

Chapter II Identity of the SFO

1. Life Project

It is essential to understand clearly the charism, mission and prophetic role of the SFO in the Church and today's society in order to foster the growth of mutual and lifegiving communion between the Seculars and the religious of the various Franciscan Orders and within the Franciscan Family.

1.1. Vocation of the Secular Franciscans

The vocation of the Secular Franciscans arises from the universal call to holiness. We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (941): "Lay people share in Christ's priesthood: ever more united with him, they exhibit the grace of Baptism and Confirmation in all dimensions of their personal, family, social, and ecclesial lives, and so fulfill the call to holiness addressed to all the baptized."

As penitents, the Secular Franciscans aspire to conversion of heart, knowing that in this way God will fill them with himself, for he is the Holy One. In his *Letter to the Faithful* or *Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*, Saint Francis presents "doing penance" as a way of Christian life and as doing the will and works of the Father. And in his *Testament* (1-3) he describes clearly a well-defined process of conversion: "The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body."¹

Such a conversion process, to be realized day by day, is essential for a life of penance:

- God initiates the process: "*The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way.*" This is the call, the "vocation" of the penitent.
- God leads the penitent to places where the penitent would rather not go; yet such times and places allow us to increase our trust in God.
- The penitent responds by accepting and placing self at the service of others and, in the final analysis, by acceptance of self: "*...and I showed mercy to them.*"
- This leads to happiness: "*...what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.*"

1.2. Penance, the way of holiness

Penitents are those who desire to open their hearts to God while living among ordinary people who often long for happiness even though they may not be aware of the need for conversion of heart. All Franciscan men and women, whether Seculars or

¹ Test 1-3; FA:ED I, 124.

members of religious Orders, have the responsibility to teach by word and example that “penance” (*metanoia*) is a positive act of self-realization. It is a change in our heart when it opens itself to God’s action in us, in union with Jesus, through the power of the Spirit. Unfortunately we have a tendency to confuse “penance” with “doing penance.” The two things are not the same.

The *traditional works of penance* to which we are called—fasting, almsgiving—are a result of our decision to open our hearts to God. In themselves, these things do not lead us to God or to conversion, even though they are helpful in our conversion. For example, unless we fast with the intention of opening ourselves more to God’s action, what use is it? It is simply a diet concealed behind a lofty motive. If in giving alms or helping the poor, as the Lord exhorts us, we do so selectively, we give only to those we decide are deserving. How can this open our hearts to trust in God’s power?

1.3. Secular Franciscans share the charism of Francis of Assisi

Saint Francis of Assisi—God’s gift to the Church, to the men and women of all the Franciscan Orders (religious and secular), and to the world—lived the gospel charism he left to all his children. Among the latter, within the Franciscan Family, are the Secular Franciscans. The Secular Franciscan Rule, with great simplicity, says that the members of the Franciscan Family “intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.”² We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “In the communion of saints, many and varied spiritualities have been developed throughout the history of the churches. The personal charism of some witnesses to God’s love for men has been handed on, like ‘the spirit’ of Elijah to Elisha and John the Baptist, so that their followers may have a share in this spirit.”³

The Secular Franciscans follow the same path as Francis in following Jesus. It consists in attuning our entire being to the Lord, truly God and truly human, living among us. Imitation does not mean duplication or cloning. Saint Francis was the “mirror of Christ” and we too must reflect the Lord Jesus in our life.

1.4. Secular Franciscans in the footsteps of Jesus

Secular Franciscans follow the Jesus of the Gospels, who was the center of Francis’s life. To the extent that we are able to share the primitive Franciscan charism, we will be able to present ourselves to the whole world as examples of true joy. As baptized Christians, Secular Franciscans should give an example of Christian life lived in simplicity, within the Church. They manifest this by living their values:

- obedience to the Holy Spirit,
- prayerful trust in divine Providence,
- grateful and simple use of the gifts of creation,
- delight in the gifts of God all around us,

² *Rule SFO*, 1.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (= CCC), 2684.

- joy at being a Christian in the Church,
- gratitude for the world seen as a gift,
- readiness to help others.

Franciscans, like all Christians, must be a living proof of the Incarnation, promoting the growth of the Kingdom of God in society. Since the one who is baptized is with Jesus, what could harm us? “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Rom 8:35). Saint Francis writes: “Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance. Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice. Where there is rest and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor restlessness. Where there is fear of the Lord to guard an entrance, there the enemy cannot have a place to enter. Where there is a heart full of mercy and discernment, there is neither excess nor hardness of heart.”⁴

1.5. Secular environment is what characterizes secularity

Secular Franciscans live the ordinary life of the Christian laity. Secular Franciscans who are bishops, priests or deacons live the ordinary life of the diocesan clergy.

The diocesan clergy and the laity strive to make present the gift of themselves to the world, as followers of Saint Francis and his way of following Jesus, wherever they are, just as they are, without pretense, with the hope and joy that should characterize followers of the Lord Jesus. This “secularity,” an essential feature of the life of the SFO, must be expressed by the Seculars in a way that can be recognized in their particular society and culture.

2. Secular Franciscan spirituality

2.1. Spirituality and spiritualities

According to the *General Constitutions of the SFO*, “the principal task of the assistant is...to co-operate in the initial and continuing formation” of the members of the SFO.⁵ This means helping them become conscious of their special role. For this reason assistants should be familiar with the main points of Vatican II ecclesiology and the document *Christifideles laici* (1988) on the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. They must also recognize how the main points of lay spirituality are present in the *Rule and Constitutions* of the SFO.

Among its various meanings, the word “spirituality” is used to refer to styles of Christian life associated with specific existential circumstances (lay spirituality, priestly spirituality, religious spirituality) or certain spiritual traditions (Benedictine spirituality,

⁴ Adm 27; FA:ED I, 136-37.

⁵ *Const.*, 90.1.

Franciscan spirituality). Here it is used in both senses, and for this reason we speak of *secular and Franciscan* spirituality.

To be sure, the *SFO Rule* is a mature fruit of Vatican II and later reflection, but at the same time it is also a faithful expression of the Franciscan spiritual heritage.

Let us briefly recall the main points of the conciliar documents. The laity: who they are, their special characteristic, their dignity as members of the People of God;⁶ the universal call to holiness in the Church;⁷ the Church's solidarity with the whole human family;⁸ the rightful autonomy of earthly affairs;⁹ the help the Church offers to human activity through Christians.¹⁰ The decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* speaks of the vocation and formation of the laity for the apostolate and about the ends, means and areas of their apostolate.

The *Rule* gives a Franciscan spirit and expression to these directives.¹¹ The synthesis of lay and Franciscan spirituality becomes more concrete in the *General Constitutions*.¹² Here we should note two documents from the ministers of the Franciscan Family: "I Have Done My Part," for the eighth centenary of the birth of Saint Francis (1981), and "Vocation and Mission of the Lay Franciscan Faithful in the Church and in the World" (1989). Both of these contain directives and important practical suggestions. In the first document, the special role of the SFO is described near the subheading "Concrete Efforts to Heal Human Ills."

