in whom he found the reflection of that perfect bride of the Holy Spirit, Most Holy Mary. . . Here is the place where, for eight centuries, many pilgrims have come to contemplate the divine legend of Clare and Francis together, a legend which has influenced very greatly the life of the Church and the history of Christian spirituality." And so we cannot really come to know Saint Francis without also coming to know Saint Clare who lovingly referred to herself as "his little plant."



May an active and lively love of Saint Clare grow in your heart as you continue your journey in or toward the Franciscan way which is truly a "Franciscarian" way! May her blessing be upon you - and all of us - always:

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He show His face to you and be merciful to you. May He turn His countenance to you and give you peace. I, Clare, a handmaid of Christ, a little plant of our holy Father Francis, a sister and mother of you and the other

Poor Sisters, although unworthy, ask our Lord Jesus Christ through His mercy and through the intercession of His most holy Mother Mary, of Blessed Michael the Archangel and all the holy angels of God, and of all His men and women saints, that the heavenly Father give you and confirm for you this most holy blessing in heaven and on earth. On earth, may He increase [His] grace and virtues among His servants and handmaids of His Church Militant. In heaven, may He exalt and glorify you in His Church Triumphant among all His men and women saints. I bless you in my life and after my death as much as I can and more than I can with all the blessings with which the Father of mercies has and will have blessed His sons and daughters in heaven and on earth. Amen. Always be lovers of God and your souls and the souls of your Sisters, and always be eager to observe what you have promised the Lord. May the Lord be with you always and, wherever you are, may you be with Him always. Amen!" (as found in Armstrong and Brady, 1982, pages 233-234).



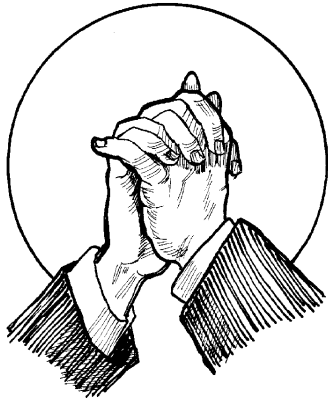
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Prayer: The Soul Of All We Secular Franciscans Are And Do

by Teresa V. Baker, S.F.O.

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As in any relationship, communication is vital. So it is in the life of prayer of every Secular Franciscan. First and foremost, the very life of a Secular Franciscan begins with a call, a vocation, from God. Thus one is invited to a deeper relationship. It is answered in various ways, but one that can never be overlooked, forgotten, or downplayed is that of prayer. Before all else, Secular Franciscans are called to be persons of prayer - persons who have their minds and hearts set on the things of God while working to accomplish them in this world. This is the basis of their vocation.

Prayer, communal, private, or liturgical, is the lifeline of Secular Franciscans. It provides them with the spiritual energy needed to carry them through the tasks of everyday life. Prayer is for them, as it is for all Christians, communication with God. It is both active participation and quiet contemplation of what God would have them do.

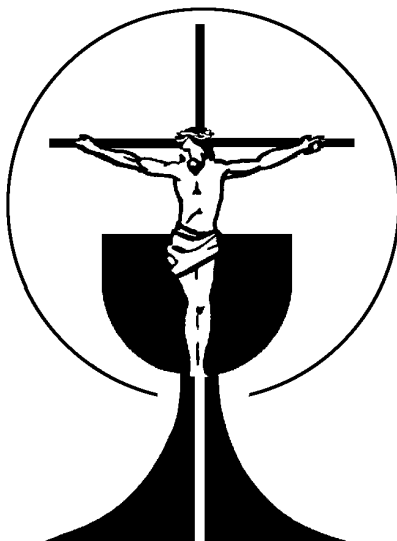
The *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* addresses prayer in several of its articles. "Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel" (article #4). One of the best ways by which we can incorporate the Gospel into our daily lives is through the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*. This is a traditional form of applying the Scripture to daily living. It has four basic principles, the "4 R's," if you will: **Read**, **Reflect**, **Respond**, and **Receive**. We place ourselves in the presence of God and enter into the written Word.

This first step requires a careful, open, and pensive reading of a Scripture passage. It could be the Gospel of the day or any other passage that is part of our daily prayer. (I mention Gospel because it is the basis of the life of a Secular Franciscan.) This reading may have to be reread two or three times in order to grasp the meaning of the passage, or just to give oneself the space to settle into it. The second step requires a reflective understanding of the text. What was the Scripture passage saying in its own day? How does the passage translate into the trials and joys we face today? Do we understand the message God is trying to convey? Study guides may be helpful here. Responding to this message for our own lives is the third step of *Lectio Divina*. How does the Gospel challenge us? What does God ask of us? How willing are we to respond to God's invitation to live in closer union with Him? If so, what is the cost, and how far am I freely willing to go? Finally, when we have completed this spiritual inventory, we sit back and gently receive the gracious gift God has in store for us, realizing that this "gift" may not always seem like a gift. It is in this step of *Lectio Divina* that we sit and listen to God. Prayer, like any form of communication, requires that we both speak and listen. Often we forget to do the latter. Either we don't have enough time or we don't want to hear.

“ . . . Let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do” (*SFO Rule*, article #8). Prayer, active communication with God, and contemplation, quietly entering into the silent Mystery of God, the “acting” and the “being” of prayer are the root of the life of Secular Franciscans.

Contemplation is being present to the silent Mystery of God and allowing that Mystery to touch us, to heal us, to challenge us, to draw us into a deeper and more intimate union with God. Contemplation is prayer without words, without thoughts, without agendas. Contemplation is silence, pure silence. It is prayer at a very deep level, a level that needs no words, a level that needs no feelings, a level where God can be God with us and we can be the true person God created us to be - without our masks, without our false pretenses. We exist in this space with God in total freedom.

We do not contemplate in and of ourselves; rather, contemplation is the action of God in our lives. We can prepare ourselves for this gift of God by opening ourselves to the Divine action and presence in our lives. Contemplation is an unconditional “yes” to the will of God. We rest in the Presence of God so that, if God chooses to rest in us, we are prepared. An excellent method for entering into a state of readiness is *Lectio Divina*, as described above. Contemplation is the “gift” we receive from God. Another way of preparing ourselves for this encounter with God is *Centering Prayer*. Books by Father Thomas Keating and others on this method of prayer are very helpful. Some forms of meditation also lead to the quiet needed for contemplation as Clare advised Agnes of Prague in reference to the Crucifix: “Gaze upon Him, consider him, contemplate him as you desire to imitate Him” (*The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague*, as found in Armstrong, 1993, p. 42). The language of God is silence and to enter into total dialogue with God we must be willing to enter into this silence. In this silence, God allows us to see ourselves with our faults, to become aware, to acknowledge, to repent, to be healed, and so to be set free. In the deep recesses of this silence with God, we know truth and we are set free - free to rejoice in the goodness, the mercy, the awesomeness of God.



Article #8 continues, “Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist.” Within the context of the Mass, we enter into the Paschal Mystery of Christ. We celebrate again the Supper He left behind, “Whenever you do this, do it in memory of Me.” Eucharist is the celebration of a life accepted freely in love, given freely in death, so that all of us may one day come to share in the glory of God. The Mass as the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist combines the richness of the stories of our Judeo-Christian heritage which culminate in the stories of the life and ministry of Jesus with our sharing of the most sacred meal.

As we meditate on the words and partake of the meal, the life of Our Lord becomes united with our own. We walk out into the world a new creation - no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. This is the person we bring to our home and to our workplace. This is the person who is attuned to the Paschal Mystery of Christ. With such a generous meal, we are fortified to go forth and be Eucharist for others - bread that is broken so that all may have life. The Paschal Mystery involves the death as well as the resurrection of Christ. Each time we enter the Paschal Mystery, we freely enter into Christ's dying so that we may also rise with Him. Eucharist involves both, and it is to both that we say "Amen" when we receive Our Lord in this generous sacrament of love.

Again, Article #8 continues: "Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ." Another form of public worship in the Church is the *Liturgy of the Hours*. As Eucharist is an entering into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, the *Liturgy of the Hours* is an entering into the ever-present, providential love of God. The purpose of the *Liturgy of the Hours* is to offer to God the entire cycle of our daily life. Its basis comes from Jesus and the disciples being in constant communion with God. Often in the Gospels, we read about Jesus going off to pray in the early morning, after performing miracles, late into the night. On other occasions, Jesus calls the apostles away with Him to rest awhile and to pray, after they had returned from their various missions.

