



Secular Franciscan Order



GUIDELINES FOR INITIAL FORMATION



INTRODUCTION

The Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) whose members are called to live a vocation of charity, a vocation of faithfully following the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, includes among its stages, initial formation – the time after admission to the Order and before profession. This time is intended to deepen the maturation of the vocation, to enhance the experience of evangelical life in fraternity and to gain a better knowledge of the Order (Art. 40 GGCC).

Formation at this stage should be aimed at becoming more aware of the Order and toward making the decision to profess. Prior to this stage is orientation. During this time, the formation team should ensure that the candidate have a basic understanding of the Catholic Church. The Rule and the General Constitutions should be reviewed. The candidate should be a practicing Catholic and should be integrated into the local fraternity.

Formation for the Secular Franciscan Order is not just academic. It will move the Secular Franciscan to a deeper experience of life based on faith and charism. It leads the candidate to make a commitment to fulfill the mission given to Francis of Assisi by God himself, a mission to faithfully and humbly live, bearing witness to God to the world, rebuilding the church, and becoming illuminated with the joy of love in the same Father.

This guideline is intended to form a responsible Secular Franciscan, committed, mature and convinced of the richness of fraternal life. At this stage, we seek to deepen Christian and Franciscan knowledge in communion with the Church and in the world and we become aware of the importance and significance of making Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order. (Art. 40 GGCC). Our way of life clearly states “... by virtue of their vocation, motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel calls ‘conversion.’ Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily.” (OFS Rule Art. 7a).

This guideline is meant for those Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters who have already been admitted and have gone through orientation (Art. 37-38 GGCC). They are starting the stage of initial formation as indicated in Art. 40 GGCC. This instrument should be life-giving and should be accompanied by concrete experiences of service and apostolates, which should enrich the experience.

These are times of grace, but also very demanding times, times of violence and the increasing dehumanization of man. We must be more intensively prepared to offer our hand and to carry the message of mercy, love, hope and help, according to the invitation of our Holy Father St. Francis, to rebuild the moral and social fabric of the church and to reach out to everyone.

“Place your trust in the Lord and He will help you.” St. Francis of Assisi

With the joy of being children of God, we are called to live and serve joyfully in the world.

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CONTENT

Chapter I – Life in Christ, in the Church and in Francis

- Christ, the center of our lives.
- Francis, the center of our mission, his life, vision and his approach to divinity
- The Church, our partner on the Franciscan journey
- What it means to be a Secular Franciscan

Chapter II – The Secular Franciscan Order

- Franciscans: A family of families – A Common Charism for the Church.
- Entrance to the Order and Formation: The Call, Vocation, Discernment, Conversion and the Journey
- The History of the Order and its Rule, Nature, Charism
- Life and Mission of the OFS
- Profession and Life in Fraternity
- Franciscan Youth: Way of life, Organization, Stages, Relationship to the OFS
- Spiritual Assistance – A Gift to Fraternity

Chapter III – The Secular Franciscan

- The Way of Life: The Gospel; The Secular Franciscan Life
- The Rule and the Constitutions
- Service: Our Commitment in the World Based on the Franciscan Experience and Its Importance (JPIC, Family, Work, Apostolates)

Chapter IV – Mary and the Holy Spirit – Our Companions on the Journey

- Francis, the Secular Franciscan and Mary: Lady of the Porziuncula in the History of Humanity and in Our Lives
- The Holy Spirit: Lord and Giver of Life

Appendix (Available on-line: CIOFS. ORG)

Resources for Formation:

The Rule, The Constitutions, The Ritual

Admonitions

Biography of St. Francis

The OFS Rule – An Examination of Conscience – A Checklist

Prayer – Lectio Divina

History of the Tau

Application Questions – Procedure

Baptism and Profession

Franciscan Prayers

And more...

CHAPTER 1:



“Life in Christ, in the Church and in Francis”

This chapter aims to strengthen faith and the certainty of following Christ, keeping our eyes fixed on Him as we prepare for Profession. We must reflect especially on the mysteries which Francis of Assisi himself internalized: the incarnation, the birth and the passion of our Lord Jesus. We should seek to live the Gospel humbly, bearing in mind the example of the life of our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi. We must remember that we are all one in one God, we are children of God, brothers in Christ, one family, one house, one mission. This chapter aims to develop the following topics:

- Christ, the center of our lives.
- Francis, the center of our mission, his life, vision and his approach to divinity
- The Church, our partner on the Franciscan journey
- What it means to be a Secular Franciscan.

“For the spirit of the Lord shall be upon them, and he shall make his home and abode with them (cf. Jn 14:23), and they are sons of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45) And they are husbands, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf Mt 12:50).

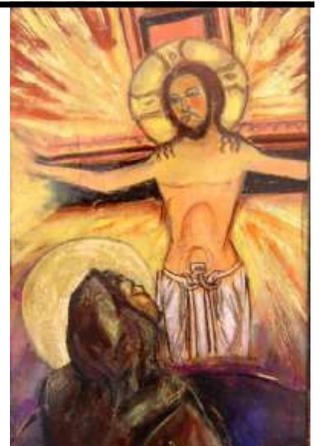
”...Oh, how holy it is to have such a spouse, consoler, beautiful and admirable! Oh, how holy and loving it is to have such a brother and such a pleasing, humble, pacific, sweet, loving son and more than all desirable things, our Lord Jesus Christ!”

(Exhortation of St. Francis of Assisi to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance – OFS Rule)

Theme 1: Christ, Center of our Lives

The Rule and life of the Secular Franciscan is this: *“to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people.” (OFS Rule, Art. 4)*

The reason why we are called Christians is that we are followers of Christ. But what does it mean to be a follower of Christ? First and foremost, our life and our spirituality has to be Christocentric. This however, does not mean we ignore the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christ himself tells us that



to know Him, is to know the One who has sent him. (Jn 14:7) And how can we know both the Father and Son without being guided by the Holy Spirit? As Catholics, we believe and profess a Trinitarian God – “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Through Christ we come to know the Father.

Jesus, therefore, helps us to deepen our understanding about his true identity by asking us a simple and yet a very profound question. *Who do you say that I am? (Mt 16: 13-15)*. In other words, we must try to go beyond what our catechism teaches and what formators taught us and to begin our own personal relationship with Christ, making Him the center of our lives.

Francis himself as he listened to the Crucifix at San Damiano began to discover that he needed to put Christ at the center of his life by rebuilding the church – the body of Christ, and embracing Christ in the lepers.

Being a Secular Franciscan is to follow the way of life that Francis embraced. But how can one do that without allowing the “Word of God to dwell amongst us?” St. Francis in his lifetime did his best to live a life fully centered in Christ. His humility, obedience, love of the Eucharist, and his love of Scripture were clear reflections of Francis’ way of living, which was centered in Christ. This was driven by his love of Christ. The Word of God inspired Francis to draw closer to Christ. Whatever Francis did or said was a true expression of his understanding of what it means for the “Word of God to live among us.” His Admonitions (writings) “*form a kind of mirror of perfection for anyone called to follow the Franciscan way of life, for Francis presents in them his ideal of Franciscan observance in the various points covered. They are replete with a knowledge of human nature and with a practical good sense,*” (cf. The Admonitions) putting Christ as the point of reference for a true way of life.

The Second Vatican Council opened even more doors towards the love of Scripture. The laity cannot simply continue to concentrate on pious devotions but must also read and reflect on the Scriptures and participate more fully in the Eucharist to bring them closer to Christ. But as St. Francis puts it in the admonitions, we have to be careful how we put Christ at the center of our life. “*A religious is killed by the letter when he has no desire to follow the spirit of Sacred Scripture, but wants to know what it says only so he can explain it to others,*” and not living by example.

By putting Christ as the center of our life, we become prophets and witnesses of faith, hope and charity in the world. Such a prophetic function is given by Christ himself during our baptism. The laity, in particular, by our secular character, are called to proclaim in our own lives the prophetic mission through witness.

“The laity show themselves to be children of the promise, if, strong in faith and hope, they make the most of the present time and with patience await the glory that is to come. Let them not, then, hide this hope in the depths of their hearts, but even in the framework of secular life let them express it by a continual turning towards God.” (*Lumen Gentium 35*)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. What is my relationship with Christ?
2. Is Christ at the center of my life?
3. As a Secular Franciscan, how would I demonstrate my love of Christ in the world around me?