It is not easy to speak of Franciscan spirituality in a way that will show all the riches it contains. Here we emphasize the basic points of this spirituality.

2.2. What is Franciscan spirituality?

Franciscan spirituality is one of the great spiritualities that finds expression in the Church in two major areas: the practical and concrete, and the speculative and doctrinal. It is a spirituality characterized by an intense experience, beginning in the thirteenth century with Saint Francis of Assisi and continuing in history with his followers until today. It cannot be easily captured in a few pages.

In Bortoli's book, *Lineamenti di spiritualità franciscana*, we find a simple definition that may be helpful in our reflection. Speaking of Franciscan spirituality, the author writes: "Franciscan spirituality is a form of spiritual life nourished by a desire to possess, ever more intensely, divine love as a love-response to God who is Love, through

⁶ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, (= LG) 30-36.

⁷ Cf. *LG*, Ch. V

⁸ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, (= GS) 1

⁹ Cf. *GS*, 36.

¹⁰ Cf. *GS*, 43.

¹¹ Cf. *Rule SFO*, 4-19.

¹² Cf. *Const.*, 8-16 on the form of life, and 17-27 on active presence in the Church and in the world.

Jesus Christ, conformed to him by means of total and loving observance of the Gospel.”¹³ Briefly, we can say that Franciscan spirituality is a form of life whose aim is to follow Jesus Christ in love of God and neighbor by observing the holy Gospel.

2.2.1. To live according to the form of the holy Gospel

Saint Francis’s *forma vitae* was nothing but a collection of various gospel passages especially dear to him. Here we would like to recall 24 February 1209, the feast of Saint Matthias. Francis, who is in the Portiuncula, hears the following passage from the Gospel: “*The kingdom of heaven is at hand.... You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food*” (Mt 10:7-10). The biographers tell us that when he heard those words and the priest explained them to him, he exclaimed: “This is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart.”¹⁴

There are many other examples where Francis also urges his brothers to faithfully follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The way of life proposed by the saint is nothing but an application of the Gospel. Writing his *Testament* during the last weeks of his life, he reminds the brothers once again of their basic commitment to “live according to the pattern of the holy Gospel.”¹⁵

For Francis the holy Gospel contains the very person of Jesus Christ. For him, to love the Gospel means to love Jesus; to hear the Gospel means to hear Jesus. To live according to the Gospel means to live according the example of Jesus, to live life as Jesus Christ lived it.

By living the holy Gospel in this way Francis left us a beautiful example in which we can see how the Gospel itself molded and shaped his life, making him increasingly like his Master. He left us an example of a life lived wholly according to the Gospel.

In the Gospel Francis discovered the tremendous love of God the Most High, who has revealed himself through his only Son Jesus Christ. God has shown us the greatest love by giving us the most beautiful gift, his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ. Reflecting on the example of Jesus, who for us and for our salvation became poor and little, Francis became poor and little. For Francis, responding to this great love meant becoming like Jesus, being the servant of all, doing as the Lord did. For although he was Son of God, he became the least of all and the servant of all.

For Franciscan spirituality, love of God with all our heart and all our soul, and love of neighbor as our self is always the first task. This is the true reality of this new *forma vitae*. By placing our life in the hands of the One who loves us and by living in his presence, we become increasingly free. Only then can we proclaim, with joy, God’s great

¹³ Cf. M. BORTOLI, *Lineamenti di spiritualità francescana*, Vicenza 1976, p. 27.

¹⁴ Cf. 1C 22; FA:ED I, 201-02.

¹⁵ Test 14; FA:ED I, 125.

mercy. This is the good news that Francis and all his followers proclaimed with simplicity and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

2.2.2 Follow the footprints of Jesus Christ

Franciscan spirituality sees in Jesus Christ the one mediator between God and human beings. We also find this affirmation in other spiritualities in the Church, but in Franciscan spirituality the words take on a deeper meaning. When we say “through Jesus Christ” we mean that without Jesus Christ or apart from Jesus Christ it is impossible to conceive of the father-child relationship between God and human beings. The existence of Jesus, the Word who became flesh independently of sin, is essential to Franciscan spirituality.

For Francis, Jesus Christ was first of all the Father’s Son through whom all things have been made and renewed. God sent him into the world as savior of humankind and all creation. Francis felt called to live fully this reality of faith and to make its joyful message known to all people. Recognizing in Jesus Christ the teacher, who is the *way, truth and life*, Francis found it natural and spontaneous to follow his footprints.

The idea of following Jesus presented itself to him as a prompting of grace in his tireless search for God’s plan. This charismatic inspiration led him to divest himself of everything, choosing humble poverty in order to resemble Jesus Christ more closely.

Francis was not attracted by the great and powerful Lord, but by the poor, humble and crucified Lord, and he desired always to follow his footprints in freedom and joy. The following of Christ, undertaken in response to his love, became for Francis a reality that marked the path to complete liberation: first, through liberation from evil, then through orientation to good with complete attachment to the will of God.

2.3. The Eucharist, center of Franciscan spirituality

Another very strong element in Franciscan spirituality is the sacramental life where we contemplate and experience the living presence of the Lord Jesus. The sacrament of the Eucharist, the greatest gift of God’s love for us, holds a primary place in Franciscan spirituality. The Eucharist helps us realize that our Lord Jesus Christ has not left us alone, but with his presence—living, true, real, substantial—and with his sacred humanity and his divinity he has remained with us until the end of the world. For Saint Francis too this was reason for the deepest and most heartfelt love.

Contemplating Jesus in the Eucharist, two things especially struck Francis: *the humility of Jesus*, who is willing to remain with us under the appearances of bread and wine, and his *command to feed on him*. This humility and this command aroused in Francis’s heart feelings of deep humility, together with a more intense desire to give himself to Jesus in order to live in and for him alone.¹⁶

¹⁶ Cf. M. BORTOLI, *Lineamenti di spiritualità francescana*, Vicenza 1976, p. 48.

Writing to his brothers assembled at the General Chapter, Francis says: “Kissing your feet, therefore, and with all that love of which I am capable, I implore all of you brothers to show all possible reverence and honor to the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in whom that which is in heaven and on earth has been brought to peace and reconciled to almighty God.”¹⁷

According to Saint Francis, to celebrate the Eucharist means to celebrate the life, to celebrate the love that becomes for us the food of new life, life that has been given to us by God and renewed in the sacrifice of the death and resurrection of his beloved Son Jesus Christ. For this reason Franciscan spirituality finds in the sacrament of the Eucharist the center and basis of its life with God and with the brothers and sisters.