Within the *Liturgy of the Hours* are seven different times in the day when religious, secular, clerical and lay persons set aside the ordinary tasks of life to turn their minds and hearts to God. The number of *Hours* ("hour" in this context refers to a prayer period rather than to a 60 minute time span) prayed differs for those persons called to different lifestyles. All seven hours are required for most members of the clergy as well as those men and women who live a monastic life.



For Secular Franciscans, *Morning* and *Evening Prayer* become the hinges of the whole day. *Morning Prayer* offers praise to God for the marvels of creation; *Evening Prayer* offers thanksgiving to God as the day draws to a close. Each setting consists of psalms, canticles, a reading from either the Old or New Testament, a responsory, a canticle from the Gospel of Luke, intercessions, the Our Father, and a concluding prayer. (At times, the psalms or the readings can be changed to suit the various needs of the person praying.

However, the official prayer is outlined by the Church.) The other five *Hours* consist of the *Office of Readings*, *Night Prayer*, and the Lesser Hours, *Mid-Morning*, *Mid-day*, and *Mid-Afternoon Prayer*. These can be celebrated by Secular Franciscans according to their needs and circumstances.

In addition to the formal *Liturgy of the Hours*, the *Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order* suggests these other forms of prayer:

- 1) A shortened form of the *Liturgy of the Hours*;
- 2) The *Little Office of the Blessed Virgin*;
- 3) The *Office of the Passion* (written by St. Francis of Assisi);
- 4) The *Office of the Twelve Our Fathers*;
- 5) Special prayer forms for the liturgical seasons (examples would be: *Stations of the Cross* during Lent, or the *Franciscan Crown Rosary* during May and October).

As members of the Catholic Church, Secular Franciscans are familiar with and participate in other prayer forms in addition to those mentioned above. Some of these forms are the traditional (i.e., five-decade Dominican) Rosary, exposition and benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament, litanies, chaplets, spiritual reading on the lives of the saints, or meditations on their writings. Here we have focused on those particular prayer forms that are specifically mentioned in the *SFO Rule* and the *Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order*. This is not to deny the importance of any of these other prayer forms. Those selected are important to Secular Franciscans because they were important to Saint Francis himself and can be traced back to the early *Rules* of the Order.

“Let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do . . . going from gospel to life and life to the gospel” (*SFO Rule*, articles #8 and #4). This, in essence, is the life of prayer of a Secular Franciscan, a life that is lived in open and honest communication with God, the Giver and Sustainer of Life, the Giver and Sustainer of this vocation that we profess as Secular Franciscans.

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Christ the Center: The Franciscan Image of Christ

by Edward L. Shirley, S.F.O.

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We all know about Jesus. We know what the Church teaches about Him: that He is truly God and truly human, united in one person. From all eternity, He is the Word of the Father, the Second Person the Holy Trinity, and that He entered time and became as human as you and me. He entered our history as one of us, as the Creed says, “for us men and for our salvation.” St. Athanasius tells us that “He became human so that humans could become divine,” and at Mass we pray that “we might come to share the divinity of Christ who humbled Himself to share our humanity.” This our faith; it is the faith of the Catholic Church. This was the faith of St. Francis, for whom Christ was the center and focus of life.

This idea of Christ humbling Himself is very important. Quite often, we in the Church have so emphasized the divinity of Christ, we sometimes forget his true humanity. Prior to Francis, Christ was pictured most often as the *Pantokrator*, the Gloriously Reigning King, seated on his heavenly throne. Even when He was pictured on the Cross, it was usually as Christ the Victor, the Risen Christ. For Francis, the divine Christ was known only through his humanity, which was, in turn, a sign of his humility (the words “human” and “humility” are from the same root). For Francis, and for Franciscan spirituality after him, the humanity of Jesus is of central importance. For Francis, Jesus was brother and friend, as well as Divine Savior. For Francis, the humanity of Jesus was a constant reminder that Christ chose to empty himself, to become poor and humble, to serve and not to be served. For Francis, the clearest examples of the humility, poverty and helplessness of Jesus were the Christ of the Crib and the Christ of the Cross. In what theologians were to later call the coincidence of opposites, for Francis, it was precisely in this humility that Christ most clearly manifested his Divine Glory.

True, Christ was the Eternal Word from which all Creation sprang. Yet, this same Word of the Father entered into Creation as one of us. This is the Mystery of the Incarnation, that the Creator actually became a creature. When Christ became human, he began his life as every other human does, as a baby. To think that the Eternal Son of God lay helpless in a feeding trough, without a decent place to lay his head, subject to the elements, to the dangers of Herod’s army, that he depended on Mary for his food, on Joseph for love - well, it is almost more than the human mind can comprehend or the human heart can bear.

The first Nativity or crèche scene was set up by St. Francis himself in order to celebrate in a special way his devotion to the Mystery of the Incarnation. In 1223, in the town of Greccio, Francis brought together a manger, hay, and living animals, and Christmas Mass was celebrated. When we set up our Nativity scenes, are we aware that this practice began with St. Francis? And have we stopped to reflect on the deep mystical theology which lay behind Francis' devotion to the infant Jesus?



Francis was also devoted to the crucified Christ. This is the Christ who “humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). Once again, the Eternal Word of God, the Creator of the Universe, made himself lower than the lowest. He allowed himself to be turned over to the religious and political leaders of his day, to be mocked, whipped within an inch of his life, nailed to a piece of wood and allowed to die a slow and painful death. When the Letter to the Philippians says “*even* death on a cross,” it is expressing something which we in the modern world can scarcely comprehend. This is not a mere execution. It is the most excruciatingly painful way to die that the Romans could devise. It is for this reason that it was reserved for their worst enemies. As someone hung on a cross, his arms were pulled from their sockets, the bodily fluids began to drain into the lungs, and he would literally drown. This usually took hours to happen. Is it any wonder that Francis saw

Christ on the Cross as the poor Christ, the powerless Christ? And it was this desire to imitate the crucified Christ that prepared the way for Francis' reception of the stigmata, a physical manifestation in his own body of the bloody wounds of Christ crucified.

These two central events in the life of Christ, summarized in the Joyful and Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary, stand as a reminder that Francis' Jesus was the Christ who, though “being in the form of God,” chose to empty Himself, to become human, and, as human, continue to empty Himself “even unto death, death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5-11). This is a Jesus who has come to our level, who shares in our own misfortunes and the misfortunes of the poorest of the poor. This is a Jesus who is friend and brother.

Yet, for Francis, devotion to Jesus was not enough; he called for imitation of Christ, who alone is the model for human life. Jesus Christ is the Rule of Life, and even our own Secular Franciscan *Rule* today calls us to go “from gospel to life and life to the gospel” (article #4). This is not a mere external imitation of Jesus; rather, it is an imitation which comes from the inside out. Thus, Christians must be transformed by grace into the likeness of Christ: we must become like the infant Jesus and the crucified Jesus, a transformation which comes through prayer and meditation on the life and virtues of Jesus.

St. Bonaventure, one of the greatest Franciscan theologians, portrays Jesus as the Tree of Life, whose leaves are medicine to prevent and cure every illness, whose flowers, beauty and fragrance attract the human heart, and whose fruits satisfy human longing. Bonaventure says that the lower branches of this tree contain the fruits of Christ's birth and life, the middle branches the fruits of his passion and death, and the upper branches, the fruits of his resurrection and glorification. Each of the fruits is a particular virtue: humility, piety, confidence, patience, and so forth. Through eating these fruits (meditation on these virtues), they become part of ourselves, and we are transformed into the likeness of Christ, producing these virtues in our own lives as (Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*). Precisely because Jesus really shared our human nature, He can transmit his own qualities to us, and we can come to share in his divinity. He can share our human nature because we were created according to his image and likeness, who Himself is the Image and Word of the Eternal Father. Christ, for Francis, is the center of our innermost being, and in Him we live and move and have our being.

Francis also discovered the likeness of Christ in Creation all about him. His biographies tell us of how Francis, on one occasion, rescued some lambs being led to the slaughter because they reminded him of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Again, on another occasion, Francis found a worm in the middle of the road, and remembering how the psalms, speaking prophetically of Christ, declared, "I am a worm, not a man," he moved the worm to safety on the side of the road.