Theme 2: Francis, the center of our mission, his life, vision and his approach to divinity

“go therefore and make disciples in the whole world...” Mt 28:19

(Note to reader: In preparation for this chapter, it is recommended that you read a brief biography of St. Francis of Assisi.)



It is true that our founder is St. Francis of Assisi and we live and follow a Franciscan charism, but the center of our mission is Christ. Christ is the one who called St. Francis. We saw in Francis this love of Christ and then decided to embrace the Franciscan way of life, just like Andrew the apostle who told his brother Simon, “I have found the Lord” (*cf. Jn 1:41*) and took him to Jesus. God entrusted Francis to repair his church and Francis took this mission seriously. It is significant for us to remember that the Church is essential to the mission of Christ. The mission of renewal and establishing the kingdom in its fullness is carried on through the mission of the Spirit in the Church. The Church is not an end in itself but the universal sacrament of salvation. (*Cf. Catholic Heritage, Vatican II the pilgrim church on earth. Kairos Vol. 21, issue 06*). So, Francis being an exemplar of the Christian life did not proclaim himself as the focal point. Christ was the focal point, and he continues to help us to put Christ at the center of our life and mission in the Church and in the world.

Francis had a great devotion to the Trinity. Thus, the mission of the Church begins in the Trinitarian communion. The Church is the Body of Christ, and we, as members, ought to draw our strength from God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. “The church becomes the missionary by giving itself and by giving the presence of the Spirit which always enlivens the brothers and sisters.” Thus St. Francis becomes a model of our mission and not necessarily a center of our mission. In Francis, we draw the ideals of our mission which is inspired by Christ. By living out our Franciscan charism, we become beacons to others and effectively accomplish the mission entrusted by God.

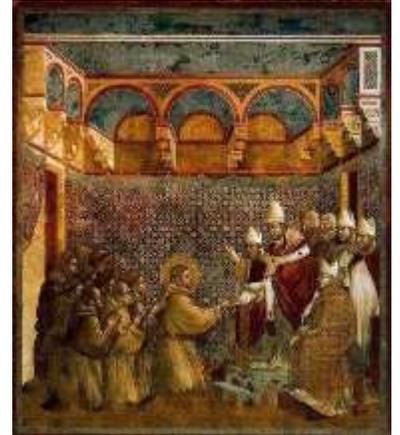
“It is essential, therefore, for us to discover ... that at the very center of our charism is the heavenly Father, and we must understand the importance of our charism for our spiritual journey and the realization of the mission.” (*Cf. Vocation, Charism and Mission of the Secular Franciscan Order by Benedetto Lino, OFS pg. 18*)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. What do I love about St. Francis?
2. What does it mean for me to follow in the footsteps of St. Francis?
3. What can I do, as a Secular Franciscan, following in the footsteps of St. Francis, to become a beacon to others?

Theme 3: The Church, our partner on the Franciscan journey

“... the Church, at once ‘a visible association and a spiritual community,’ goes forward together with humanity, and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family.” (Second Vatican Council: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church AAS 57; 1965, pg. 11; 43)



St. Francis at the early stage of his conversion was longing to associate himself both with this “visible and spiritual community” by giving himself wholeheartedly to the service of God and the Church.

His refusal to be taken to the civil authorities of Assisi and yet consenting to be taken to the bishop of Assisi, illustrated his willingness to journey with the church and with God.

“Francis respected this summons, and there, in the presence of his father Pietro Bernardone, and the bishop, he stripped off his garments and cast them at the feet of his father, saying: from now on I can freely say ‘Our Father who art in heaven, not father Pietro Bernardone’, (1Cel 14-15 and II Cel., 12.)

The church, that is, the community of believers, the body of Christ, the pilgrim people of God, is an important element for our Franciscan journey because in her we are able to serve Christ through our fellow brothers and sisters. This body, although with many members, with different functions (*cf 1 Cor 12:25-26*) is so interrelated that what happens to one part affects the whole body. Francis understood the basis of this unity, therefore, soon after listening to the voice of Christ at the San Damiano Cross, immediately longed to unify himself more profoundly with the church by rebuilding it, and then uniting himself once again with the higher authority of the church, i.e. by asking the approval of his way of life from the Pope.

Francis’ love and respect of the clergy once again illustrates his understanding about the value of not only journeying alone but with the church. (*Cf. Admonitions XXVI*). The entire body of Christ is what the church calls the pilgrim church – both consecrated religious and secular. The whole of the human race and all of creation is oriented towards one goal: to be renewed in Christ (LG 48) and to reach completion in Him. The Scriptures point to this purpose in Christ (Acts 3:21, Eph 1:10, Col 1:20, 2 Pet 3:10-13). Christ came, not for a handful of people who are called Christians, but came for all people and the whole of creation. This once again helps

us to understand why the whole Franciscan family should continue the journey of proclaiming and witnessing Christ's mission among all people.

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. How can I become a partner with the church as I take my Franciscan journey?
2. What are some ministries that my local Church is involved in and how can I support those ministries as a Secular Franciscan?
3. Why should I, as a Secular Franciscan, support the rulings and directives of our Pope?

Theme 4: What it means to be a Secular Franciscan

To be a Secular Franciscan means to be the herald of the Gospel in the Church and in the world – by living out and witnessing the message of the Gospel in our local fraternities and in the world.

“Secularity” is in itself an officially recognized form of spirituality in the Church. The Secular is not in opposition to the sacred, it is the embodiment of the sacred.” (Cf. Basic Catholic Doctrine by Edward L. Shirley, OFS. Pg. 13)



All are called to build the church of Christ. The same call that came to Francis – go and rebuild my church – still echoes in the heart of all Secular Franciscan members even today. Through our baptism, both secular and religious share in the priesthood of Christ and we are called to the same purpose. Of course, it doesn't mean we should negate the differences between the ministerial and common priesthood. Those who, by virtue of ordination, exercise their ministerial priesthood, should recognize the true identity of the secular character which is: “as baptized, we are all children of God; but the modality of living it, is different for lay people than for clergy and religious. This modality, however, is not accessory nor secondary but proper and particular to the layperson; it is his/her intimate nature which is to be secular.” (Cf. Elements of Ecclesiology and Theology of the Laity by Ron Pihokker, OFS pg. 8)

The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people. (OFS Rule 4)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. What does it mean for me to become a Secular Franciscan?
2. I am not a religious like the First Order, Second Order and Third Order Regular. I am secular. How can I be different and yet still be a part of Franciscan family?
3. How can I work and support the efforts of my religious brothers and sisters who are Franciscan?

CHAPTER 2:

“The Secular Franciscan Order”

During the initial formation stage, the candidates will study the basic themes of the OFS, the Franciscan Family and the place of the OFS within it. We believe that it is important that the brother/sister, admitted to the OFS, have a full understanding of the basic aspects of the OFS, before profession. They are: its history, life, mission, stages, admission (considering the vocational call), etc. We hope to reinforce the sense of identity and belonging. In this chapter, the following themes will be developed:

- Franciscans: A Family of Families – A Common Charism for the Church.
- Entrance to the Order and Formation: The Call, Vocation, Discernment and Conversion, and the Journey.
- The History of the Order and its Rule, Nature, Charism.
- Life and Mission of the OFS
- Profession and Life in Fraternity
- Franciscan Youth: Way of Life, Organization, Stages, Relationship to the OFS.
- Spiritual Assistance – A Gift to Fraternity

Theme 1: Franciscans: A Family of Families – A Common Charism for the Church.

“I have done what is mine (to do); may Christ teach you what is yours (to do)!” – St. Francis of Assisi

All Franciscans from around the world are part of one family. We all follow in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare, but we live our charism within different lifestyles.

Our history as a family began in 1206 when our Father Francis became a lay penitent when he heard the words of Christ, “rebuild my church.” Around 1208, a group of lay men, inspired by Francis, joined him as “Penitents of Assisi.” In 1209, the group journeyed to Rome to get the approval of Pope Innocent III. He approved the “Propositum Vitae” (the way of life). The rule, however, would not be written until some years later. Thus, began the Franciscan Movement, a Gospel way of life, based on imitating the poor and humble Christ.