2.4. Live the Church

Another theme we rightly consider essential in Franciscan spirituality is ecclesiality. This too has its historical basis in the personal attitude of Saint Francis. Every step in his vocation, inspired by the Lord, was marked by a great love for the Church, beginning with his encounter with the Crucifix in the church of San Damiano, where he heard the Lord’s words: “*Francis, go rebuild my house; as you see, it is all being destroyed.*”¹⁸ From that moment Francis began to carry out, with deep love, this command of the Lord.

Francis expresses his profound sentiments of faith and love for the Church in many other situations. In the *Legend of the Three Companions* we find his very beautiful words when he said to his brothers as he was searching for answers to his questions and doubts: “*Let us go to our mother, the holy Roman Church.*”¹⁹ We see that for Francis the Church is like a mother.

The ecclesial spirit in Franciscan spirituality, based on Francis’s personal example, is characterized not only by a promise of strict obedience and subjection to the authority of the Church, but also by a love, affection and desire to serve the Church, to collaborate in its pastoral work for the good of souls. Above all it is based on a faith vision that sees in the Church the presence of God, in other words, the Church’s supernatural reality.

The Church is a community of persons who share the same faith in Jesus Christ and live together as brothers and sisters, in spite of their differences. Thus we come to another great theme of Franciscan spirituality: fraternity.

2.5. Live fraternity

The novelty that Jesus Christ brought to all the people by his preaching, the good news Francis discovered in the Gospel, was that our God is a Father, the Father of all

¹⁷ LtOrd 12-13; FA:ED I, 117.

¹⁸ 2C 10; FA:ED II, 249.

¹⁹ L3C 46; FA:ED II, 95.

people, and all people are his children. So, concluded Francis, if God is our Father, then all of us, created in his image, are his children, and therefore brothers and sisters. We have the same Father, and through Jesus our brother we are members of the same family.

What we have then is a very familial relationship, which God has revealed to us through his only Son. The fraternity is a family that is based on this truth of faith and that lives by and in the presence of the Lord. This family is formed from those who experience themselves as brothers and sisters in the faith.

To live in the Church means to live in fraternity, since we are all children of the same Father, members of his family. And if we are children, we are also brothers and sisters. Jesus' words, "*You are all brothers*" (Mt23:8), found a special place in Francis's heart. Seeing that many were coming after him in order to follow this new way, he wrote in his *Testament*: "And 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."²⁰

Francis's concept of fraternity as the place where God's presence is manifest is also essential in Franciscan spirituality. Christ is the true center of fraternal life. It is he who speaks to us through our brothers and sisters. It is he who unites us in the power of his Spirit. It is he who makes us all one.

3. Fraternal life

3.1. Live the Gospel in fraternal communion

The Secular Franciscan vocation is a call to live the Gospel in fraternity and in the world. The purpose of the SFO's organizational structure—communion and sharing of goods—is to achieve this ideal, which is reflected in its presence and mission in a specific place.

The gospel fraternity finds its basis in Christ, first-born of many brothers, who makes of all people one true fraternity. Fraternal life is built by welcoming the option of the *kenosis* of the Incarnation and Easter, and by following the footprints of Christ the Servant, for "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).

Ever since Christ gave his life for others, service implies the elements of renunciation, humiliation and suffering. The natural context of service is the expectation of solidarity in suffering, not that of reward and recognition. The commitment to fraternal life and its cult (*douleia*) necessarily pass through *the gift of service (douleia) rendered as a sacrifice and gratuitously*.

²⁰ Test 14; FA:ED I, 125.

Gift, because it means serving our brothers and sisters, not being served by them. *Sacrificial service*, because in service there is sacrifice; only service costs something. *Gratuitous service*, because it does not demand recompense (*do ut des*), because it is not motivated by the constraints of slavery, but by the freedom of love, by the need to show loving concern for others and for the fraternity.

3.2. Fraternity as service

What kind of service?

3.2.1. The service of “bearing one another’s burdens”

This is the first and essential form of fraternal *diakonia*, because brothers and sisters are not objects to be dominated, but “burdens” to be borne. And they are brothers and sisters precisely because they weigh heavily on the shoulders of others.

Fraternal communion is realized in support, just as communion between God and humans is realized in support. In fact, God supported us in the Body of Christ, because “*he has borne* our infirmities and carried our diseases.... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole” (Is 53:4-5).

Fraternal communion is the communion of the Cross; it is present whenever we feel the weight of others. On the other hand, there would be no Christian communion and the law of Christ would be nullified if we did not feel the burden of our brothers and sisters.

3.2.2. The service of good example

Good example is always connected with and dependent on *metanoia*, which enjoins self-transformation, doing violence to our passions and evil desires. Fraternal life is not built through discussions; it is not the outcome of a defense of fraternity. It is based instead on the example of those ready for sacrifice, who overcome their natural reluctance to carry out tasks that involve renunciation, weariness and distress; those who do not allow themselves to become disheartened will not be discouraged by opposition in the form of mediocrity for which “good example” is a reproach.

Fraternal life is the result of humble and simple witness; it depends on personal readiness to die like the grain of wheat; it is the goal, never definitively reached, of constant daily heroism.

3.2.3. The service of dialogue

Dialogue springs from a love that enables people to “be receptive” and gives them the courage to “be open” themselves. Dialogue is not superficial conversation, nor is it dialectic display, nor is it discussion or even a simple exchange of opinions.

Before it is ever seen as an act, dialogue is an interior attitude, a way of “behaving” as a person before others, a way characterized by a sincere desire to understand and be understood, in order to arrive at mutual acceptance in love and, if possible, at an encounter in the truth.

3.2.4. The service of trust and respect

Trust and respect are not given or granted to others through simple *goodwill*; they are required because of the value which is the brother or sister. Goodwill must be superseded by merit. Brothers and sisters *merit or deserve good* because of their value as human beings, as *christifideles*, as Franciscans. To esteem our brothers and sisters means to revere them, recognizing them as a *sacramentum Christi*.

3.2.5. The service of confidence

Fraternal service is based on awareness of mutual dependence and mutual needs, on overcoming individualistic self-sufficiency. Therefore we must confidently share our experiences and needs.

3.2.6. Service in sincerity and loyalty

Sincerity and loyalty are inseparable, for sincerity is not justified in itself. It is not virtue unless at the same time it is also loyalty, that is, unless it relates not simply to abstract truth, but has a relationship with love. It is a question of *authenticity*, that is, an awareness not only of one’s own deeper experience but also that of others. We are neither authentic nor sincere when we say what we think at all costs, without taking into account the feelings of others.

Truth is not present simply because the truth is told. Truth is reality; it exists more in the realm of action than of word. Truth is not spoken but constructed, and it is impossible to construct the *verum* if at the same time we do not construct the *bonum*. Sincerity is possible when the rule of conduct is not just the thoughts and feelings of the individual but also those of others.