However, Francis' vision of Christ in Creation was not limited to such biblical symbolism. For Francis, all of Creation reflected patterns found in Christ himself; every creature was a reflection of the Image of God, an echo of the Eternal Word. Christ, as the mediator between God and the world, is the center of each creature. This vision is nowhere so clear as in his *Canticle of the Creatures*. In this *Canticle*, Francis begins by praising God, who transcends all Creation. Then, beginning with the Sun, whom he calls "brother," Francis begins to praise God for each creature. The word he used in Italian, *per*, has an interesting complex of meanings. It can mean *for*, *through*, *in*, and *with*. Here we have a wonderful example of St. Francis' sacramental world vision: each creature is a theophany, a manifestation of God breaking through into our world. Thus we praise God for each creature as a gift, through each creature as a mediator, in each creature as its center, and with each creature as brother or sister. As each creature reflects something of the Divine Image of Christ, each creature is a "miniature Christ" to us.

St. Bonaventure tells us that Christ, from all Eternity, is the Word and Image of the Father; whatever the Father is, the Son expresses completely. And from all Eternity, the Son has emptied Himself and returned to his Source, the Father. Thus, the Son is at the very center of Trinitarian life. In Him exist all patterns for all of Creation. Whatever can exist is somehow contained in the fullness of the Word, who, Himself, contains the fullness of the Godhead. Yet, this same Christ, Word and Image of the Father, emptied Himself, and through Him all Creation came to be. He is the center of

the relationship between God and the world. For Franciscans, the Incarnation is the completion of Creation, and the very reason God created in the first place, to share Himself fully with his creatures.

Finally, no treatment of Franciscan devotion to Christ would be complete without touching upon the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. St. Francis, like all



Catholics, accepted Church teaching that the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist are the Body and Blood of Christ. Though our faith in the Real Presence is the same, many elements of Eucharistic practice are different in our day than they were in the time of Francis. One significant difference is that in the Middle Ages, the Church was just beginning to develop the practice of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. We have 800 years of development of Eucharistic adoration between Francis' time and our time. The Christ in the Eucharist is the same Christ who is present in Creation and within us. Indeed, Christ can be

present in the Eucharist precisely because the bread and wine which are offered to God are already manifestations of God's Eternal Word, the "gifts of the earth and work of human hands." And, as St. Augustine reminded people as they came forward for Communion, "Receive what you are." The Blessed Sacrament preserved in the tabernacle or displayed in a monstrance can serve as a powerful focal point for our Christ-centered prayer. Many have been led into the heights of contemplation through prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. What a wonderful way to confess our faith that Christ is truly Present!

But, of course, our faith in the Presence of Christ in the tabernacle would be empty if we did not first of all confess with our hearts and receive in our bodies the Real Presence of Christ at the Eucharistic liturgy itself. In Francis' day, people would often receive the Eucharist only once a year. This is why the first article of the *Rule* of the "Third Order" required members to receive Communion three times a year. What a gift we have in our day when the Church, going back to ancient practice, urges us to receive the Eucharist frequently. Indeed, most of us could receive the Eucharist daily if we so chose. What a tremendous gift, to receive in our bodies Christ, who transforms us into his likeness.

Thus, we can see that for Francis, Christ is truly the center: the center of the Trinity, the Image and Word of the Father; the center of each creature, manifesting Himself on all levels of Creation; and the center of the human soul, transforming us, who are created in his image, into the likeness of Himself, drawing us into the very life of the Trinity. St. Bonaventure, in *The Mind's Journey into God*, reflecting on Francis' vision of the six-winged seraph, sees a pattern for our spiritual lives: our mystical journey begins with finding God in all creatures and all creatures in God, moving into finding God at the center of the soul, and into contemplation of God Himself, and at the center of each of these stages is the Crucified Christ Himself, through whom we then pass into the very life of the Triune Godhead.

Mary: Mother And Model
by Edward L. Shirley, S.F.O.

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Francis, like all Medieval Christians, had a special devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Francis' devotion to her was, according to his earliest biographer, Thomas of Celano, "inexpressible," for "it was she who made the Lord of majesty our brother" (2 *Celano*, 198). In other words, the humanity of Jesus, which was so central to Francis' experience came through Mary. So great was his love for her that he composed a poetic litany, "The Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary" in her honor. Like all Christians at the time, Francis acknowledged Mary as Mother of God, Mother of Christians and model for the Christian life. In addition, almost as one ahead of his time, he anticipates the theology of the Second Vatican Council and speaks of Mary as "the Church." These are the three powerful images of Mary one finds in Scripture.

What does it mean to speak of Mary as Mother of Christ and of Christians? In the Gospel of John, Mary appears only twice (at the wedding at Cana and at the foot of the Cross), and is never identified by name; yet it is here that we get the clearest picture of Mary as Mother. Though based on historical events, the Gospel of John is a very symbolic Gospel. For example, the Gospel opens with the words "in the beginning," which calls to mind the Creation story of Genesis. John is drawing a parallel between the Creation story of Genesis and the New Creation brought about by Jesus. Jesus can only create anew because he is the Word made Flesh: the same Word through which the Old Creation came to be is now a human being, bringing about the New Creation. Hence, John will continually contrast the old with the new. The first Creation took seven days, so, too, the second Creation. After the parallel "In the beginning," John counts off seven days (1:19, 1:29, 1:35, 1:43, and 2:1) until Jesus produces his first sign of the New Creation, the transformation of water into wine. It is in the first verse of this scene that Mary is introduced.

Mary is not mentioned by name; she is simply called "Jesus' mother." Jesus has done nothing extraordinary to this point, yet Mary has glimmers of his possibilities and presents him with her simple request: "They have no wine." Jesus' response to her has puzzled Christians for centuries: "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour is not yet here." Some have wondered why Jesus spoke so "harshly" to her. However, Jesus also calls her "Woman" when he is dying on the Cross, hardly a time he would speak harshly. It would seem, therefore, that this is not a "put down." Once we understand the structure of the Gospel of John, the matter becomes clear. We are at the beginning of a New Creation. In Genesis (the Old Creation), who was called "woman?" Eve, the mother of all the living. John here presents the Woman of the New Creation as present

at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It is no wonder that the early Church Fathers, drawing upon the Pauline theme of Jesus as the New Adam, also drew upon the Johannine Gospel here and presented Mary as the New Eve.

When Jesus transforms the water into wine (the Eucharistic imagery of the New Creation), and the headwaiter exclaims that the groom has saved the best wine for last, this is the proclamation that the New Creation will far surpass the first. This is the first work, the first "sign" of the New Creation. Through Eve the Old Adam sinned and began the destruction of the Old Creation; now through the instigation of the New Eve, the New Adam begins the transforming work of the New Creation.

The next scene in which Mary appears is at the foot of the Cross. His hour has finally arrived and she is present. Mary is with the "beloved disciple," who in John's Gospel is the symbol for the "perfect disciple." He represents us. It is this disciple who lays his head on Jesus' breast at the last Supper (indicative of intimacy with Jesus) and who is the first apostle to arrive at the Empty Tomb on Easter Sunday (indicating coming to faith in the Risen Lord). It is this "ideal disciple" who is accompanied by Mary to the Crucifixion.

"Woman," Jesus says, "behold your son." Then the clincher: "Son, behold your mother." And from that moment on, the beloved disciple, the ideal disciple, took Mary as his own mother. Just as the Woman of Genesis, the first Eve, was the mother of all humanity, the Woman of John's Gospel, the New Eve, is mother to all Christians, given to us by Jesus himself. How are we to understand Mary's continuing maternal role? If Mary is the Mother of Jesus on earth, and we are members of that body, then Mary, as Mother of Christ, is mother also of Christians and of the Church.

In the Gospel of Luke, and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, we find the clearest picture of Mary as the model Christian disciple and as the personification of the People of God, both Israel and the Church. Three sections of Luke's writings portray Mary as the prototype of the Christian disciple and the personification of the People of God: the infancy narratives, the section where Jesus' mother and brothers come to see him (Luke 8: 19-21), and in the Upper Room (Acts 1:14), awaiting Pentecost.