From these early days grew the Franciscan Trilogy – the three branches of the Franciscan family:

- First Order Friars
- Second Order Sisters

- Third Order Seculars and Third Order Regular Friars and Sisters.

The **First Order Friars** or Friars Minor were the first followers of Francis, established in 1209. Over the years, the Order split based on their understanding of the Franciscan way of life. Today, we have three branches: the Orders of Friars Minor (OFM), Order of Friars Minor Capuchin (OFM Cap) and the Order of Friars Minor Conventuals (OFM Conv.)

The Second Order is a religious community of women known as the Poor Clares. They were founded by St. Clare in 1212. They live a cloistered, contemplative life of prayer and penance in the Franciscan tradition of joy and simplicity.

The Secular Franciscan Order (previously The Third Order, Brothers and Sisters of Penance and Tertiaries)

The Third Order is the largest of the Franciscan orders. It was created by St. Francis in 1221 because many married men and women were asking to embrace his style of life and could not enter either the first or second order. Within the Third Order of St. Francis, we need to distinguish between the Third Order Regular and the Third Order Secular (The Secular Franciscan Order).

The Third Order Regular

In time, some of the Third Order members started living in communities. These later developed into a religious order with vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. We refer to them as Third Order Regular (TOR). They can be male or female but they live in community according to their gender. This branch of the Franciscan Family was officially united in 1447 by a papal decree. Today, there are hundreds of Third Order Regular communities around the world.

The Third Order Regular Friars are recognized on an equal basis with the First Order Friars with equal responsibility for the spiritual support of Secular Franciscans.

The Secular Franciscan Order (OFS):

The Secular Franciscan Order (or OFS) includes both men and women. Members do not live in community, but live their daily lives of work and prayer in the world with their families. Members gather together in community on a regular basis. This is called “fraternity.” They do not profess (OFS Rule 20) vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but they do make a profession to live the Gospel according to the example of Francis and follow the Secular Franciscan Rule.

While the three branches of the Franciscan family live their lives differently, focusing on different ministries, and embracing Francis from different perspectives, we all follow Francis and are united in the Franciscan charism. We are stronger together, each bringing our own unique strengths.

The Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) shares in **vital reciprocity** with the other branches of the Franciscan family and has **equal dignity**. It was given the **same charism and mission** as the other branches of the Franciscan family. In our secular state, we, too, continue the mission of St. Francis to rebuild God's Church.

(Modified & edited from – Bob Fitzsimmons, OFS, For Up to Now **Formation Manual, United States**)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. Based on the information above, draw a simple family tree of the Franciscan Family.
2. Are Secular Franciscans equal to the other members of the Franciscan Family? Explain.
3. How are the branches of Franciscans different? How are they alike?

Theme 2: Entrance to the Order and Formation: The Call, Vocation, Discernment and Conversion, and the Journey

I have called you by your name. “You are mine because you are precious in my eyes, you are honored and I love you.” (Isaiah 43:1b, 4)

“You are the ones that I have chosen, that people may know and believe me and understand that it is I.” (Isaiah 43:10)



Entrance into the Order and Formation

In order to be admitted into the Order, we must: profess the Catholic faith, live in communion with the Church, be of good moral standing, and show clear signs of a vocation. (GGCC 39. 2)

Membership in the Order is attained through a time of initiation, a time of formation, and the Profession of the Rule. The journey of formation, which is expected to develop throughout life, begins with entrance into the fraternity.

Profession is the solemn ecclesial act by which we renew our baptismal promises and, in a public ceremony, consecrate our life to the service of God's kingdom and to live the Gospel in the world according to the example of Francis and following the Rule of the OFS. (GGCC 42. 1)

Those responsible for formation are: the candidate, the entire fraternity, the minister with the council, the formation team, and the spiritual assistant as spiritual guide.

The Call – Vocation

A vocation is God's call. It is an invitation to share in the life of the Trinity. God wants every person on earth to turn from sin and be transformed by his love. He is calling us.

We began the inquiry phase of the Secular Franciscan journey with a discussion of what a vocation is, with an analysis of God's **primary call to all people**. We proceeded to the **personal** vocation, and then to the **specific** vocation to the Franciscan Order. As we continue the journey, we also continue our process of discernment of whether we are truly called to be Secular Franciscans.

Everyone's primary vocation is to share in God's own life. This is not something that can be earned. It is pure gift. **Everyone has the choice to accept that gift or refuse it.** It is most important because other choices are based on that one. God gives each of us the means to become holy according to our own personal vocation.

It is also important to remember that the gift of vocation is not just for the person being called. St. Francis emphasizes that a vocation is a call to be an instrument that God will use not only for the one called but for the benefit of other people.

Vocation demands our entire life. It is total availability – a willingness and surrender. If we are willing, then we are ready to do whatever God asks. If we surrender, we yield control to the God who loves us so much... The Spirit will lead us to be and do what God has planned for us.

Many people are attracted to St. Francis and believe they have a Franciscan vocation. However, attraction is not enough. To have a Franciscan vocation includes the willingness to bind ourselves permanently to a consecrated form of life for lay people, the Secular Franciscan Order. We can be inspired by Francis but not be destined to serve in a consecrated Franciscan form of life.

Discernment

Discernment is a word that describes the process of coming to understand whether or not the Lord is calling and inviting us to a Franciscan lifestyle.

In discerning whether we fit in the Franciscan family in a formal way, we may want to ask the following questions:

1. Can I put aside feelings of romanticism, sentimentalism about St. Francis?
2. Do I identify with the things about Jesus that Francis discovered and on which he based his way of living and serving? Can I see Christ with the eyes of Francis? Can I live that way too?
3. Looking at my own life experiences, do I find myself ready to learn more about this

way and make the effort to embrace the Franciscan path?

4. Can I accept living and nurturing the charism of Francis to make it present in the world?

There is a particular spiritual style or charism for those who are Franciscans. The following are some characteristics that are found in a person who is called to be a Franciscan. These can help us discern if we have an authentic Franciscan vocation:

- An intense Eucharistic spirituality (Seeing Christ present in the Eucharist and the ideal of self-giving like Jesus did, and continues to do in the Eucharist.) (OFS Rule 5)
- A strong fraternal communion: (We are united as brothers and sisters to each other in our fraternities and in the world. Our spirituality includes the support, encouragement and inspiration of others in our Order.) (OFS Rule 13)
- Simplicity (A spirituality that is genuine; without pretense.)
- Poverty (Love of Gospel poverty develops confidence in the Father and creates internal freedom.)
- Humility (The truth of what and who we really are in the eyes of God; freedom from pride and arrogance.) (OFS Rule 13)
- A genuine sense of minority (The recognition that we are servants, not superior to anyone.) (OFS Rule 14)
- A complete and active abandonment to God. (Trusting in God's unconditional love.)
- Conversion (Daily we begin again the process of changing to be more like Jesus.) (OFS Rule 7)
- Transformation (What God does for us, when we are open and willing.)
- Peacemaking (We are messengers of peace as Francis was.) (OFS Rule 19)

Those of us, who, through proper discernment recognize that our call is to follow Jesus in the footsteps of Francis will then accept his way of living through a public, solemn and perpetual commitment called profession before God and the Church. This is true for all called to the Franciscan way of life, including Franciscans of the First, Second and Third Orders.

The fraternity of the Order is inspired by Francis who said that the essential Gospel quality of life is found in fraternal communion. The OFS vocation to live the Gospel then, is meant to be experienced in fraternal communion. We, as members of the Order, gather in ecclesiastical communities which are called fraternities. For our initial formation, participation in the meetings of the local fraternity is indispensable for initiation into this community of prayer and into fraternal life.

Sections of this chapter were modified & edited from – For Up to **Now Formation Manual, United States**, [http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular Franciscan Order](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_Franciscan_Order), [Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order](#), [OFS Rule](#)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. Based on what I have read above, do I have a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order? How do I know?
2. Can I make a commitment to my Franciscan Family?
3. Can I let God direct me and my service as a Secular Franciscan?

Conversion and The Journey

We have a calling. Is it to the Secular Franciscan Order? Orientation and Formation periods help us determine if ours should be a formal Franciscan journey.