Fraternal life takes place when we stop being *individuals* and become *persons*, that is, when we enter into relationships. Persons are born and develop in relationships, in awareness of their own worth and that of others, in mutual giving and receiving, in care and trust, in sharing and gratitude. Personal identity is experienced and acquired in fraternal relationships.

In light of these basic considerations, we can see how, for one who becomes a member of the SFO, fraternity is a gift deriving from profession and is to be lived with particular commitment, so that the mutual relationships of communion might become “the place” of our sanctification and of witness to the love of God, who in Christ is revealed and given to us. Thus fraternity becomes also an inescapable mission. Therefore,

as ones who profess Peace and Goodness, the Brothers and Sisters of Penance should live in the world as gospel leaven, so that others, seeing their fraternal life lived in the spirit of the beatitudes, will come to understand that the Kingdom of God has already begun in their midst.

4. Secularity

4.1. Secular dimension of the Franciscan charism

Christifideles laici states: “The lay faithful’s position in the Church comes to be fundamentally defined by their newness in Christian life and distinguished by their secular character.”²¹

Francis is seen today as a man for the second millennium. We are all convinced of the place he and his spirituality of communion, fraternity, respect and dialogue occupy in ecclesial and lay circles, even though the spiritual riches of the SFO are not sufficiently known, nor is its presence in the Church and in society always evident. The *Rule* and *General Constitutions* are meant to give the SFO a more significant presence in the Church and in society.

The secular nature of the SFO will be discussed at greater length in Chapter III when speaking of its mission. Here it is enough to note that the vocation and mission of the SFO place special emphasis on this Order’s uniqueness as called to live the Gospel “in the world” according to the charism of Francis of Assisi. Unlike the “religious” Orders, the SFO is a secular Order, whose secular nature is recognized by the Church.

The secular nature of the SFO means that it is part of the world and that it is responsible, in and with the Church, for proclaiming the Gospel for the salvation of all. In the *SFO Rule* this vocation and obligation are traced back to certain essential features, inspired by Franciscan spirituality, which are at once seen to be in full accord with the Council’s teaching, and which respond to the Church’s expectations for the work of restoration that was, and remains, the original mission of Francis and his followers.

The *SFO Rule*, in accord with the experience of Francis, is meant to lead lay Franciscans to assume fully in themselves a positive relationship with God, using their secular state as starting point. By living in fidelity to their state they effect in themselves conversion or turning to God, in other words, holiness. To create this awareness, the *Rule* presents a positive view of the world, understood as all people, children of God to be loved, and creatures who bear God’s likeness,²² as the place in which Christ’s redemption is present and made real through the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus the *Rule* is offered to lay Franciscans as a project or itinerary, suitable for leading them to live in right relationship with God, people and creatures.

²¹ *Christifideles Laici* (= CL), 15.

²² Cf. Cant. 4; FA:ED I, 113.

Through the way of gospel penance lay Franciscans are led to overcome in themselves that “spirit of the flesh” or “wisdom of this world” which is the negative expression of the human world opposed to God, and to restore, in themselves and the world in which they live, that “new creation” which is already present in hidden mystery. Indeed, we must still complete in ourselves the salvation Christ merited for all.

The *Rule* does not forget that people, in their tireless search for God, are severely hampered by the evil that surrounds them and vitiates all reality. But evil is, and can no longer be, absolute lord of this world. Christ has overcome it, Christ who by his death on the cross reconciled sinful humanity with God, re-establishing communion of life and grace, laying the foundation for universal reconciliation between people themselves, and between people and all creatures.

Secular Franciscans find in the *Rule* the gospel project and the help needed to become true instruments of the universal reconciliation brought about by Christ. This Franciscan project envisions collaboration with God’s project, starting from within human structures. The expression “from within” is extremely important because it means that holiness, the “perfection of charity” that lay Franciscans are called to achieve, does not exist “above” their human condition, be that individual or social. It is not achieved “despite” the fact that they live in a family, work, study, fight for a more just society, for justice, peace, etc. But—and this is the great truth Saint Francis understood—their holiness is achieved by living faithfully and in a gospel manner all the situations proper to their secular state.

4.2 From the beginning

The emphasis on “secularity” as an obligation in and for the world goes back to the purest traditions of the Franciscan laity. We need only think of the prominence enjoyed by the Order of Penance in its first centuries, to the point that by itself it permeated the entire ecclesiastical world and the complex fabric of civil society. The austere lifestyle and spirit of poverty that had become widespread in the fraternities led the brothers to give away their surplus goods each year. Thus the fraternities of Penitents established hospitals, dispensaries, stores of food and clothing for the poor, for pilgrims etc. This “ministry of charity” is one of the best known chapters in the history of the Franciscan Penitents, and we still find traces of it today in place-names in cities and in the remote origins of existing charitable organizations.

The Franciscan laity also exerted a strong influence because of their prohibition against bearing arms and taking oaths. Moreover, because of their reputation for honesty, their spirit of dedication and unselfishness, they were often asked by the civil authorities to accept difficult public positions. Documents still exist about brothers who were asked to manage hospitals and other charitable organizations; who held administrative and fiscal, political or diplomatic positions; who were placed in charge of public works and food distribution programs.

In times closer to our own, we should not forget that Pope Leo XIII, the Pope of *Rerum Novarum* and initiator of the Church's social teaching, hoped to find in the Third Order of Saint Francis "a vigilant support to help me defend the rights of the Church and carry out social reform."²³

5. Unity

5.1 Organic union

The first words that come to mind when presenting the "unity of the SFO" are those of the *Rule*, which describes the SFO as "an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world."²⁴ "The international fraternity...is identical to the SFO."²⁵

To speak of the unity of the SFO means to travel the path, not always easy, that goes from theory to practice. But the reality of the SFO today gives us the basis of unity in these terms: the *Rule*, a "splendid gift"²⁶ of the Holy Spirit, approved and confirmed by Pope Paul VI, "is in your hands a genuine treasure, in accord with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council according to what the Church expects from you today;"²⁷ the *General Constitutions* "ratify, without derogation, the union of ordinances, structures, formational and operational models;"²⁸ it is an "international fraternity...guided and animated by the International Council of the SFO (CIOFS) with its seat in Rome (Italy), by its Presidency and by the general minister or international president."²⁹

But we must be renewed and converted if we are to fill up what is lacking in the plan of unity for the SFO, which manifests itself in the unity of SFO structures and in the collegial union of spiritual assistants at the various levels: regional, national and international. Moreover, mindful that it is the Spirit who animates us and that unity "is founded on the activity of the Spirit,"³⁰ this unity is sustained by mutual love, deepened through formation, guaranteed by the service of the brothers and sisters, aided by the brothers of the First Order and the TOR, and gives us a more mature awareness of our responsibilities.