In the Infancy narratives, we have the scenes of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation, and the Finding of Jesus in the Temple. These contain the richest Mariological content of the Gospel. In the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her that she is to become the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. The angel's first word of greeting, "Hail," (or "Rejoice") is already packed with meaning. In the Greek Old Testament, the verb form of this word (to hail) is used about 20 times, each time designating a special saving act on God's part. The use here signals the reader (already familiar with the Old Testament) that God is about to do something terrific. The actual word "hail" is used in

the Old Testament four times, three of which are addressed to the “Daughter of Zion,” the female personification of God’s Chosen People. The meaning is clear: Mary is the Daughter of Zion. She is God’s People Israel.

The angel then tells her she is to bear the Messiah, who will inherit the throne of his father David. When Mary questions him, not from lack of faith, but because she is a virgin, Gabriel tells her that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and so the child will be called the Son of God. The confession of faith that Jesus is son of David according to the flesh and Son of God according to the Spirit is one of the earliest Christian creeds (Romans 1:3). By placing this confession of faith on the angel’s lips, and through Mary’s response, “Be it done to me according to your word,” Mary becomes the first (and thus “prototypical,” or model) Christian disciple. She has heard the Word of God, and has received (and kept) it. The overshadowing by the Holy Spirit implies that Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant, the Holy of Holies, which the Most High overshadows as in the cloud at Mount Sinai and in which he dwells. She is the Temple.

Yet response is never once and for all; it must be continual. In each succeeding section of the Infancy narratives, Mary is presented again and again with testimony that God is doing something extraordinary: Elizabeth proclaims, “Blessed is the fruit of your womb;” the shepherds come to do homage; Simeon prophesies that the child will be the “rise and fall of many in Israel;” and when Mary finds Jesus in the Temple, Jesus responds that he must be about his Father’s business. And though she may not fully understand, Mary continually receives the word, and “keeps these things in her heart.” To keep in the heart means to “puzzle over,” to meditate upon. Mary does not simply hear and forget; she continually reflects on these things in her heart, allowing them to sink to the center of her being.



The final scene in which Luke gives us a picture of Mary is that of her present in the Upper Room, praying with the apostles and the rest of the disciples, awaiting the descent of the Holy Spirit. Here we have a very nice picture of the model Christian disciple praying with the whole Church; indeed, she is already the spouse of the Holy Spirit, something which the whole Church is about to share. Perhaps this is why after the Holy Spirit comes, Luke does not mention Mary again; her role becomes the role of the Church.

Mary, then, is at the hinge of history; indeed, with Jesus, she is the hinge of history. Not only in her own person is she a true disciple, but Luke suggests that she is the symbol and model for all true believers, both of the Old and the New Covenants. Indeed, she symbolizes and personifies the entire People of God, Israel and the Church. When we imitate her, not superficially, but in the depths of our being, when we receive the word of God and keep it in our hearts, putting it into action, we become true disciples.

Francis, though not a theologian, seems to embrace this rich theology. Mary is the mother of Jesus and the mother of Christians. In a very special way, she is mother of the Franciscan family. She is the model for Christians, and thus for Franciscans, who are called to be “mother and brother and sister” to Jesus. And she is, in Francis’ own words, “the virgin made church.”

Any discussion of devotion to Mary in a Franciscan context would be incomplete without mentioning two very important Franciscan contributions to Marian devotion and theology. The first is the *Franciscan Crown*. While most Catholics are familiar with the fifteen-decade rosary, often associated with the Dominicans, many are not so familiar with the *Franciscan Crown Rosary*. The story goes that in 1422, a young man who used to adorn a statue of Mary with a wreath of flowers every day was upset that he was unable to do so now that he had entered the friary. The story says that Mary appeared to him and asked him to give her a crown of flowers in the form of reciting seven decades of Hail Marys in honor of her seven joys: the Annunciation, the visit to Elizabeth, the Nativity, the adoration of the Magi, finding Jesus in the Temple, experiencing the Risen Jesus on Easter, and her Assumption. Soon this devotion spread through the Franciscan family. Later a custom developed of following the seven decades with two Hail Marys in honor of the seventy-two years that legend has it Mary lived on earth, and adding one Our Father and Hail Mary for the intention of the pope.

The second Franciscan contribution is to Marian doctrine. For centuries, the question of whether Mary was conceived without Original Sin was bantered about by theologians. The leading theologians of the Church, including Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, had resisted this doctrine, fearing that it would mean that Mary had no need of Christ, and thus Christ would not be savior of *everyone*. It was a Franciscan theologian, John Duns Scotus, who offered this solution: Mary was saved from Original Sin *in anticipation* of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. In other words, Mary did need Christ, though it was applied to her before the actual fact of the Death and Resurrection. Duns Scotus paved the way for the Church to proclaim the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (promulgated by a Secular Franciscan, Blessed Pope Pius IX, in 1850) in such a way that it did not detract from the salvific work of Christ.



As should be clear, there is a deep connection of the Franciscan Family to Mary. For the most part, Franciscans simply share in the general devotion to and belief about Mary that all Catholics hold. In a special way, Mary is seen as the protectress of the Family (“She was embraced by Francis with indescribable love and declared the protectress and advocate of his family” [*The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, article #9]), and a model for Franciscan life. And Franciscans have added to the wealth of Mariological doctrine and devotion through the *Franciscan Crown Rosary* and the theology of Duns Scotus. Now let us follow the instructions of the Blessed Mother at Cana and “do what he [her Son, Jesus] tells you.”

Make Me An Instrument Of Your Peace

by Sarah and Dan Mulholland, S.F.O.

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OUR GOSPEL FOUNDATION

In order to understand what Peace and Justice means for Secular Franciscans, we must start with Christ - as Francis did. In the Gospel of Matthew (22: 34-40), Jesus gives us the Great Commandment:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they assembled in a body; and one of them, a lawyer, in an attempt to trip him up, asked him, "Teacher, which commandment of the law is the greatest?" Jesus said to him: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it; You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well."

We firmly believe that this commandment - to love God and one another as Christ loves us - is the basis from which our call to be peacemakers comes. As the Catholic Bishops of the United States stated in their 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, "Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peace makers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus" (#333).



We are called to love one another as Christ loves us. We are called to be in harmony with one another. Article #5 of the *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* instructs us to "seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ" in all spheres of life. Article #13 of the same *Rule* challenges Secular Franciscans to "accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ."

So we see that we all image Christ. We are all in relationship with God and with one another. This realization brings responsibility. St. Francis called all creatures brothers and sisters because he recognized their unity of origin. He saw God in all persons and in all creation. We encounter God in love of our neighbor and we have St. Francis to show us the way.

St. Francis announced peace because he truly had peace in his heart. Through conversion, turning to the Lord, he had peace in his heart. And because he was filled with peace through conversion and love, St. Francis became a peacemaker. His inner peace flowed out in witness and service. As his followers, Secular Franciscans also are called to be peacemakers.

Because he saw God in all people, Francis became a reconciler. He maintained respect for all his brothers and sisters, not making them "enemies" but trying to move them to nonviolent reconciliation through dialogue. Like St. Francis, Secular Franciscans are called to be reconcilers. As followers of Christ, with St. Francis as guide, Secular Franciscans are called to live the gospel, to seek inner conversion and peace, to bring the gospel message, as brothers and sisters with all people, as reconcilers of injustice, and in harmony with all of God's creation.

SECULAR FRANCISCANS AND PEACE AND JUSTICE – AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



St. Francis himself established the Third Order for lay people and secular clergy who desired to follow Jesus in a special way, but were obliged to remain "in the world." The "Tertiaries" were to exercise their apostolates in the world as a kind of leaven, as witness to Christ. In nearly 800 years there have been only four *Rules of Life* approved by various Popes for the Secular Franciscan Order. It is interesting to see how the early *Rules* specifically address issues of Peace and Justice, and how they differ from the *Rule* by which Secular Franciscans live today.

Rule of 1221

All Candidates had to pay all debts before entering fraternity. Almsgiving and works of mercy were stressed. Fraternity members had to be reconciled with their neighbors and live in harmony with the other members. They could not sue in civil court, but had to bring disagreements to the bishop or fraternity minister to be settled. They were forbidden to take oaths of fealty and could not bear weapons. They were exempt from military service. In terms of lifestyle, the tertiaries were to wear simple clothing and to engage in fasting and prayer.