Initial Formation (GGCC 40): – Formation is the initial time of study on the Secular Franciscan journey. We learn about our beloved founder, the order, its rules, its history, its charism, but, as importantly, we learn about ourselves. We ask ourselves if we are Franciscan at heart? Is this the journey that the Lord wants us to take? If it is, we'll begin to discern our roll in the Order. How will we serve? How will we live the charism?

The first step was **Orientation** and lasted no less than three months. During this period of time, we reviewed Basic Catholic Doctrine, the Church and Theology of the Laity and we were introduced to Franciscanism and Francis.

Inquiry (our present step) follows for no less than six months. This is where we begin our formal journey in Initial Formation. We'll read and talk about Francis and the Franciscan Movement, what it means to be Secular Franciscan, the charism and the mission of the order. And, we will continue to pray and discern our own vocation. At the end of this period, we will be formally admitted into the Order. At the end of this stage, we will be called candidates.

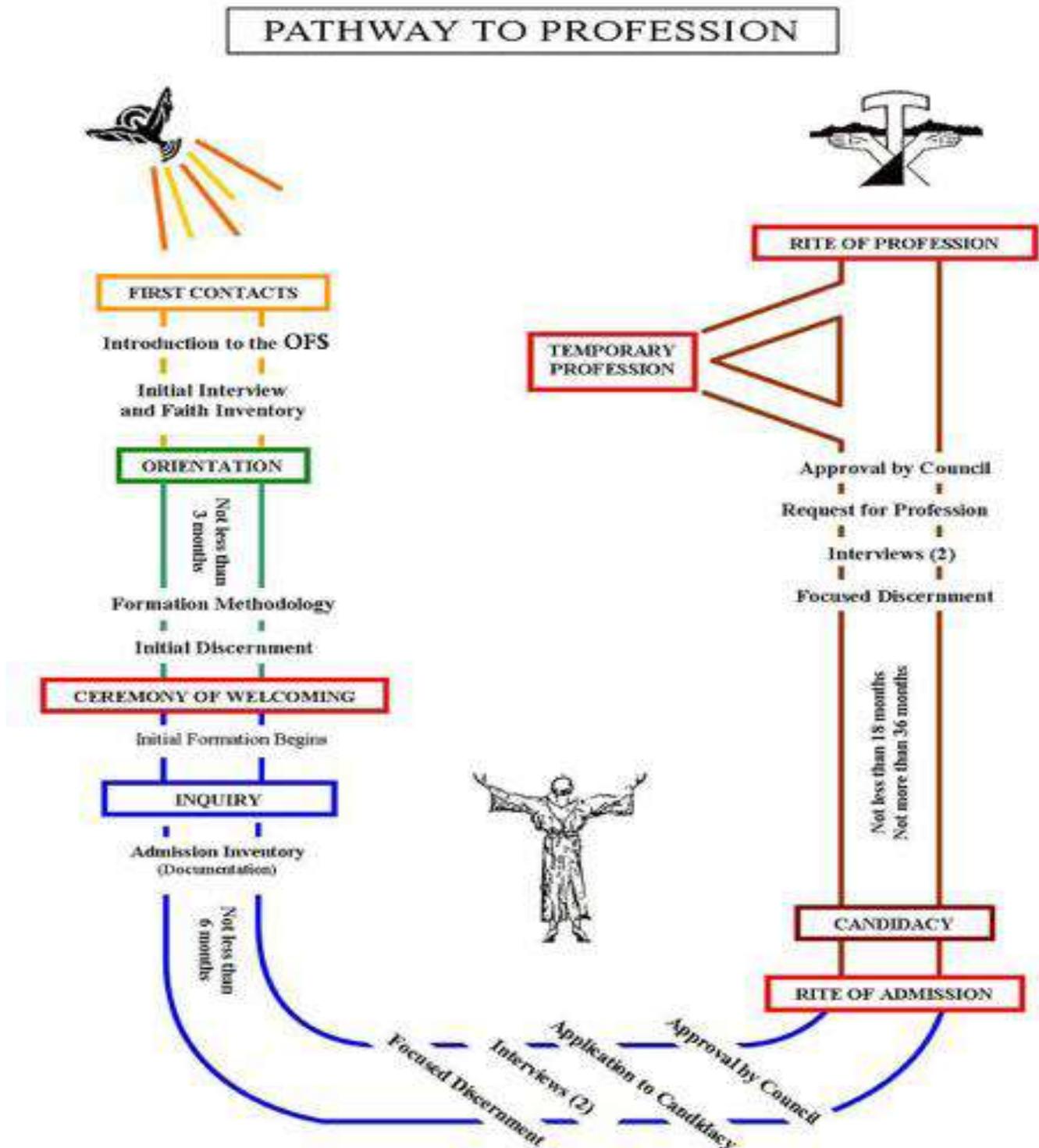
Candidacy (GGCC 40) time of formation lasts no less than 12 months and no more than 36 months. Our studies will include reading and in-depth sharing on the history of the OFS, the Rule of the OFS and OFS Constitutions, Francis and his understanding of Divinity, Franciscan Theology and Spirituality, Francis and his relationship to the Virgin Mary, Clare of Assisi, the mission of the OFS – Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation (JPIC), Catholic Social Teaching, family, work, living in Fraternity, daily conversion and penitence, and Profession.

Profession is the culminating moment on our journey as candidates. This spiritual and family event is public and joyful. It allows us to publicly express our permanent commitment to serve and live as Secular Franciscans. (GGCC 41, 42, 43) 21

Modified & edited from – Marie Amore, OFS, **For Up to Now Formation Manual, United States** and [http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular Franciscan Order; General Constitutions](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_Franciscan_Order;_General_Constitutions)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. In your words, describe the process of becoming a Secular Franciscan.
2. Can I patiently go through the process?



3. What does Profession mean for me?

(By Jan Parker, OFS, For Up to Now Formation Manual, United States)

Theme 3: The History of the Order and its Rule, Nature, Charism

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, since the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them (cf. Is 11:2) and He will make His home and dwelling among them (cf. Jn 14:23). They are children of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45) whose works they do, and they are spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50). – **Second Letter of St. Francis of Assisi to the Faithful**



Foundation of the Secular Franciscan Order (previously known as The Third Order Franciscans)

We're not certain about where the Third Order was first introduced. One story tells of a merchant, Luchesius Modestini.

When Luchesius met Francis in 1213, his life changed. He and his wife Buonadonna were inspired to dedicate their lives to prayer and to serving the poor, but they did not want to separate and enter monasteries as some chose to do. This couple felt called to live out this new way of life together. Francis, recognizing their desire to serve in a special way, was moved to write a Rule for them which would allow them to remain together. His friend Cardinal Ugolino di Conti (later Pope Gregory IX) assisted him in composing the rule. Thus began the Brothers and Sisters of Penance in the Franciscan movement, which came to be called the Franciscan Third Order – today's Secular Franciscan Order.

This way of life was quickly embraced by many couples and single men and women who did not feel called to the stark life of the friars and nuns. Francis was their model from whom they learned lessons concerning prayer, humility, peacemaking, self-denial, fidelity to the duties of their state, and above all charity. Like Francis, they cared for lepers and outcasts. Like Francis, they celebrated prayer and service.

The OFS Rule

The earliest OFS Rule was probably composed by Francis before 1215. He completed an expanded version by about 1220. Both documents call the lay faithful to a life of penance, of turning away from sin and turning toward God. In the Earlier Exhortation, Francis describes the elements of the conversion process: 1) love God 2) love your neighbor 3) turn away from our sinful tendencies 4) receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and, as a result of the above, 5) produce worthy fruits of penance – a renewed life characterized by charity, forgiveness and compassion toward others.

The first official rule was approved by Pope Honorius III in 1221 with the *Memoriale Propositi*. Franciscan Pope Nicholas IV revised it in 1289. Pope Leo XIII approved a new rule called *Misericors Dei Filius* in 1883. The current rule was given by Pope Paul VI in 1978 with the Apostolic letter *Seraphicus Patriarcha*. It is designed to adapt the Secular Franciscan Order to the needs and expectations of the Church based on the changing times.

The spirit of the Rule can be found in Article 4 of the OFS rule:

The rule and life of the Secular Franciscan is this: To observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people of Christ, the gift of the Father's love, is the way to him, the Truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the life which he has come to give abundantly. Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the Gospel, going from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel.