5.2. Walking together

²³ *Dizionario francescano*, s.v. "Ordine Francescano Secolare."

²⁴ *Rule SFO*, 2

²⁵ *Const.*, 69.1.

²⁶ *Lettera dei quattro Ministri generali della Famiglia francescana*, in *Regola, Costituzioni generali, Rituale dell'Ordine Francescano Secolare*, Roma 2001, p. 9.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Ai membri del Consiglio internazionale dell'OFS*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 September 1982.

²⁸ Emanuela De Nunzio, *Presentazione delle Costituzioni e le loro entrata in vigore*, in *Regola e Costituzioni generali dell'Ordine Francescano Secolare*, Roma 1991, p. 49.

²⁹ *Const.*, 69.2.

³⁰ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 47.

The plan of the past, in which Pope Leo XIII urged the Secular Franciscans (then known as Tertiaries) to join forces and many of them felt the need to seek an organic and permanent form for linking the obediential fraternities, becomes present today in “the union of the Secular Franciscan Order” as a “characteristic present on a practical and organizational level.”³¹ The task at this point is to achieve in every country and region the unity of the Secular Franciscan Order expressed in its legislative texts and affirmed by the fact of its juridical personality in the Church.

In this regard we have gone through a process of renewal and deeper understanding of the nature of the SFO, a rediscovery of the Franciscan charism, of the place of the Gospel in the life of the fraternity, its secularity, its autonomy and its self-government.

Every country has a national council and minister, and a collegial spiritual assistancy, a sign of unity. It is a question, then, of a finished product to which all must contribute in order to make it effective. Specifically, the Secular Franciscans must be able to move, simply but boldly, from the norm of one *Rule*, one *Constitutions*, one council and one minister/president to the practical and everyday life of feeling and living unity, and vice versa.

5.3. Promote the charism of unity

It is also the task of the brothers of the First Order and the TOR to learn how to accept these structural changes. We are asked to stand beside the laity, the Secular Franciscans, who, as the Second Vatican Council says, have a maturity and responsibility in the Church: “Priests should confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the church, giving them freedom and opportunity for activity and even inviting them, when opportunity offers, to undertake projects on their own initiative.”³² And, paraphrasing a text in *Christifideles laici*, helping our Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters to become increasingly aware, not only that they *belong* to an order, the Secular Franciscan Order, but that they *are* the Order, sharing the same charism as the brothers of the First Order and the TOR. They are a Secular Franciscan Order “because they in particular, ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church.... These are the Church.”³³

Recognizing the greater age of the laity and our responsibility for *altius moderamen* and spiritual assistance, we friars must learn how to go from direction, which at times we still exercise in the fraternities at various levels, to accompaniment and spiritual assistance, being at the same time promoters of unity, for it is not easy to do this, even after reflection. It is also a characteristic of our Franciscan maturity and our minority. Here it seems opportune to quote some lines from the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*: “The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then

³¹ Emanuela De Nunzio, *Presentazione delle Costituzioni...*, p. 49.

³² *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9

³³ CL, 9.

in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries....”³⁴ We Franciscans are called to be “meek, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble,”³⁵ promoters of peace and reconciliation and harmony in all situations and circumstances. Must we, perhaps, be this in a special way with the secular brothers and sisters who share with us the Franciscan ideal and spirituality?

Only a positive response of animation and accompaniment in the movement toward unity will indicate that we have understood that the SFO has “the special characteristic of the laity,” which is to be “secular.”³⁶ And so, in the great Franciscan Family, “the sharing of the lay faithful has its own manner of realization and function, which, according to the Council, is ‘properly and particularly’ theirs. Such a manner is designated with the expression ‘secular character.’”³⁷

Let us allow ourselves to be imbued with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of unity. Let us allow ourselves to be seized by him whose fruits are “love, joy, peace patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22), the basis for unity of charism. We quote two texts from the letter of the Conference of the Franciscan Family on the subject of unity. The first is from the section “Our Service of the Spirit”: “We should not forget that the first visible effect of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was that of uniting in the one faith many different peoples. He is the Spirit of unity and he is present wherever unity is created or strengthened....”³⁸ And among the proposals, in the section entitled “The Spirit of Unity,” we also find a stimulus to unity in the SFO: “...called to live the spirit of unity especially among themselves.... We want to insist, as we did in last year’s pre-Jubilee letter, in inviting to an ever-closer communion and collaboration within the great Franciscan Family.... Within the three Franciscan Orders...encouragement should be given to meetings even of an informal kind, to exchanges, common moments of prayer and reflection, concrete initiatives of communion and fraternity.”³⁹

5.4. From the beginning

Turning our attention to the history of the Secular Franciscans, we see that certain steps are of great importance and signs of the Spirit’s presence.

Francis of Assisi was a sign of the renewing and encouraging movement of the Spirit in his day. Francis dedicated his life to penance, he lived “in conversion,” and at the same time became part of the penitential movement. Francis was also faithful to the Spirit of the Lord in the Church and coming from the Church, at a time of great confusion and many movements that claimed to be led by the same Spirit, but in which neither peace nor unity reigned.

³⁴ *Vita Consacrata*, (=VC) 51, Cf. also nos. 41, 45, 46, 47.

³⁵ LR III, 11; FA:ED I, 102.

³⁶ *LG*, 31.

³⁷ *CL*, 15.

³⁸ Second Letter of the Conference of the Franciscan Family on the occasion of the Jubilee 2000, in the year of the Holy Spirit, 9.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 13.

To this must be added the interest of Francis and his brothers in the penitential movement, with which they began the Third Order, today the Secular Franciscan Order: “Similarly, married men said: ‘We have wives who will not permit us to send them away. Teach us, therefore, the way that we can take more securely.’ The brothers founded an order for them, called the Order of Penitents, and had it approved by the Supreme Pontiff.”⁴⁰ They received a “rule of life” already outlined in the *First Letter to the Faithful* and a little more developed in the second version. It contains these five elements:

- love of God;
- love of neighbor;
- opposition to the spirit of the flesh, to evil’s sinful tendencies;
- celebration of the sacraments, especially confession and the Eucharist;
- behavior always consistent with a life of conversion.

Juridically, this rule of life is found in greater detail in *Memoriale propositi* (1221-1228), the work of Francis and Cardinal Hugolino. Its thirty-nine articles regulate a life of austerity, poverty in clothing, fasting, frequent reception of the sacraments, works of mercy. *Memoriale* was given concrete expression in three great Rules over the course of time.