Rule of 1289

Men could now bear arms in defense of church, faith, their country, or with their minister's permission. They could take solemn oaths "to maintain peace", to defend the faith, or when making a contract for sale or purchase. How attitudes had changed in only 68 years!

Rule of 1883

The *Rule of Life* became streamlined and more accessible. Strict lifestyle requirements were lessened, so more people could and would join. Pope Leo XIII wanted the Order to be a means of social reform and as a result, until 1912 in Europe, members of the Franciscan Third Order Secular were very active in social, economic and political projects.

In 1912, Pope Pius X in a letter *Tertium Franciscanum* stressed the Third Order as a religious order. Its primary purpose was the personal sanctification of its members. The focus was on personal spiritual growth and inner peace and so peace and justice activities were de-emphasized. There were other vehicles for social action and ministry (for example, the Catholic Action movement in the United States in the 1930s). Social action was not a role of the Secular Franciscans at this time. This *Rule* of 1883 was in place up until the Second Vatican Council and is the *Rule* under which many currently active Secular Franciscans were professed. One sometimes hears it referred to as "the old *Rule*."

Rule of 1978

Then came Vatican II, with its emphasis on the changing role of the laity. All Orders and religious communities were called to return to their roots, to rediscover the spirit of their founders. For Secular Franciscans this meant the roots of Franciscan values and a Franciscan charism. The *SFO Rule of 1978* (sometimes called the Pauline Rule in honor of Pope Paul VI who promulgated it) truly reflects the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is both inspirational and challenging. The model of sanctity for Secular Franciscans changed. Prayer is still primary, but now Secular Franciscans must learn to balance action and contemplation, to move from "gospel to life and life to the gospel" (article #4). We Secular Franciscans of today must continue to look to St. Francis to show us the way, as he has since 1221.

Justice

The first place the *SFO Rule* addresses issues of peace and justice is in article #15, which states: "Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith."

As Secular Franciscans we have a slightly different charge than our brothers and sisters of the First and Second Orders and the Third Order Regular. We are in the world. We are given a special vocation - to be leaven, to bring religious values to bear in our daily tasks, through the witness of our lives, and also through our actions.

Father Roland Faley, TOR, who was Minister General of the Third Order Regular at the time of the promulgation of the *Rule of 1978*, wrote: "It is this transformation of society, through personal and collective initiatives, that is central to the lay Franciscan call.

One cannot help but note the balance present in the new Rule in stressing the importance of both witness and prophesy - in Article #15 testimony ... AND ... courageous initiatives..."



We are called by our *Rule* to show justice ourselves, and to motivate justice in others, including in the public forum of politics, business, economics, etc. Tom Grady, a Franciscan brother, has written that "Justice is another way of living fraternal relationships." Justice sees all creation as one. Franciscans must

work for justice because we live in relationship and value all life.

When St. Francis and the early brothers left Assisi to live among and minister to lepers, they were performing corporal works of mercy. But they were doing much more. They also made a social statement because of their justice perspective. They saw lepers as brothers and sisters. The townspeople of Assisi saw lepers as outcasts, banished from their town. But the Franciscans saw the lepers as brothers and sisters. Their decision to minister to the lepers was indeed a work of mercy, but it was also a rejection of injustice and an affirmation of equal, fraternal relationships.

Secular Franciscans are charged with mirroring this approach. We must see our acts of charity stretched to become actions on behalf of justice. This means we must question the structures that create the injustice. We all must work to empower those who are victimized, oppressed or dehumanized by injustice because we live in fraternal relationship with God and one another.

For example, many of us work in soup kitchens. We need to do this; we need to feed the hungry. But we also need to figure out ways to help the hungry move out of their oppression. We need to work to change whatever it is in our society that is causing our brothers and sisters to be so much in need.

Peace

The second specific place in the *Rule* that addresses peace and justice is Article #19 which states: "Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon. Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others."

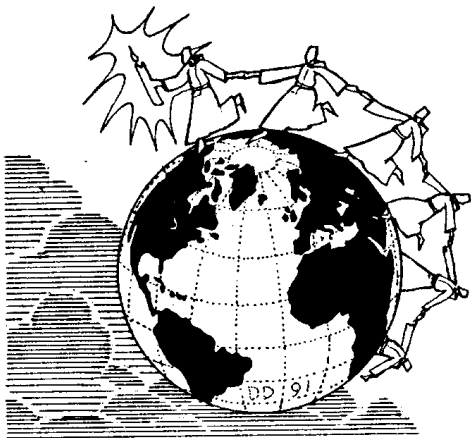
There are many other approaches that could have been taken to resolve the dilemma the townspeople of Gubbio felt when the wolf was attacking their town and eating their chickens. If this were happening in our town today, someone would probably suggest that we shoot the wolf, or that he be locked up, or shipped off to the far north where there are other wolves, in the hope that he would never come back. But it was Francis who was called to deal with the situation in Gubbio. Because he recognized the dignity of the wolf as one of God's creatures and remembered Jesus' words "love one another," Francis saw the need for dialogue, for nonviolence. Francis believed in the transforming power of love and pardon.

And it worked. Francis brought reconciliation between the wolf and the townspeople of Gubbio. There are many "wolves of Gubbio" in our world today, many polarized situations - in our personal lives and in our collective lives. It's so easy to create "us vs. them" situations.

If we listen to St. Francis, and if we listen to the *SFO Rule*, we know that we cannot walk away from these situations. We must address them. Secular Franciscans must be reconcilers, (not winners, because when you are a winner, someone else is a loser). Of course it's valid to have disagreements and for people to be on the wrong track. Injustice exists. Evil exists. Sin exists. But for Franciscans, even when confronting sin and evil, the goal must be transformation, through bringing and witnessing God's love.

We must not dismiss the "other", or only see them as "the enemy", because whoever they are, they too are children of God. They are our brothers, our sisters, our neighbors - and the Gospel tells us to love them. When through love we are reconcilers, everyone wins. St. Francis always remained mindful of the dignity of "the other", even in confrontation. He didn't see an enemy, only another creature of God who hadn't been converted yet. Franciscan peacemaking flows from this concept.

WHAT CAN WE DO?



Secular Franciscans are truly gifted with the example of St. Francis and with the *SFO Rule*. They both tell us strongly that peacemaking begins with prayer, both personal and collective. Fasting is important action. It helps us identify with the poor and hungry. And it is also by emptying ourselves that we give God a chance to work in us. Reading the Gospels will help us gain peace in our hearts and also learn the ways of peace.

Specifically as Secular Franciscans, our position in the world gives us opportunities to bring peace and act with justice. Our *Rule* directs us to do so, in every aspect of our lives, in every situation in which we find ourselves.

No one can say what each Secular Franciscan should do to accomplish the work of peace and justice. We are all different, with different gifts and different things that draw us. Each of us must discern what it means to follow Christ in the manner of Francis. Each of us must decide what working for peace and justice means in our own lives. We are not all called to the same action, but we are all called to something. All Franciscans must reflect on injustice. All Franciscans must announce peace. And all Secular Franciscans must bring the Gospel to life and life to the Gospel.

In Praise Of All Creation *by Charles Spencer, S.F.O.*

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Article #18 of the *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* states: "Moreover they should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which 'bear the imprint of the Most High,' and they should strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship." The Franciscan concept of universal kinship among creatures, animate and inanimate, is one characteristic of our *Rule* which makes the Franciscan charism different from other Orders in the Church. In fact, so unique is this attribute, the Secular Franciscan Order is the only Order within the Catholic Church that has an article in its *Rule of Life* which addresses the integrity of creation.

In his *Canticle of the Creatures*, Francis of Assisi praises God for all of God's creatures, the sun, moon, and stars, all weather, fire, air, water and earth, each of whom he calls brother or sister. For Francis, every creature, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, were brothers and sisters, brought into being by the same Father. In this *Canticle*, Francis praises God "for, because of, in, with and through" all creatures. In other words, for Francis, each creature is a sign and reminder of God's presence. St. Bonaventure speaks of each creature reflecting the Eternal Word of God and bearing the "footprints" of the Trinity.

The Canticle of the Creatures (1225)



Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are *the praises, the glory, and the honor*, and all *blessing*,
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.