Structure of the Secular Franciscan Order

The Secular Franciscan Order is a canonical order of the Catholic Church. It is composed of fraternities at various levels: local, regional, national, and international. The OFS is governed by the universal law of the Church, by its own Rule, the Constitutions, the Ritual, and the statutes. (GGCC 46-74)

The council at each level animates and guides the fraternity at that level. The council usually consists of the minister, vice minister, secretary, treasurer, formation director, and councilors. They follow the Rule, the Constitutions, and their own Statutes which determine which offices are elected positions and which are appointed positions. (GGCC 76-80)

The interpretation of the Rule and of the Constitutions belongs to the Holy See. The General Chapter of the OFS and the international council, called the Presidency, interpret the Constitutions, with the purpose of ensuring that all levels of the Order are working and living in harmony with the Rule. (GGCC 5)

CIOFS, the international arm of the order with its headquarters in Rome, Italy, reports a worldwide membership of approximately 300,000 professed members.

Modified and edited from: [http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular Franciscan Order](http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_Franciscan_Order); [General Constitutions](#); [Secular Franciscan Rule](#)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. Based on the history provided above, develop a timeline for the Franciscan family.
2. Based on the explanation above of the Secular Franciscan Order, draw a chart of the different levels of the Order.

3. What is the responsibility of the Council?

Nature, Charism and Spirituality of the OFS

“There is ... a Franciscan doctrine ... which (says) God is holy, is great, and above all, is good, indeed the supreme Good. ...In this doctrine, God is love. He lives by love, creates for love, becomes flesh and redeems, that is, he saves and makes holy, for love. There is also a Franciscan way of contemplating Jesus: the meeting of uncreated Love with created love. Similarly, there is a method of loving Him and of imitating Him: in reality, it sees the Man-God, and prefers to consider Him in His holy Humanity, because this reveals Him more clearly and... allows Him to be touched. From this arises a burning devotion to the Incarnation and the Passion of Jesus, because these (mysteries) allow us to see Him, not so much in His glory, in His omnipotent grandeur, or in His eternal triumph, as rather in His human love – so tender in the manger, so sorrowful on the cross.” – St. Pius X

Francis's spirituality is simply to “observe the Gospel.”

The Franciscan emphasis, then, is on the fact that God is love. While every Christian believes this, Franciscans choose to emphasize it as Francis did. They devote themselves to living the Gospel according to the spirit of Francis, especially to careful reading of the Gospel and going from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel. (OFS Rule 4)

As a summary of the elements of Franciscan spirituality, a Franciscan should live:

- in communion with the poor and crucified Christ,
- in the love of God,
- in brother/sisterhood with all people and all of creation,
- participating in the life and mission of the Church,
- in continual conversion,
- in a life of prayer – liturgical, personal, communal,
- as instruments of peace.

Charism: Being secular

One of the most important consequences of the Secular Franciscan charism is that our spiritual formation must cater to us who live in secular circumstances. Intimate union with Christ lies at the heart of the OFS vocation. Therefore, we, as Secular Franciscans, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in our brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church and in liturgical activity. (OFS Rule 5) We do this by studying, loving and, most of all, by living in an integrated way the human and evangelical aspects of our life in the world.

We, as twenty-first century Secular Franciscans, live out the secular aspect of our charism by paying attention to three things: learning from the lives of past Secular Franciscans who lived as parents, single people, kings and queens, recluses and people involved in serving; being creative

in confronting evangelization in the third millennium; cultivating a deep understanding and knowledge of our Father Francis.

The Secular Franciscan charism is not given to an individual but to a group of brothers and sisters. As times change, it has to adapt to the needs and expectations of the Holy Church. Thus, from the outset, we are a group that is shaped by the Holy Church, and it is only in this context that the charism can thrive.

Modified and edited from selections from [http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular Franciscan Order](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_Franciscan_Order) and **For Up to Now Manual, United States; OFS Rule**

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. In your words, what is Franciscan spirituality?
2. In your words, what is the Franciscan charism?
3. How can we live our charism in the 21st Century?

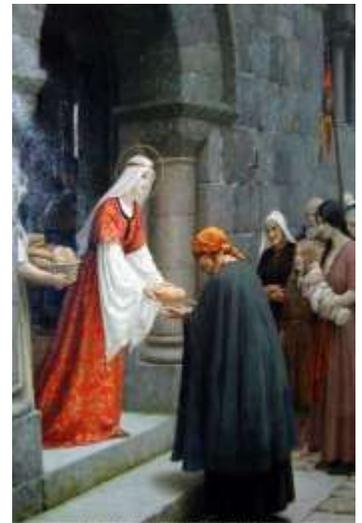
Theme 4: Life and Mission of the OFS

We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined to our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are brothers to Him when we do the will of the Father Who is in Heaven (Mt 12:50); mothers, when we carry Him in our heart and body (cf. 1 Cor 6:20) through divine love and pure and sincere conscience and when we give birth to Him through a holy manner of working, which should shine before others as an example (cf. Mt 5:16). – **Second Letter of St. Francis of Assisi to the Faithful**

As Secular Franciscans, we commit ourselves to live the Gospel according to Franciscan spirituality in our secular condition. We must personally study the Gospel and Sacred Scripture to foster love for the word of the Gospel and help the brothers and sisters to know and understand it.

We promise to live in the spirit of daily conversion. (OFS Rule 7) Some ways to cultivate this characteristic of the Franciscan vocation, individually and in fraternity, are: listening to and celebrating the Word of God; evaluating our lives; spiritual retreats; seeking the help of a spiritual adviser, and penitential celebrations.

As Secular Franciscans, we should pledge ourselves to live the spirit of the Beatitudes and, in a special way, the spirit of poverty. (OFS Rule 11) Evangelical poverty demonstrates trust in the Father, assists with interior freedom, and disposes us to promote a more just distribution of



wealth. We must provide for our own families and serve society by means of our work, and maintain a form of evangelical poverty.

To understand and achieve evangelical poverty requires a strong personal commitment and the support of the fraternity in prayer and dialogue, a communal review of life, and attentiveness to the instructions of the Church, and the demands of society.

We, as Secular Franciscans, pledge ourselves to reduce our own personal needs so as to be better able to share spiritual and material goods with our brothers and sisters, especially those most in need. We should give thanks to God for the goods we have received, using them as good stewards and not as owners. We should love and practice purity of heart, the source of true fraternity.

Modified and edited from: [http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular Franciscan Order](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_Franciscan_Order); OFS Rule

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. What does “daily conversion” mean?
2. How can I help myself with “daily conversion?”
3. How do I know that I am going through the process of “daily conversion”?
4. How can I practice poverty as a Secular Franciscan?

Theme 5: Profession and Life in Fraternity

Profession

“Profession is the solemn ecclesial act by which the candidate, remembering the call received from Christ, renews the baptismal promises and publicly affirms his or her personal commitment to live the Gospel in the world according to the example of Francis and following the Rule of the OFS. Profession incorporates the candidate into the Order and is by its nature a perpetual commitment.” – (OFS General Constitutions, Articles 37:1, 42:1-2)

Profession, by its nature, is a permanent commitment. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. “The moment of Profession is a specific moment. It just doesn’t happen. It is prepared for and is joyfully anticipated.” – Fr. Richard Trezza, OFM.

“The liturgy of Profession gives one the opportunity to make an appropriate response to God – the One who gave the call in the first place. Participation in the Profession Rite, is a ‘confession of faith – confessio fidei’ on the part of the one being professed. It says that we believe in such a way, that we are willing to allow our words and actions to betray the fact that we are true followers of Jesus Christ and His Gospel.”

“God does not allow us to make promises that He is not willing to help us keep.”

The Holy Spirit is called down upon those of us to be professed during the ceremony in a way similar to the type of invocation prayed at Mass upon the gifts of bread and wine so that they may be transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

“Profession is an Action of Christ and of the Church” – not just our own action. It is an event in the life of the Church – a life-changing event in God's time...and in our time.

“Our membership in the fraternity is a cause of great joy and hope for the members of this community.”

Although profession is not a sacrament, it is sacramental in nature. It reminds us of God's interaction in our lives...

“Mass emphasizes what takes place at Profession, that is, there is a sacrificial dimension of self-giving taking place. By promising to live the Gospel life, we, the candidates, make ourselves entirely available to God and place our own bodies (persons) on the altar of Christ's sacrifice, as a holy victim pleasing to God.”