The Rule of Nicholas IV (Fr. Girolamo Masci of Ascoli Piceno, Minorite) repeats *Memoriale*. It was promulgated with the bull *Supra Montem* (18 August 1289) and remained in force for six hundred years. Opposed to the unity of the Rule were the “obediencies,” later consolidated as a reflection of the separation between Conventuals and Observants, ratified by Leo X in 1517, and the later separation of the Capuchins in 1525, besides the autonomy of the Third Order Regular. The Third Order Secular, while remaining one, began to make a distinction between fraternities according to the religious obedience from which they received spiritual assistance. In this way an artificial division was created, based on the four families of Franciscan religious. The unity of the Secular Franciscan Order was preserved since the Tertiaries are seculars, not friars. The SFO itself is not identified with any of the branches of the First Order or with the TOR, nor with their geographical structures.

Leo XIII published a new Rule with the bull *Misericors Dei Filius* (30 May 1883). Even though the structure of “obediencies” was kept, Leo XIII considered the Third Order to be a *single Order* when he wrote: “When I speak of social reform, I am thinking especially of the Third Order of Saint Francis.” And in another place: “The Third Order of Saint Francis, organized for social action, is capable of producing wonderful fruits.”⁴¹ The “interobedientiality” that appears in the 1957 Constitutions was the first step toward achieving the unity of the SFO, which had existed from the beginning but was obscured by the division of the First Order into different branches.

⁴⁰ AP, 41 (FA:ED II, 54-55); cf. 1C 37 (FA:ED I, 215-17); LMj IV, 6 (FA:ED II, 553-54); L3C 60 (FA:ED II, 103).

⁴¹ AA.VV., *Dizionario Francescano*, col. 1299-1300.

On 24 June 1978, Paul VI issued the present Rule with the bull *Seraphicus Patriarcha*. Its Prologue is the first version of the *Letter to the Faithful*, and it recaptures the importance and basis of the expression “to observe the gospel,”⁴² to seek “the living and active person of Christ,”⁴³ as well as the meaning of “penance” and “conversion,”⁴⁴ the proper relationship to temporal goods⁴⁵ and their witness to the goods yet to come.

If the Rules of these long seven and a half centuries are the main sign of the “unity” of the SFO, today the Rule of Paul VI has given the decisive impetus to this unity. It speaks of one Rule, General Constitutions, a single International Council, one general minister, a single structure, a structure that disregards “obediences,” which are a reflection of the division existing in the First Order. In the *General Constitutions* interobedience is not even mentioned, since the SFO is a single united Order, “which is governed by the universal law of the Church, and by its own: the Rule, the Constitutions, the Ritual, and the particular statutes.”⁴⁶

5.5. Guidelines in the Rule and Constitutions

The Secular Franciscan Order has its own personality: “It is divided into fraternities of various levels—local, regional, national and international.”⁴⁷ Each fraternity at the various levels has a “juridical personality within the Church”⁴⁸ and is animated and guided by a council and minister (or president), who are elected by the professed according to the *Constitutions*.⁴⁹ The autonomy of the SFO, that is, its direct responsibility for managing its own affairs (G. Pauldet OFM), is indispensable, since the core of its spirituality is “to live the Gospel in fraternity.”⁵⁰

The *General Constitutions* indicate that the SFO is a public association in the Church,⁵¹ and that it is divided into fraternities at various levels (local, regional, national and international), each of which has its own juridical personality in the Church.⁵² The chapters of the fraternities at the various levels have legislative, deliberative and elective power.⁵³

Naturally, there remains the bond of affection, family and recognition between the fraternities of the SFO and the fraternities of friars through the *altius moderamen* and spiritual assistance, by seeking “to live in life-giving reciprocal communion with all the

⁴² *Rule SFO*, 4.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Rule SFO*, 7.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*

⁴⁶ *Const.*, 4.1.

⁴⁷ *Rule SFO*, 20.

⁴⁸ *Const.*, 1.5.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*; can. 309.

⁵⁰ Cf. can. 215: “Christ’s faithful may freely establish and direct associations which serve charitable or pious purposes or which foster the Christian vocation in the world.”

⁵¹ Cf. can. 116 §1.

⁵² Cf. *Const.*, 1.5.

⁵³ Cf. *Ibidem*, 64, 68 e 70.3.

members of the Franciscan Family.”⁵⁴ But the geographic structure of the friars must in no way influence the regional structure of the Secular Franciscan Order: “The regional fraternity is the organic union of all the local fraternities existing in a territory or which can be integrated into a natural unity, either by geographic proximity, or by common problems and pastoral circumstances. It assures the link between the local fraternities and the national fraternity in respect to the unity of the SFO and in accord with the cooperative efforts of the Franciscan religious orders to provide spiritual assistance within the area.”⁵⁵

This is repeated when speaking of the national fraternity, which has no connection with the provinces of the friars: “The national fraternity is the organic union of the local fraternities existing within the territory of one or more states which are joined and coordinated among themselves through regional fraternities, wherever they exist.”⁵⁶

The international fraternity “is identical to the SFO. It has its own juridical personality within the Church.”⁵⁷

It we want to list the essential points of the new SFO Constitutions, we can single out three basic elements: secularity, unity, and autonomy of the SFO.⁵⁸ In the Constitutions the governmental functions of the fraternities at all levels, reserved exclusively to responsible seculars, are carefully distinguished from the functions of spiritual and pastoral assistance, entrusted to religious of the First Order and the TOR. In this distinction their membership in the one Franciscan Family remains firm and solid, the “life-giving reciprocal communion” that expresses the communion of spiritual goods, unity of purpose and mutual help, in order to make Francis and his ideal come alive today in the life of each person and in the mission of the Church.⁵⁹

5.6. Looking towards the future

Juridical union itself, with its international council and its national and regional councils, is a sign of human, evangelical and Franciscan growth. It is an advantage for everyone, seculars and friars, society and the Church, for the brothers and sisters are communicating vessels in which gifts are exchanged and enriched. Fr. Jaime Zudaire says it this way: “The expression organic communion (= common union = unity) means soul and body. Soul: the fraternal affection, the common ideal, the desire to serve and help each other and perform common works in order to promote the good. Body: the organization, the juridical norms that are an incarnation, sign and instrument of the call to live in local and universal fraternity.”⁶⁰

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 98.1.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 61.1.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 65.1.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 69.1.

⁵⁸ Cf. Emanuela De Nunzio, *Presentazione delle Costituzioni*, p. 49.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 49-50.

⁶⁰ Jaime Zudaire, *En seguimiento de Cristo con Francisco de Asís*, Consejo Nacional OFS, Madrid 1995, p. 56.