Praised be You, my *Lord*, with all *Your creatures*,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister *Moon* and *the stars*,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

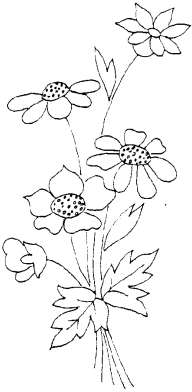
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister *Water*,
who is very useful and humble and precious and
chaste.



Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother *Fire*,
through whom *You light the night*,
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

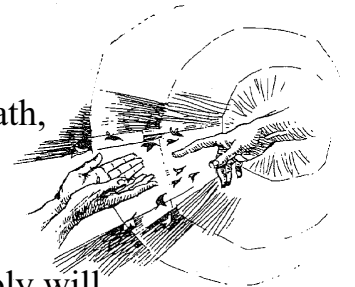
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother *Earth*,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various *fruit* with colored flowers and *herbs*.



Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.



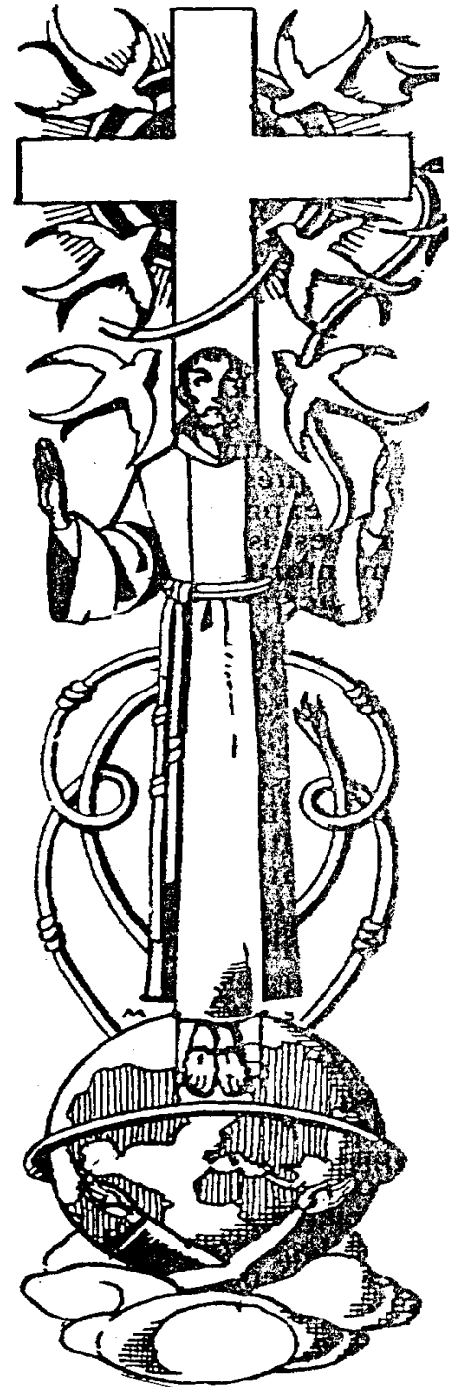
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for *the second death* shall do them no harm.

Praise and *bless* my Lord and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.

(As found in Armstrong, Regis J.; Hellmann, J. A. Wayne; & Short, William, J. (Eds.). (1999).
Francis of Assisi: Early Documents I: The Saint, pages 113-114. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press.)

Franciscans recognize that all creation flows from God, thus, giving all expressions of life a divine nature. Through this understanding we are called to revere and respect all life, and to recognize all creatures as brothers and sisters as St. Francis did. The power and love of God as expressed through creation was so expressive to St. Francis that in humility he identified himself even with the lowly worm.

Upon publicly renouncing his inheritance, then walking out through the gates of Assisi, Francis walked into the hands of God. In living beneath the open sky in poverty, he committed himself to full cooperation and dependence upon the divine order and expression of creation. It was through this pure and constant subjection to God in creation that he came to witness the divine presence permeating all created forms and space between them. Recognizing this presence as central to Franciscan spirituality, we follow in Francis' footsteps by strengthening our perceptions which enable us to interpret the language of creation, thus setting us free and making us rich as God is rich. Through these observations and the broadening of our awareness, the concept of coincidence is replaced with faith in providence: all things fall within God's providential wisdom and love. God is always expressing Himself to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. In addition to liturgy, sacraments, and prayer life, our relationship with God becomes both strengthened and more intimate through our association with the rest of creation. Thus, we come to understand the value of creation in nourishing our own spiritual needs and development. Also, through our active participation in bearing witness to His glory, we are made more responsive to bear witness to the injustices which undermine the integrity of His creation.



In respect to the infinite wisdom and purpose of God, we find it most appropriate not to place any form of life, apart from human life, above another, and simply to accept that what is born out of creation is born out of God. This stance frees us from our own prejudices of "good" and "not good" when looking at God's creation. Although it is easy to favor the insect over the tree, and the sunshine over a storm cloud, it is to more to our advantage to recognize our own poverty, realizing we have no way of knowing the full intent and purpose of God expressed through creation. In this detachment we are made free.

As society has become less dependent upon creation as an earth-based economy, and more dependent upon a market economy, we have become largely separated from creation by disassociation. As followers of St. Francis and especially as Secular Franciscans, "we are called to be *in* the world, though not *of* the world," rejecting wastefulness and materialism. We are called to be thankful for all that finds its way into our hands, and cognizant of the potential harm it may cause when we carelessly discard it.



As Franciscans, we are not only called to witness the glory of God in creation, we are also called to "strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship" (*SFO Rule*, article #18). This means that we must come to recognize our tendency to exploit creation in ways that we do not understand. Thus we are called in article #11 of the *Rule* to "seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying [our] own material needs," and to "purify [our] hearts from every tendency and yearning for possession and power." In this we find purpose and identity by walking gently upon the earth as St. Francis did. We are also called as peacemakers to stand up and bear witness to forms of exploitation and desecration, to "individually and collectively

be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of [our] human lives and [our] courageous initiatives." In this, we are to "make definite choices in harmony with [our] faith," while "bearing witness" through our decision-making in the home, marketplace, and community (*SFO Rule*, article #15).

Franciscan Spirituality And Work

by Pauline Cahalan, S.F.O.

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Article #16 of *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* tells us we need to “esteem work both as a gift and as a sharing in the creation, redemption, and service of the human community.” In the *Rule* of 1223 written for the First Order friars, Saint Francis describes work as a grace and warns the brothers against idleness.

As you read this, you can begin to get the idea that to follow this Article one has to be countercultural in much of U.S. society. Many people see work as something one does to have money to keep food on the table, a roof overhead, and to do other things. People may not see their work as a grace or contribution they are making, as stewards of God’s world, to its continual functioning. To “esteem work as a gift” is a real stretch for many folks. The last thought on their mind would be, “Thank God it’s Monday so I can return to sharing, redeeming, and serving the human community by the use of my talents in whatever job God has provided me at this time.”

Francis saw work as a grace and gift from God. We must be receptive to the grace and nurture the gift through prayer and openness to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Franciscan spirituality is based in Scripture. St. Francis’ *Rule* was promulgated to help all Franciscans, Secular and Religious, live the Gospel. Just as Saint Paul admonished the Christians of Thessalonica (see 2 Thessalonians 3:8-10) that those who refused to work shouldn’t eat, so Francis dismissed a brother because he wouldn’t work. In the early days of the Franciscan Movement, the Brothers often worked as day laborers. Francis noted that this brother who refused to work always ate more than his share at mealtime. As he dismissed this lazy brother from the Order, Francis said to him, “Go on your way, Brother Fly, because you want to feed on the sweat of your brothers but wish to be idle in the work of God. You are just like Brother Drone who wants to be first to eat the honey without doing the work of the bees” (Celano’s *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* [Second Life of Saint Francis], as found in Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2000, page 297).

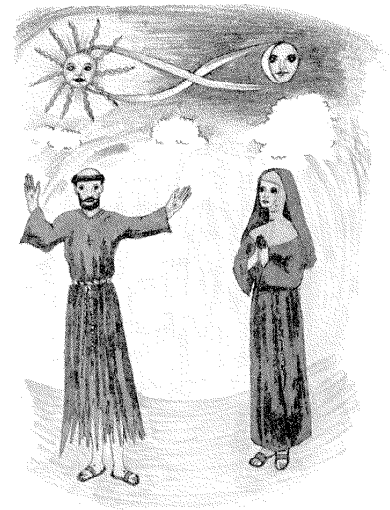
Francis’ idea of poverty was to depend totally on God and his own ability to work. Therefore it was part of the fraternal work of the members to work regularly, and beg only when necessary for enough to keep the members fed and to carry out their work with the poor, especially lepers.