We become Franciscans NOT to become another Francis, but rather to journey toward Christ and eternal life with God – with Francis as our guide and our inspiration.

(Modified and edited from selections from Richard Trezza, OFM, **For Up to Now Formation Manual, United States**), Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order, General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order (Art. 41, 42)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. Why do you want to be professed?
2. Describe your profession day.
3. How will profession change your life?

Life in Fraternity

The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love. (Chapter 3, Art. 22, OFS Rule)

Chapter Three of the OFS Rule provides specific guidelines of what it means to be a Secular Franciscan participating in the life of the Fraternity. In short, we, as Secular Franciscans agree to being personally present at fraternity gatherings. We should participate in daily prayer and be witnesses to the Gospel. We should actively collaborate, based on our own situation, and embrace the obligation of animating the Fraternity.

Each Fraternity is animated and guided by a council that has a ready and willing spirit to serve. While we are not expected to serve as council members as soon as we are professed, we may be

invited to serve in a variety of capacities. We should accept and embrace the opportunity. The Holy Spirit will guide and support us through the process.

The local fraternity is the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members. The entire community is engaged in the process of growth.

When we find ourselves in particular difficulties, we, as members, should discuss our problems with the council in fraternal dialogue.

Withdrawal or permanent dismissal from the Order, if necessary, is an act of the fraternity council. Such an act is taken seriously and prayerfully. (GC 58-59)

To foster communion among members, the council organizes regular and frequent meetings of the community as well as meetings with other Franciscan groups, especially with youth groups. The council should adopt appropriate means for growth in Franciscan and ecclesial life and encourage everyone to a life of fraternity. The communion continues with deceased brothers and sisters through prayer for them.

Regarding expenses necessary for the life of the fraternity and the needs of worship, of the apostolate, and of charity, we, as brothers and sisters, should all offer a contribution according to our means. Local fraternities should contribute toward the expenses of the higher fraternity councils.

As a concrete sign of communion and co-responsibility, the council asks for spiritual assistance from one of the other branches of our Franciscan family. This request is made to the superiors of the four religious Franciscan families to whom the Secular Fraternity has been united for centuries. (GGCC 85-91)

To promote fidelity to the charism as well as observance of the rule and to receive greater support in the life of the fraternity, the minister or president, with the consent of the council, should ask for a regular pastoral visit by the appropriate religious superiors as well as for a fraternal visit from those of the higher fraternities, according to the constitutions. (GGCC 95)

– [OFS Rule, Chapter 3; General Constitutions](#)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. How will I serve in my Fraternity?
2. Describe your brothers and sisters in your Fraternity?
3. What are the needs of my brothers and sisters?

Theme 6: Franciscan Youth: Way of life, Organization, Stages, Relationship to the OFS

The OFS, by virtue of its very vocation, ought to be ready to share its 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. (Art. 96.1 GGCC)

Membership in YOUFRA contributes to the integral formation of young people, helping them to have a clearer vision of God and Life. This knowledge brings them together and leads them to live in fraternity and to seek an ever more solid experience of their life and mission in the light of St. Francis of Assisi. (Art. 96.2 GGCC)

GIFRAJUFRA
YOUFRAJEFRA
FRAMA

Franciscan Youth (YOUFRA) is the fellowship of young people who feel called to experience their Christian life in fraternity with St. Francis of Assisi as their model. It is the responsibility of Secular Franciscans to guide and animate them.

Living in a YOUFRA Franciscan fraternity transforms young people's life, strengthens their identity, promotes their commitment to the mission, nourishes them with the Gospel and Franciscan spirituality in their state and stage in life, progressively leading them to a mature commitment based on the form of life (Rule) of the Secular Franciscan Order, which responsibly assists Franciscan Youth. (Art. 96. 3 GGCC)

The joy of finding the face of the Father and his tender gaze clarifies the vision of the young person and clears the heart of everything pulling him toward being a brother, charitable, loving, available, servant... and above all a young person who lives his vocational journey joyfully. "... my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." Lk. 1,46-47

ORGANIZATION

Using the OFS Rule as inspiration, YOUFRA is organized in a similar way as fraternities at the various levels – local, regional and national. It is coordinated internationally and participates in the Presidency of the International Council of the OFS, according to its own rules. It is always inspired by the Rule of the OFS which is particularly responsible. YOUFRA receives spiritual assistance from the First Franciscan Order or the Third Regular Order.

STAGES: Formation Program

Although they possess unique Statutes, we can clearly identify the three stages of the different YOUFRA fraternities that exist in the world:

FRANCISCAN YOUTH

Initiation	Formation towards commitment to YouFra	Deepening one's vocation
		
<p>Attracted by the testimony of Franciscan life, they begin learning about Francis and YOUFRA.</p>	<p>Prior to their time of learning and basic living, they are admitted into the YOUFRA fraternity through a rite of initiation.</p>	<p>Having deepened their fraternal living and knowledge of being Franciscan, they are disposed to living the vocation and achieve this by making a promise according to a ritual.</p>

RELATIONSHIP TO THE OFS

As OFS brothers and sisters, we “are particularly responsible for Franciscan Youth” (YOUFRA) and we should promote times in common with them and the other members of the Franciscan Family for the sake of strengthening and building the universal brotherhood that our Seraphic Father, St. Francis of Assisi, sought.

YOUFRA is fed by the Rule (the form of life of the Secular Franciscan Order), the document that is the basis of their inspiration.

As members of the OFS, we should strive to transmit our Franciscan charism to those young among us who have a love for St. Francis. We must make the charism attractive to our youth and transmit the validity of the call of God.

The OFS Rule, General Constitutions and YOUFRA documents all state that every OFS fraternity needs to appoint a fraternal animator who will accompany a YOUFRA fraternity. Its primary goal is to be present with the youth in their human, Christian and Franciscan journey.

But, it is also important to note that our ministry to youth through YOUFRA is not meant to necessarily bring more vocations to the OFS, but rather to teach them about Francis and his journey, guide our youth in finding their own personal vocation within the Church and to start them on their personal spiritual journeys.

If a YOUFRA member decides to enter the OFS, then the fraternal animator and the spiritual assistant, with the rest of council, need to accompany her/him on this vocation journey in the OFS, explaining to her/him the possibility of double belonging.

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. What is YOUFRA? What is its relationship to the Secular Franciscan Order?
2. What can I do to reach out to the youth in my community?
3. As a Secular Franciscan, what is my responsibility to the youth with whom I come in contact?

Theme 7: Spiritual Assistance – A Gift to Fraternity

Based on the thoughts and feelings of St. Francis of Assisi we have a Universal Fraternity. We are all a great family, and in this context, it is not strange that within the Franciscan Family that was forged by divine inspiration, we find the link of unity and collaboration. We call it “vital reciprocity.” Spiritual and pastoral care for us, as Secular Franciscans, is entrusted by the Church to the First Franciscan Order and the Third Order Regular. (“Altius moderamen” dealt with this in canon 303 of the CDC).



This responsibility to care for one another is meant to strengthen the Franciscan family. The “Altius Moderamen”, according to the General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order, requires the Friars of the First and Third Order Regular to “guarantee the fidelity of the OFS to the Franciscan charism, communion with the Church and union with the Franciscan Family, values which represent a vital commitment for the Secular Franciscans.” (GGCC 85.2)

As such, Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance plays a particularly important role.

Spiritual Assistance, as it is explained in the documents of the OFS, is expected at all levels (local, regional, national, international), in particular in the local fraternity, the basic cell of the OFS, and Franciscan Youth.

A Gift to Fraternity

The Spiritual Assistant guides us in the Franciscan journey, helping us to live the ideal of our Seraphic Father with fidelity. The Spiritual Assistant is a gift of God that unites and strengthens the Fraternity as a Franciscan family. He/she doesn’t just accompany, he/she guides, enlightens, leads. Indeed, the Spiritual Assistant is a special gift to the OFS fraternity.

Indeed, the whole fraternity is a gift. It is the family that God gives us. And, even greater and more beautiful is the fact that God also gives us a brother or a sister who will accompany us, guide us, and lead us through the experience of our vocation. The Lord gave me brothers...