It seems opportune to refer to the words of Francis, which recall the presence of the Holy Spirit that draws the fraternities into unity: “His constant desire...was to foster among his sons the bond of unity so that those drawn by the same Spirit and begotten by the same father should be held peacefully on the lap of the same mother.”⁶¹

The unity of self-government of the SFO and the unity of the entire family in one and the same charism are two expressions of the power for maintaining the bond that unites us and for achieving the interrelationship of two realities: friars and Secular Franciscans, animated by one and the same Spirit: “Religious and Secular Franciscans in fact, in various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, aim to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church and of society.”⁶²

Secular Franciscans achieve unity by studying, loving and living the *Rule*, as John Paul II asks them to do: “Study, love and live the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, approved for you by my predecessor Paul VI. It is a real treasure in your hands, it is in accord with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, and it responds to what the Church expects of you.... The Church needs you for the world to rediscover the primacy of spiritual values.”⁶³

This exhortation of John Paul II holds true for religious. They must study the *Rule* and *Constitutions* of the SFO and love them, in order to help the members of the SFO to live them. For only by knowing them will they love them, and by loving them, help them to live them in the unity and communion of one Order, which with the First, Second and Third Order Regular form the great Franciscan Family.

6. Autonomy

6.1. Autonomy of government of the SFO

Pope John Paul II, in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, cites the Second Vatican Council: “By his incarnation the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each individual. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will and with a human heart he loved.”⁶⁴ This means that Jesus Christ acted with the autonomy proper to a human being. Consequently the autonomy due to each of the Secular Franciscans and their fraternities must be respected.

According to the legislation of the *Rule* and *General Constitutions*, the SFO is autonomous because it is one Order, guided by responsible elected seculars and financed by the professed members. The *Rule* says: “On various levels, each fraternity is animated and guided by and council and minister (or president).”⁶⁵ “The council of the local

⁶¹ 2C 191; FA:ED II, 369.

⁶² *Statute for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the SFO* (= *Statute for Assistance*), 1.2.

⁶³ John Paul II, *Ai membri del Consiglio internazionale dell'OFS*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 September 1982.

⁶⁴ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 4; Cf. *GS*, 22.

⁶⁵ *Rule SFO*, 21.

fraternity is composed of the following offices: minister, vice-minister, secretary, treasurer, and master of formation.”⁶⁶

The key to the unity of the SFO is the regional fraternity. The *General Constitutions* describe it this way: “The regional fraaternity is the organic union of all the local fraternities existing in a territory or which can be integrated into a natural unity.... It assures the link between the local fraternities and the national fraternity in respect to the unity of the SFO and in accord with the cooperative efforts of the Franciscan religious orders to provide spiritual assistance within the area.”⁶⁷

The *Rule* establishes the financing of the Order and the *General Constitutions* repeat it: “Regarding the expenses necessary for the life of the fraternity and the needs of worship, of the apostolate, and of charity, all the brothers and sisters should offer a contribution according to their means. Local fraternities should contribute toward the expenses of the higher fraternity councils.”⁶⁸

6.2. Autonomy is connected with unity and secularity

Autonomy, with unity and secularity, is a single reality. There cannot exist a totally autonomous SFO if it is not one, nor can there be a really secular SFO if it depends on the religious and identifies itself with the friars who provide spiritual assistance.⁶⁹ The SFO is an organic union of all the Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world, coordinated and united among themselves.⁷⁰ The council and minister of the higher level fraternity have the task of uniting and coordinating the lower level fraternities.

There can be no unity without autonomy. Autonomy and unity are two sides of the same coin. Autonomy requires that the SFO have, at all levels, “secular leaders capable of assuming fully the functions of animation and guidance of the fraternities, with all the burdens of fatigue, study, responsibility and availability this implies.... It requires an independent structure, with its own headquarters and self-financing, in other words, capable of putting programs into action without the need to appeal for help to others, whether they be organizations or private individuals.”⁷¹

During the preparation of the renewed *SFO Rule* this autonomy was desired by the Secular Franciscans and by the general ministers of the First First Order and the TOR, who were convinced that this autonomy would be a source of life for the SFO, giving it a greater spirit of initiative.⁷² This same attitude is again evident in the *Statutes for*

⁶⁶ *Const.*, 49.1.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 61.1.

⁶⁸ *Rule SFO*, 25, Cf. *Const.*, 30.3.

⁶⁹ *Report of the CIOFS Presidency to the elective General Chapter*, in *Ordine Francescano Secolare, VIII Capitolo Generale, Roma, 7-14 luglio 1996, Atti*, Rome 1997, p. 65.

⁷⁰ Cf. *Rule SFO*, 20.

⁷¹ Cf. *Report of the CIOFS Presidency to the elective General Chapter ...*, pp. 64-65.

⁷² Talk: *Vision of the SFO (autonomy, unity, secularity)* by Emanuela De Nunzio at the seminars for national Assistants at Frascati (27 February 1998 for Slavic speaking countries, 26 June 26 1998 for African countries). I am using my private notes made during these conferences.

Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order, approved by the general ministers in 2002.

6.3. Autonomy in communion

It is quite significant that the *Rule* does not start with a definition of the SFO but with a presentation of the Franciscan Family. The SFO realizes its autonomy in relationships of “life-giving reciprocal communion” with the other members of the Family. This is in line with the vision of the Church as communion and mission and with an “exchange of gifts” ecclesiology. Church communion does not permit communities to enclose themselves in their own spirituality, structures and activities, as was stressed at the World Congress of Church Movements (Rome, 27-29 May 1999). Union with one another presupposes respect for each other’s specificity; collaboration presupposes the autonomy of those who work together. Obviously, if there is to be an exchange, there need to be different gifts, received and cherished, and each one’s “charismatic identity” must be clear. Special or simple and humble, the charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit that, directly or indirectly, are useful for the the Church, because they are directed toward building up the Church, for the good of the people and the needs of the world.⁷³ The SFO needs to be conscious of its own nature, of its own role and its own responsibility in the mission of the Franciscan Family.⁷⁴

As an integral part of the Franciscan Family and called to live the charism of Francis within the secular dimension, the SFO has special and close relationships with the First Order and the TOR.⁷⁵ From Franciscan history and from their constitutions, it is evident that these orders recognize that they are committed to the spiritual and pastoral assistance of the SFO by reason of their common origin and charism and by the will of the Church.⁷⁶ This is exercised with respect for the *Constitutions* of the SFO and the statutes prepared by the fraternities at the various levels.⁷⁷

According to the SFO *General Constitutions*: “The spiritual assistant is by right, with vote, a member of the council of the fraternity to which he or she gives assistance and collaborates with it in all activities.”⁷⁸ The spiritual assistant “does not exercise the right to vote in financial questions.”⁷⁹ And the *Statutes for Assistance* state again: “In economic matters and in elections at any level he or she does not enjoy the right to vote.”⁸⁰

The spiritual assistants must take part in the council of the fraternity as “spiritual assistants” in accord with the new legislation and new spirit of collaboration with the

⁷³ Cf. CCC, 799.

⁷⁴ Cf. *The Secular Third Orders today*, by the General Assistants of Secular Third Orders (Rome 1978), in *La voce del Padre*, February 1979 (in Italian).

⁷⁵ Cf. *Const.*, 85.1.

⁷⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 85, note.

⁷⁷ Cf. *Const.*, 90.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 90.2.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 90.2.