We are here to do God’s work with Christ and Francis as our human role models. You may see some Secular Franciscans wearing the plain Tau cross as a symbol of their profession. Others wear the Tau cross with a hand on each side of the cross. One hand symbolizes Christ’s hand, the other symbolizes the hand of St. Francis. Before he died he also received the Stigmata, the wounds of Christ in his own body. This can be a reminder to us that we are Christ’s hands in the



world now and it is up to us to do his work to make his world function and to bring his presence to others. How do we figure out what God's plan is? Franciscans do this through prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit working in our fraternities. Both of these can be very hard because we take a risk that God, through the Holy Spirit, will ask us to do work we don't feel qualified or capable of doing. God will provide the strength if we are willing.

People often ask members of the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO) what is the difference between Franciscans and the other secular orders in the Church. The SFO is a (mostly) autonomous Franciscan Order of secular people, living a simple Christian life, following the original charism of St. Francis himself. As such, we live and work with dependence on God and NOT on material things, trusting that God will provide us with whatever we need. The SFO has its own formation and governmental structure, all independent and interdependent with the Religious Franciscan Orders (we call this interdependence "vital reciprocity"). The spirituality of Francis about the role that work and prayer should have in our lives impacts all of us greatly. Francis spent much time in prayer. He would go off for days into seclusion with only one companion to meet his needs. Francis had a special reverence for the Eucharist, praying more and more to be like Christ in all possible ways. He had an Order of Brothers to run. Once Clare committed to his way of life and brought followers, Francis was also a founder to the Poor Clares, writing letters advising and helping Clare discern the *Rule* to govern their order. All during his life, after his initial conversion experience, Francis would go off to pray to make sure his actions were directed by the Holy Spirit. He could have been like some people today who can't wait to get into supervisory positions so they can tell others how to do the grassroots work and no longer get their own hands dirty. He could have been but, no, that wasn't Francis's management style. He was a hands on, participatory manager. One of his early biographers, Brother Thomas of Celano, wrote, "From the time in which this man gave up transitory things and began to cling to the Lord, he allowed hardly a second of time to be wasted. . . . He thought it a grave offense not to be doing something good, and he considered not going forward going backward" (*The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* [Second Life of Saint Francis], as found in Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2000, page 350). When he was not in solitary prayer, he was doing work right along side his other brother Franciscans, all of them making their work their prayer. He worked with and alongside the poor, dressed the wounds of lepers, and begged for alms when necessary just as he expected everyone in the Order to do. What I hope I'm conveying to you is that Francis had a balance to his prayer and work life. He didn't just pray and he didn't just work. He prayed to be directed in his work and to become a more perfect person as he carried out the actions he felt the Lord called him to do.



WORK, FRATERNITY, AND PERSONAL LIFE

Secular Franciscans are not called to be just like Francis. Rather, they follow the original charism of Francis himself along whatever paths they are called, but they are not striving to be clones of Francis. There is only one Francis of Assisi. We are called to be ourselves and to share our spiritual journey in fraternity with brothers and sisters who have chosen this same path. For some of us, being ourselves means we are

inspired by the Holy Spirit to pursue the formation process and become professed. Others may not sense they have a call to become professed Secular Franciscans.

Those deciding to begin the formation process follow it through at least 18 months of learning and growing, culminating in a permanent profession of the SFO *Rule of Life*. They recognize that they are on a lifelong journey of formation and growth that will only end when Sister Death visits them. Companions on this journey are sister and brother Franciscans from throughout the world. Of course, the ones with whom these new travelers will most intimately share their lives will be those in their local fraternities. There is no such thing as an “isolated Franciscan.” Francis always had at least one brother with him. When a person walks the Franciscan path, one of the greatest blessings is having brothers and sisters who are on that same path walking beside you, supporting and guiding you. Secular Franciscans come together to be in continual formation at all levels, to learn what is going on in the lives of their sisters and brothers, to pray very specifically for the needs of one another, and to learn how to help everyone grow closer to Christ in the ways of Francis. Active fraternal life is an essential part of the life of every Secular Franciscan. Only each member contributing his/her time and talents to make this happen can foster fraternal life. One aspect of being a Secular Franciscan is being a productive member of the local fraternity, allowing oneself to be nominated for office, volunteering to help with projects or responsibilities that foster fraternal life, and helping with initial and ongoing formation at all stages of this process. As they become more familiar with the structure of the regional and national SFO councils, they can make themselves available to help at those levels too.

Active participation in improving the world, seeking equality for voiceless people, volunteering to tutor at the local high school, helping people who have no car to go shopping, helping supervisors above you consider the impact on workers of some major corporate decision, speaking warmly to the cleaning staff and letting them know you appreciate their efforts, volunteering at the local AIDS ministry, etc. (whether at home or away, whether paid or not) is an expectation for all Secular Franciscans. From the beginning of the Franciscan story, bringing Christ to the poor and marginalized of the world has been the work of the Franciscans. Was that an easy thing for these men, some of whom had been wealthy playboys? That's doubtful. However, they listened to the Holy Spirit and went. Francis certainly stepped outside his comfort zone when, despite previous revulsion at the sight of a leper, he leaped off his horse and kissed the leper in the road. Was his next step to go home and just pray for these societal outcasts? He probably did that, but he also went into their communities being the hands of Christ meeting their needs for care and evangelization to show them they were his sisters and brothers.



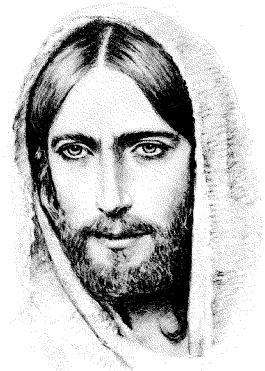
We are asked, “Do I have to give away all my money?” The answer is “No!” Each of us functions and brings Christ to others in the economic strata we have attained. However, earning more money should not be a primary reason for using your talents unless you are living at a poverty level now. Some questions to ask yourself during the formation process would include the following: “Would I deliberately sabotage a co-worker’s chance to get a promotion so I could get it instead?”; “Is having a managerial position with status something to strive for at my job? If so, why?”; “Do I tithe each year for church and charities?”; “In addition to tithing am I generous to those less fortunate?”; “Could I purchase a less expensive home or car in order to have more free time to

spend with my family, help build houses for people with none, donate my time to help at the food bank, etc.?"

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE WORK COMMISSION

How does one apply all this to the person in the workplace today? How does a person bring Christ into the workplace when one is working 2-3 jobs, has no benefits, and makes only minimum wage? How does one step out in faith to allow oneself to be nominated for office on the Council of the local fraternity? Each circumstance will be different. That is where the Work Commission of the SFO comes in. We exist at the local, regional, and national levels of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States. At the national level our responsibility is to help disseminate information about the teachings of St. Francis regarding work and to assist people in discerning how to apply it today. We distribute information regarding the teaching of the Catholic Church about work, finding sources that break this down into words that all can understand. We make sure the local and regional Work Commission Chairs get this information to their brothers and sisters. All levels of formation need ongoing information about how to think about work from a Franciscan perspective. Some of our fraternities are comprised solely of members who are retired. They wonder why they even need information about work. These same people may be very active in doing all kinds of volunteer work, inside and outside their home, often influencing younger people without even knowing it. One of the countercultural ideas that comes from Franciscanism is that as long as people are using their time and talents for the betterment of God's world in whatever they feel called to do, volunteer work is considered God's work. That is just one of the messages we try to spread throughout society as we encounter people in our daily lives. Helping people think about esteeming (i.e., respecting and appreciating) work as a gift that contributes their share to the proper functioning of God's world and making that relevant to their lives today is our main purpose.