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. What is the role of the Spiritual Assistant?
2. Why is the Spiritual Assistant an important part of the Fraternity?
3. How can I reach out to my Spiritual Assistant and include him or her into my Fraternity?

Chapter 3:

“The Secular Franciscan”

This chapter has as its purpose to strengthen the sense of being a Secular Franciscan, pointing out the way of life that we should follow, the observance of the Gospel, putting the rule into practice. It seeks to deepen the understanding of the mission and the importance of service to the OFS, to the Church and to the world. It also considers within this context the study and deepening of understanding of Franciscan Youth, a movement for which the OFS feels particularly responsible; and Spiritual Assistance, seeking to highlight the importance of working together as a Franciscan family and the life-giving union that nourishes and gives us life.



- The Way of Life: The Gospel; The Secular Franciscan Life
- The Rule and the Constitutions
- Service: Our Commitment in the World Based on the Franciscan Experience and Its Importance (JPIC, Family, Work, Apostolates)

Theme 1: The Way of Franciscan Life: The Gospel; The Secular

The Gospel and the Rule are guides for us to live our Secular Franciscan vocation. Below are quotes from the Bible, the Catechism and the Rule which provide a roadmap for us as members of the OFS. With each quote, take time to meditate and discuss what it means and how it directs us. Before we begin, let us review what meditation and contemplation mean.

Meditation & Contemplation:

Meditation is the act of giving your attention to only one thing, either as a religious activity or as a way of becoming calm and relaxed. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking. The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain. We are usually helped by books like the Sacred Scriptures, particularly the

Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts of the day or season, writings of the spiritual fathers, works of spirituality, the great book of creation, and that of history – the page on which the “today” of God is written. (CCC 2705)

There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters. Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they come to resemble the three first kinds of soil in the parable of the sower. But a method is only a guide: the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus. (CCC 2707)

Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. “I look at him and he looks at me.” This is what a certain peasant of Ars used to say to his holy curé about his prayer before the tabernacle. This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus, it learns the “interior knowledge of our Lord,” the more to love him and follow him. (CCC 2715)

St. Clare of Assisi, one of the first followers of St. Francis and his spiritual friend, offers the contemplative way: “Gaze upon Him. Reflect on Him. Contemplate Him. Desire to Imitate Him.”

Quotes to Meditate & Contemplate:

“The rule and life of the Secular Franciscan is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people.” (OFS/Rule, Art 4)

“After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most, High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me.” (St. Francis, The Testament)

“And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. Hence “access to Sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful.” (CCC 131)

The Church “forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful... to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ,’ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’” (CCC 133)

“The Church as always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord.” (DV 21) Both nourish and govern the whole Christian life. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Ps 119; 105; cf: Is. 50:4) (CCC 141)

Then they said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?’ (Luke 24:32)

Questions to discuss and meditate:

1. How can we live this Gospel life?
2. Why belong to the Secular Franciscan Order? What is the difference between living a Christian life and being a Secular Franciscan?

References:
Bible
Rule of OFS
Testament of St. Francis
Catechism of Catholic Church



Theme 2: The Rule and the Constitutions

Note to Reader: Before continuing this chapter, read the OFS Rule and the OFS Constitutions carefully. They are the roadmap for our lives and decisions.

The Rule that we present to you today is not only the fruit of this labor. The Church consigns it to you as a norm of life. – *Letter of Four Ministers General of the Franciscan Family.*

“The present rule, succeeding *Memoriale Propositi* (1221) and the rules approved by the Supreme Pontiffs Nicholas IV and Leo XIII, adapts the Secular Franciscan Order to the needs and expectations of the Holy Church in the conditions of changing times. Its interpretation belongs to the Holy See and its application will be made by the General Constitutions and particular statutes.” (OFS/Rule, Art 3)

“... we nurture the hope that the form of life preached by that admirable Man from Assisi, will gain a new impetus and will flourish vigorously...” (Pope Paul VI, *Seraphicus Patriarcha*)

After reading the rule, discuss, meditate and contemplate on the key words below which give you the essence of what the rule and the constitutions require of us as Secular Franciscans. Discuss each to deepen your understanding. As you go through the key words, ask yourself, “How will this have impact on my life?”

THE OFS RULE (Key Words of the Rule)

CHAPTER ONE: THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

Articles:

1. THE FRANCISCAN FAMILY – the one great family of St Francis – all followers
2. SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER – special place in family circle
3. THE RULE – approved 1978; previous Rules 1221, 1289, 1883.

CHAPTER TWO: THE WAY OF LIFE

Franciscan Vocation is firmly based on union with Christ and His Church

4. GOSPEL – basis of Rule
5. CHRIST – in brothers and sisters, in Scripture, in Church, in Eucharist
6. CHURCH – by Baptism, by Profession, rebuild Church, loyalty to Pope
7. PENANCE – Conversion, Sacrament of Penance
8. PRAYER – Private, Liturgical, Eucharist

Specific Franciscan dimension of our Christian life.

9. MARY – imitate her self-giving and pray earnestly
10. OBEDIENCE – fulfilling duties of vocation in life – obedience of Christ
11. POVERTY – detachment from material goods – poor Christ
12. PURITY OF HEART – unselfish love for all – and open heart
13. CHARITY – see Christ in others – others as “gifts” from God
14. KINGDOM OF GOD – build up Kingdom – spiritual values – spirit of service

Specific apostolic services

15. JUSTICE – promotes justice, decisions according to one’s Faith
16. WORK – as gift, as service to others
17. FAMILY – peace in family, fidelity and respect for life, caring for children
18. CREATION – respect for all God’s Creation – no exploitation of nature
19. PEACE – be instruments of peace – like St Francis

CHAPTER THREE: LIFE IN FRATERNITY

20. LEVELS OF FRATERNITY – International, National, Regional, Local
21. PRESIDENT AND COUNCIL – each level has President and Council to animate/guide
22. LOCAL FRATERNITY – here members have “sense of Church” and Franciscan vocation
23. ADMISSION OF NEW MEMBERS – distinctive sign, etc.
24. MEETINGS OF FRATERNITY – to encourage life in fraternity
25. COMMON FUND – for needs of worship, apostolate and charity

26. SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE – as sign of unity within Franciscan family – Pastoral and Fraternal Visitation

Prepared by Fr. Dominic Hession ofm

Discuss... Meditate ... Contemplate on the following quotes:

In the Lord Jesus Christ, I admonish and exhort all my sisters, both those present and those to come, to strive always to imitate the way of holy simplicity, humility, and poverty and to preserve the integrity of our holy manner of life, as we were taught by our blessed Father Francis from the beginning of our conversion to Christ. (*Testament of Clare 17*)

Charisms are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them, and by all members of the Church as well. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic promptings of this same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charisms. (*CCC 801*)

The initiative of lay Christians is necessary especially when the matter involves discovering or inventing the means for permeating social, political and economic realities with the demands of Christian doctrine and life. This initiative is a normal element of the life of the Church... Lay believers are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the common Head, and of the bishops in communion with him. They are the Church. (*CCC 899*)

In the Church, “lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this power [of governance] in accord with the norm of law” ... (*CCC 911*)

“During this period of time, the Constitutions have been studied and put into practice by the Fraternities of the OFS on all levels and, little by little, have marked them with the characteristics of the secularity, unity and autonomy of our Order. Not all has been easy and some aspects have still to be assimilated fully in order that, at the dawn of the Third Millennium, the OFS should really become ‘an army that can be in the vanguard in the Church and in the world to build a more human and Christian society’ as Cardinal Hamer, Prefect of the Congregation for ICLSAL wished in 1990. ” ... (*Promulgation of the General Constitutions – Emanuela De Nunzio*)

Questions for discussion and meditation:

1. How would you describe the spirit of the Rule and General Constitutions?
2. Why is it relevant that we should have, know and follow the General Constitutions?
3. What are the significant changes of the rule approved by Pope Paul VI on June 24, 1978?

References:
Bible
Rule of OFS
Testament of St Clare
Catechism of Catholic Church.
Letter of four Ministers General of
Franciscan Family
Promulgation of General Constitutions –
Emanuela De Nunzio



Theme 3: Service: Our Commitment in the World Based on the Franciscan Experience and Its Importance (JPIC, Family, Work, Apostolates)

The Rule, the Bible, the Catechism and Francis' own words clearly address our commitment in the World. Meditate and discuss the following. Let us ask ourselves, "What is our talent? What is our gift to the Lord? What is our service to the Lord and his little children?"

