

Re : Workshop #1

The Nature of the FSO and the Franciscan Secular Vocation

Excerpts from the Manual of CIOFS : section The Nature of the SFO
If desired, see The Nature of the SFO, in Power Point on the CD

The nature of the SFO is defined very precisely by 3 pivotal factors:

1. Its **genesis** and the **intention** of the Founder, St Francis, based on the **inspiration** he received from God who wanted its foundation.
2. Its **historical evolution**.
3. The **will expressed by the Church** through
 - the **legislation** which has provided for it and
 - the **Magisterium** of the Church herself, expressed by the Supreme Pontiffs through the course of history.

To examine the **first** and the **second** points, one must consider, in its whole context, the *marvellous work* (Little Flowers, Ch 10) which God *intended to do* through Francis and which, following Francis, found its continued implementation not only in a single Order, but in an entire family, *the Franciscan Family*, in its three components: the First, the Second and the Third Orders, the *Franciscan trilogy*.

What is this *Franciscan trilogy*?

The FRANCISCAN TRILOGY is the first (and only) religious experience, preordained to apostolic life, including three Orders, born simultaneously, designed to include all states of life. Francis received from Christ very precise directions: “**go, repair my house...**” The Pope confirmed this to him and the plan became clear: to **accomplish in themselves conversion and preach it to others** (*facere et predicare poenitentiam*). Francis began work immediately and put all his confidence in the Spirit. St Francis did not deliberately want to *found* three Orders. In the institution of his three Orders, Francis let himself be guided solely by the Spirit of the Lord. He welcomed this reality as it flourished in his hands, without any predetermined plan.

So, his three Orders were born and soon Francis realized that all of them (each according to its own condition) related **to his own apostolic mission** of restoring the house of the Lord and entrusted to his three Orders, *in the fidelity to their vocations*, the joint co-responsibility of mutual fraternal help, in their journey towards the Lord²⁶. Essentially, saint Francis gave his three orders only one rule: **a more perfect observance of the Gospel, according to their state of life**. The commitment of a permanent conversion to the Gospel (*facere poenitentiam*) must permeate the life of all three of the Orders.

In view of their preordained apostolic mission, the three Franciscan Orders are not related among themselves hierarchically, but from the institutional point of view, they are on an equal level of importance, **in the need of recognizing their spiritual interdependence and their need of mutual assistance**. In the reformatory context of the Fourth Lateran Council, St Francis **is the first to be led to founding a religious trilogy**.

The **nature of our Order** can begin to be outlined as follows:

- a group of Christian lay faithful evangelically committed in their own condition of secular life for a full response to the call to follow Christ, humble, poor and crucified **like St Francis**.
- The Secular Franciscans, along with the brothers and sisters of the First and the Second Orders, are **committed to achieving the mission that God entrusted to Francis to repair his house, which is the Church, the Body of Christ**, in all its manifestations, so that it can fulfill its mission of salvation,

announcing the conversion and the message of the Gospel to all creatures. (*Convert and believe the Gospel*).

- The Secular Franciscans, while not religious³⁶ in the strict sense, are committed by means of a **real and personal “religious” Profession** to witnessing to the new saving power of the Gospel, uniting themselves to the apostolate of the Brothers of the First Order and to the contemplation of the Poor Clares³³.

THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

The Secular Franciscan Order is a public Association in the Church. OFS Gen. Const., art. 1.5 – (Code of Canon Law [CCL] 301 §3; 312; 313) The SFO, as an **international public Association**, is connected by a special bond to the Roman Pontiff from whom it has received the **approval of its Rule and the confirmation of its mission** in the Church and in the world. OFS Gen. Const., Art. 99.2

The General Constitutions of the SFO open and close with these two fundamental statements which characterise the ecclesial nature of the SFO as: **A PUBLIC ASSOCIATION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITHFUL**

Let us now give a very brief description of WHAT ARE PUBLIC ASSOCIATIONS OF CHRISTIAN FAITHFUL according to the CCL:

- Associations **erected by the hierarchy** as corporations endowed with juridical rights.
- The Hierarchy assigns them a **canonical mission** because these Associations are established to share in the pastoral mission of the Hierarchy.
- **They act in the name of the Hierarchy** (*in nomine Ecclesiae = in the name of the Church*).