Have you ever known persons who, no matter what life is handing them, see God in their lives? They know they are supposed to be touching the lives of those encountered during this time; there is a quiet confidence about them. They live a Christ-centered life. Others around them may be talking and doing all kinds of crazy things but this person remains centered on the Lord. Despite ridicule these people know they are on the right track. Others in the workplace begin to notice that this person doesn't discriminate that this person treats all people and their ideas with respect and dignity. This worker recognizes the contributions of everyone else toward each part of the process that leads toward the whole. Perhaps **you** have been this Christ-centered person. Perhaps this would be a major change in your perspective and behavior at work. Is this an understanding you could adapt? You'll never know until you try. You could step out of that comfort zone of the old ways of acting if you haven't fostered community in your life and put on new ways. As Francis was dying, he said to his followers, "I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours!" (Celano's *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* [Second Life of Saint Francis], as found in Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2000, page 386).



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Armstrong, Regis J.; Hellmann, J. A. Wayne; & Short, William J. (Eds.). (2000). Francis of Assisi: Early Documents II: The Founder. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press.

A Franciscan Vision for Youth and Young Adults in the United States

by Mary and Anthony Mazotti, S.F.O.

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Among the varied Catholic youth groups in the Church are the Franciscan Youth/Young Adult fraternities. They have their own vision for following Jesus Christ and his Gospel, taking as their model and inspiration the life of St. Francis of Assisi and the *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* (see the *General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order*, articles #96 & 97). In the United States they are known as the Franciscan Youth/Young Adults (FY/YA). Franciscan Youth/Young Adult fraternities are typically sponsored by an established local fraternity of Secular Franciscans. The sponsoring SFO fraternity then becomes responsible for the spiritual formation of the FY/YA fraternity and works closely with it in program development and activities.

The call and mission of the Franciscan Youth/Young Adults can find its spiritual likeness in the call and mission of Timothy, an early Christian missionary companion of Saint Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles. It was Paul who guided, encouraged, and gave formation to Timothy, a maturing youth and servant of Jesus Christ (see 1 Timothy 4:12). Secular

Franciscans are similarly *called* to “share their experience of evangelical life with the youth who feel attracted to Saint Francis of Assisi and to seek the means of adequately presenting it to them” (*SFO General Constitutions*, article #96.1).

To help the FY/YA in its development, the National Fraternity of the SFO in the United States established a commission to assist local Secular Franciscan fraternities in promoting FY/YA. The mission of the National Secular Franciscan Youth/Young Adult Commission is “to bring the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the Youth of America [and] to inspire, motivate and assist the fostering and development of young Franciscan groups at Regional and Local Fraternity levels” (Commission’s *Mission Statement*). One of the Commission’s goals is “to show the connection between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the life of St. Francis in the reality of every day living” (Goal #3).

Jesus demonstrated great love for youth. He raised from the dead the daughter of Jairus (see Matthew 9:18-26). He took pity on a father’s son who was possessed by a demon and cast the demon out (see Matthew 17:14-18). Youth and young adults want a closer relationship with God, His Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are idealistic. One way they learn is by “catching” spiritual integrity from the people they observe. They yearn for heroes who excite, inspire, and motivate them. They have a keen eye for noticing fairness, honesty, justice, faithfulness and commitment, especially in their peers, parents, teachers, and other professionals. They also look at church “goers” critically in order to justify their own inclination toward non-attendance. In *Young Adult Ministry Resources --Young Adults and the Church*, published in 1988 by the National

Conference of Catholic Bishops, the statement is made that "Many young adults participate only at the fringes of the Church, while many others are completely on the outside. The task of bringing youth/young adults and the Church together for dialogue and meaningful ministry is an urgent one."

Signs of hope are mentioned in Part I of *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* which states: "One of the most hopeful signs over the past decades in the Catholic Church in the United States has been the renewal of ministry with adolescents . . . encouraging leaders in local communities to create a variety of ways to reach their goals. There was no longer *one* way to minister to adolescents" (1997, pages 3-4).

In 1995 the Presidency of the International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order approved documents for leaders and animators of Franciscan Youth entitled *The Franciscan Youth: A Franciscan Vocational Journey*. The documents leave space for "adaptations" by all nations for situations including socio-cultural, economic, religious, etc. The guidelines and suggestions are a help in animating Franciscan Youth and Young Adults. The documents answer such questions as:



Franciscan Youth--Who are we?

We are Franciscan Youth.
We are young.
We feel attracted by St. Francis of Assisi.
We try to share the experience of Christian life in Fraternity.
We deepen our vocation within the context of the Secular Franciscan Order.
We have our own specific organization.
We are present in many countries.

The Franciscan Youth/Young Adult fraternity differs from other groups of young Franciscans and parish youth groups in that:

It accepts the *Rule of the SFO* as a document of inspiration.
Its personal and formal commitment is taken before God and the fraternity to live out its inspiration.
It belongs to the Franciscan Family as an integral part of the Secular Franciscan Order.
It is accompanied and animated by Secular Franciscans.
It has its own organizational structure and specific method of formation in a vocational journey which can lead to ongoing conversion and the Secular Franciscan Order.

One Franciscan Youth Fraternity learns to live the inspiration of the *Rule of the SFO* through a shorter form of the *Rule* composed by a Franciscan First Order friar. It states in part:



We proclaim this gospel life
by promoting justice,
by esteeming work as a grace,
by building a Christian family,
by respecting creation, and
by bearing peace and harmony.

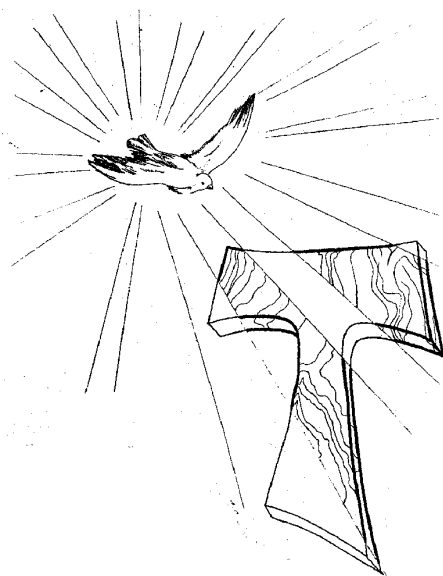
--Benet Fonck, O.F.M.



Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II has spoken and written much about youth during his pontificate. In his statement for the 1995 *World Day of Prayer for Vocations* he wrote:

This is what is needed: a Church for young people, which will know how to speak to their heart and enkindle, comfort, and inspire enthusiasm in it with the joy of the Gospel and the strength of the Eucharist; a Church which will know how to invite and to welcome the person who seeks a purpose for which to commit his whole existence; a Church which is not afraid to require much, after having given much; which does not fear asking from young people the effort of a noble and authentic adventure, such as that of following of the Gospel.

The National Secular Franciscan Youth/Young Adult Commission provides various resources to fraternities in helping them establish FY/YA fraternities. The manual *A Guide for Franciscan Youth and Young Adult Ministry* has valuable helps for leaders and animators in the areas of Community Building; Social and Group Building Activities; Works of Charity; Retreats; Special Observances; Lesson Planning; Resource Materials; and References. Youth and young adults require a balance of activities to keep them challenged and committed to the Franciscan way of life.



The FY/YA fraternity, with the help of the sponsoring SFO Fraternity, "is formed by those young people who feel called by the Holy Spirit to share the experience of the Christian life in fraternity, in the light of the message of Saint Francis of Assisi, deepening their own vocation within the context of the Secular Franciscan Order" (*SFO General Constitutions*, article #96.2). Youth and young adults focused on the Gospel of Jesus, the teachings of the Church, and the Franciscan Charism, as are the FY/YA, reap the feelings of belonging and purpose. They have the Secular Franciscans, animators, and Spiritual Assistants, to support and guide them; they become an enrichment to themselves, the Church, and the whole Franciscan Family.

Since 1997 SFO National Youth/Young Adult Commission members and several FY/YA have been represented at two World Youth Days. The millions of Catholic young people attending these gatherings are a testimony to the Spirit's action in them. Dreams and hopes for a better world filled with peace and justice, love and hope, are reinforced for building up the Body of Christ and bringing forth the Kingdom of God. With the holy examples of Francis and Clare and the entire Franciscan Family down through the centuries to imitate, the Franciscan Youth/Young Adults will never be at a loss for ways to change the world for the better through committed gospel living as followers of the Little Poor Man of Assisi.

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