“When daylight came he left the house and made his way to a lonely place. The crowds went to look for him, and when they had caught up with him they wanted to prevent him leaving them, but he answered, 'I must proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God to the other towns too, because that is what I was sent to do.' And he continued his preaching in the synagogues of Judea.” (Lk 4: 42-44)

“Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively. Mindful that anyone “who follows Christ, the perfect man, becomes more of a man himself,” let them exercise their responsibilities competently in Christian spirit of service.” (OFS/Rule, Art 14)

“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”. (OFS/Rule, Art 15)

“Happy those who endure in peace. By you, Most High, they will be crowned.” (St. Francis, “The Canticle of the Creatures”)

“Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectancy of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come. That is why, although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society. (CCC 1049)

Among the special graces ought to be mentioned the graces of state that accompany the exercise of the responsibilities of the Christian life and of the ministries within the Church: Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (CCC 2004)

The faithful should “distinguish carefully between the rights and the duties which they have as belonging to the Church and those which fall to them as members of the human society. They will strive to unite the two harmoniously, remembering that in every temporal affair they are to be guided by a Christian conscience, since no human activity, even of the temporal order, can be withdrawn from God's dominion.” (CCC 912)

“Participation” is the voluntary and generous engagement of a person in social interchange. It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. (CCC 1913)

As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life. The manner of this participation may vary from one country or culture to another. “One must pay tribute to those nations whose systems permit the largest possible number of the citizens to take part in public life in the climate of genuine freedom.” (CCC 1915)

Questions for discussion and meditation:

1. How can you show love to your neighbor?
2. What examples of injustice suffered by the poor can you mention? How can you help?
3. How can you simplify your way of living and help the environment?

References:
Bible
Rule of OFS
Canticle of the Creatures
Catechism of Catholic Church



CHAPTER 4:

“Mary and the Holy Spirit – Our Companions on the Journey”

This last chapter considers the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, not as least important, rather as being always present in our lives. They accompany us, they help us and inspire us. This chapter highlights the following themes:

- Francis, the Secular Franciscan and Mary: Lady of the Porziuncula in the History of Humanity and in Our Lives
- The Holy Spirit: Lord and Giver of Life



Theme 1: Francis, the Secular Franciscan and Mary: Lady of the Porziuncula in the History of Humanity and in Our Lives

“Francis surrounded himself with an indescribable love for the Mother of Jesus, for having made the Lord of majesty our brother. He gave her special praises, he multiplied prayers for her, he offered affections, as many and such as cannot be expressed in human language. But what is most joyful to know is that he made her the advocate for the Order, and put it under her wings, to nourish and protect the children to the end. Oh, Advocate of the poor, fulfill your mission as tutor until the day appointed by the Father. (Br. Thomas de Celano, Second Life, 198)

If we take a quick look at the life of St. Francis of Assisi, we can clearly appreciate the affection with which he addressed the Mother of Our Lord, how close he felt to her, how much he sought her, and how often he invited the brothers to love her.



We, as Secular Franciscans, following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, seek and promote in various forms devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and we include her in a special way in our Rule and in the General Constitutions “... she is the model for hearing the Word and for being faithful to the vocation...” (Rule 9, GGCC art. 16. 1).

“The Virgin Mary, humble servant of the Lord, always attentive to his word and to all her actions, was for St. Francis the center of unspeakable love, and was declared by him Protectress and Advocate for his family. Secular Franciscans bear witness to their ardent love for Her by the imitation of her unconditional availability, and in the outpouring of a confident and conscious prayer.” SFO Rule art. 9

We, Secular Franciscans, are called in a special way to live a vocation that, although Franciscan, should be marked by being Marian. *“Let the brethren cultivate intense love for the Blessed Virgin through imitation, prayer and filial devotion. Let them manifest their personal devotion with expressions of authentic faith, in the forms accepted by the Church.”* (GGCC. art. 16. 1 p. 2)

Throughout history we find Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus. We also find her in different cultures today. It is not uncommon to see that devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is growing in a very special way even in countries where our faith is not professed. It is a sign of strength, perseverance, hope and faith that is achieving a significant change in current history.



The lady of the Porziuncula in the history of humanity and in our lives.

The small church dedicated to Saint Mary of the Angels (“The Porziuncula”) has on its main altar the image of the Annunciation to Mary with a very important passage:

In the words of the angel we see how she describes Mary, “Full of grace.... You are blessed ...”. We think of Mary as mature, obedient: *“I am the slave of the Lord,”* responsible and determined: *“Let it be done to me according to your word.”* These are two phrases that St. Francis of Assisi made his own and lived, *“Who art thou, and who am I a vile little worm?”* and his gift to the service of God: *“Lord, what do you want me to do?”*

To speak of Saint Mary of the Angels (The Porziuncula) is to also speak of Mary, the Mother who listens, the Mother who assists, the Mother who intercedes. This small church which Francis honored as a holy place for Mary, holds a plenary indulgence for those who follow the guidelines. Mary was the intercessor for God to grant Francis such a request. Our Lady of the Porziuncula represents that constant invitation to come to trust as Francis did. She was the one whom he never left. She was his Faithful Mother.

Seeing the faithful testimony of Mary throughout history, let us emphasize her courage, from the beginning, by questioning the Angel, by accepting to be the Mother of God, by walking with everything against her, by taking care of our Lord since she conceived him, by putting her life at risk, her reputation, her future, by accepting to bear the Cross of pain by accompanying her Son, by taking the leadership role after the departure of Jesus, by leading the Apostles, by guiding. She is undoubtedly an example and a model to follow today as the Franciscans are called in a more intense way to rebuild the moral and social fabric of humanity. Keep in mind all of Mary’s qualities, among them courage and leadership.

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. Why is Mary so important to me as a Secular Franciscan?
2. How do we know that Francis had a strong devotion to Mary?
3. Why does Mary make me a better Secular Franciscan?

Theme 2: The Holy Spirit: Lord and Giver of Life

When he comes, the Spirit of truth will guide you to complete truth; he will not speak of his own accord, but he will speak based on what he hears, and he will announce to you what is to come. (Jn. 16, 13)

The mission of the Holy Spirit is to give the testimony of the Father and the Son, and of the truth in all things. With that we contemplate that the Father and Son are love and that truth is life. The Holy Spirit enlightens us to follow the way of love to which the Father has called us.



Our Rule says: Oh, how blessed are they while they do such things and persevere in such things! Because the Spirit of the Lord will rest on them and will make his home in them. (Prologue of the OFS Rule)

Article 2 emphasizes that the Secular Franciscan Order, “...has a special place” within the Franciscan Family that at the same time is a family enlightened by the Holy Spirit in the Church. It identifies the Holy Spirit as the one who pushes us to reach for the perfection of charity in our secular state, motivating us through our Profession to commit ourselves to live the Secular Franciscan vocation.

Clearly, we appreciate that the Holy Spirit is manifested in a special way for us, as Secular Franciscans. He motivates us in life with reason, motion and energy on our journey. He animates us, accompanies us, instructs us, drives us and helps us to grow. As John, the Evangelist says... he guides us to the complete truth that is God.

By living according to the Holy Spirit, we, Secular Franciscans, are called to rebuild the Church, motivating and animating, multiplying the effects with our testimony of life, attracting more children to God and toward the knowledge of the Father and his truths, toward the light, the love and the life. For this reason, it is of vital importance to keep in mind that without our General Minister, the Holy Spirit, life with a vocation would have no motivation, no reason to be. As such, it is necessary at all times to invoke his presence, assistance and help in order to live a faithful life based on the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, a life well lived and transmitted.

“And all whoever keep these things, in heaven he will be blessed by the Most High Father, and on the earth, he will be blessed by his beloved Son with the Most Holy Spirit, the Paraclete...”
(Blessing of St. Francis: Testament V. 40)

Questions for discussion or meditation:

1. How does the Holy Spirit support our Franciscan journey?
2. What is the mission of the Holy Spirit?
3. What is the role of the Holy Spirit – in the Church and in the Franciscan Family?

PEACE AND ALL GOOD!

We thank all those who support the formation process to keep the charism alive.