As a **Public Association of the Christian Faithful**, the **SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER**:

- exists through a deliberate act of the will of the Church³⁶ (it is the Church itself that wants its existence in as much as the **Church considers that it needs the SFO**),
- is **erected by the Holy See**
- is intimately connected to the life of the Church, from which it receives a **specific mission to be carried out in its name**.

³⁶ Stated and confirmed by the Church for 8 centuries.

However, looking at the SFO own law, we can underline the following specific differences with respect to the Code definitions of Public Associations of Faithful:

1. Hierarchy does not intervene in the nomination and removal of officers: SFO law allows it to elect its own ministers and councillors without the intervention of the Hierarchy. Removal by the hierarchy is obviously possible in extreme case.
2. Spiritual assistants do not exactly identify with the ecclesiastical assistants described in the Code. Moreover, by a special *privilege* granted to the SFO by the Holy See, they are appointed by the Major Superiors or by the General Ministers of the First Order and Third Order Regular, **on request of the Fraternities and not by imposition**.
3. The Rule and the General Constitutions are approved by the Holy See. **Statutes are approved by the same SFO authorities**.
4. The functions of control of property belong to the SFO. Only in case of disputes or of extinction of the Association, as a whole, would the Hierarchy dispose of the properties.

Now, let us look more closely at our Secular Franciscan Order, comparing it to what we have learned about the fundamental characteristics of a « third order ».

THIRD ORDERS

Secular associations **affiliated, associated** to a religious institute

They participate in the **spirit of the Institute to which they are affiliated**

Depends on a religious institute

A religious member of an Institute can become a member of the Third Order of another Institute, without any incompatibility.

The same person can be a member of third orders of different religious Institutes without any special authorization.

Any religious Institute may have its own Third Order, without requiring any special permission from the Apostolic See.

SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

Not associated or affiliated to First Order or TOR. The SFO was born completely **autonomous** and complementary to the other two Orders of the Franciscan Family.

The SFO is part of the religious family founded by St Francis, in his threefold expression. It **participates in the spirit of the entire family**, and not of a single part of it. **It has received the same charism and mission directly from the seraphic Father** just like the First and the Second Order.

The SFO was born independent of the other two Orders of the Family.

There is a marked difference with our law which dictates exactly the opposite: article 2.1 of General Constitutions.

This possibility is in contradiction with the CC.GG (article 2.1): —*The vocation to the SFO is a specific vocation that gives form to the life and the apostolic activity of its members* ||

The SFO is a Public Association of the Christian faithful **erected by the Supreme Pontiff and not by a religious institute.**

None of the three First Orders, nor the TOR holds the SFO as —its own third Order || .

The SFO has the privilege of being assisted collegially by its religious brothers rather than by the bishops.

All in all, as we can see, the differences are many and substantial that distinguish the Secular Franciscan Order from a —third order || as it defined by the Code.

The SFO is, in the Church, an Association of the Christian Faithful which is universal, constituted by the faithful and erected under the personal authority of the Supreme Pontiff.

As a Public Association, the SFO enjoys *the privilege* to be assisted pastorally and spiritually by its brothers of the First Order and the TOR rather than the Bishops, though remaining under their jurisdiction for apostolic activities in their respective dioceses (article CC.GG 101.2)

The SFO is *autonomous* (has its own law) and *united*, living in fullness its *secularity*, to completely fulfil its role in the common mission of the Franciscan Family.

These three features, **autonomy, unity, and secularity** are the essential characteristics which make up the constitutive elements of the nature of the SFO.

The SFO has its own particular law which, in a certain way, derives its inspiration more from the laws of religious than from pure and simple associations of the Christian faithful.

The SFO, in some respects, resembles a third order, while not having the basic characteristics mentioned in the Code of Canon Law.

The SFO follows, essentially, the norms of Public Associations of the Christian faithful, although marked by many peculiarities that make it a Public Association of a unique kind, as we have seen.

Certainly, our denomination remains that of an —Order || , both for our historical origin and to underline the peculiarity and the uniqueness of our nature, charism and mission in the Church and in the Franciscan Family.

Certainly the SFO is and will always be “the” Third Franciscan Order, the same as always, in an uninterrupted continuity with the one founded by St Francis.

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