⁸⁰ *Statutes for Assistance*, 12.3.

laity, “giving them priority with regard to the guidance, co-ordination and animation of the fraternity.”⁸¹

Recognition of the responsibility of the seculars must not be transformed into a passive attitude of “leave it to them,” but must be an active attitude of promotion and collaboration so that the seculars might realize their vocation and proper mission.⁸²

6.4. From the beginning

Just as unity goes back to the beginning of the SFO, so also its autonomy, confirmed by the current legislation, is a return to the beginnings.⁸³ The present autonomy is a return to the origins. The figure of Francis, the life and preaching of his brothers, the form of life given to the penitents caused many persons to enter the Order of Penance assisted by the Lesser Brothers.⁸⁴ The *Memoriale propositi* (1221) helped them live the gospel life in fraternity, a fundamental aspect of the life of these penitents. Each of these fraternities had its own government, composed of brothers and sisters chosen by the fraternity. The council had the power to adapt the articles of the *Memoriale*, after consulting the fraternity. When the year had passed, the ministers with the counsel of the brothers were to elect two other ministers and a faithful treasurer, who would provide for the needs of the brothers and sisters and other poor; and messengers who at the command of the ministers would publish what was said and done by the fraternity.⁸⁵

Between the *Memoriale* and the Rule of of Nicholas IV (1289), there were moments of very close relationship between the Lesser Brothers and the Order of Penance, for example during the generalate of John Parenti (1227-1232). But it seems that Brother Elias (1232-1239) was against this responsibility. During the generalate of John of Parma (1245-1257), Innocent IV in 1247 urged the provincial ministers of Italy and Sicily to visit the brothers of Penance, even though a year later he put the Penitents of Lombardy under the jurisdiction of the bishops, and in 1251 those of Florence. Saint Bonaventure (1257-1274) was against having obligations toward the Third Order.⁸⁶ In 1284 good relations between the Lesser Brothers and the Order of Penance were re-established. That year we find as Apostolic Visitor of the brothers and sisters of Penance a certain Brother Caro from Florence, who composed a Rule for them. Nicholas IV, with the bull *Supra montem* (1289) approved this Rule composed by Brother Caro, which retains all aspects of the *Memoriale*, but introduced “visitors” and “instructors.” He stipulated that all visitors and instructors of the penitents would be Lesser Brothers: “Because this present form of life took its origin from the aforementioned Blessed Francis, We counsel that the visitors and instructors should be taken from the Order of

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 13.2.

⁸² Cf. *Lettera dei Quattro Ministri generali francescani sulla Vocazione e missione dei fedeli laici francescani nella Chiesa e nel mondo* (Roma, 18 agosto 1989) n. 49 c.

⁸³ Cf. *Lettera dei Quattro Ministri generali della Famiglia francescana* (4 ottobre 1978), nell’occasione della consegna della *Regola*.

⁸⁴ Cf. A. Pompei, *Il movimento penitenziale nei secoli XII-XII*, in *Atti del Convegno di Studi Francescani*, Assisi 1972, pp. 20-21.

⁸⁵ Cf. *Memoriale propositi*, 38.

⁸⁶ Cf. Saint Bonaventure, *Determinationes quaestionum circa Regulam fratrum minorum*, p. II, q. 16, in *Opera omnia*, p. 368 ff.

Friars Minor, whom the custodes or guardians of the same Order shall appoint, when they have been requested in the matter. However, We do not want a congregation of this kind to be visited by a lay person.”⁸⁷ The visitor’s first duty was to guard orthodoxy and the observance of the Rule.

The fraternities of the laity remained autonomous, as was proved by the chapter for all of Italy, held in Bologna in 1289, and by a number of regional chapters in Marsciano, Bologna and Umbria.⁸⁸ With the bull *Romani Pontificis Providentia* of Sixtus IV (1471), any remaining desire for autonomy on the part of the Penitents was squelched, and a system of dependence on the religious was established, which would last until the Rule of Paul VI in 1978.⁸⁹

The Rule of Leo XIII (1883) states: “The offices shall be conferred at a meeting of the members. The term of these offices shall be three years.”⁹⁰ But it emphasizes: “The visitors are to be chosen from the First Franciscan Order or from the Third Order Regular.... Laypersons cannot hold the office of visitor.” And again: “The visitor...shall diligently investigate whether the Rule is properly observed. Therefore, it shall be his duty to visit the fraternities every year, or oftener if need be, and hold a meeting, to which all the officers and members shall be summoned.”⁹¹

In the *Constitutions* of 1957 the Third Order (Secular) has no autonomy, no direct responsibility for the fraternity. They state: “The government of the Third Order is of a double kind, in conformity with its particular nature: external, which is exercised by the Church and the four Franciscan Families; and internal, which common law leaves in the hands of the Tertiaries themselves.”⁹² The superiors of the four Franciscan Families normally govern the Third Order through the general, national, provincial and regional commissaries, and through the local directors.⁹³ The local director or moderator...must be a person of experience, zeal, holiness, prudence and pastoral dedication. In the spirit of our Seraphic Father, the Tertiaries shall show him obedience and reverence.⁹⁴ The internal government of a fraternity, as a moral person, belongs to the council of the Third Order. This council consists of the minister prefect and councillors, and constitutes the director’s advisory board.⁹⁵ At least once a month...the council shall hold a session, presided over by the director.⁹⁶ If the director was not present at the session of the council, its decisions require his approval. Elections, however, may not be held in the absence of the director or the visitor.⁹⁷

⁸⁷ *Rule of Nicholas IV*, 16.2.

⁸⁸ Cf. G. G. Meersseman, *Dossier de l'Ordre de la Pénitence*, pp. 160-178.

⁸⁹ M. Bigi “*L’universale salute*”, pg. 111

⁹⁰ *Rule of Leo XIII*, 3.1.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 3.3, 3.2.

⁹² *Constitutions of 1957*, 94.

⁹³ Cf. *Ibidem*, 105.

⁹⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*, 111.

⁹⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, 120.

⁹⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 130.

⁹⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, 131.

These citations from the *Constitutions* of 1957 show the great extent of the changes brought about by the renewed *Rule* and by the *Constitutions* of 1990 (updated in 2000), according to which the fraternity is guided by the council and the minister, whereas the spiritual and pastoral assistant is a member of the council, not its director.

6.5. Process of realization of autonomy

The law establishes the autonomy of the Secular Franciscan Order clearly and without exception. In fact, the SFO will not be fully autonomous until it is united as a single Order in every regional and national fraternity, until the councils at the various levels are capable of governing the respective fraternities, and until it is financially self-sufficient.

In realizing autonomy as envisioned, there is no lack of difficulties.⁹⁸ There are fraternities fully conscious of their own autonomy. But there are also contrary situations where fraternities to a certain extent depend on the religious or the spiritual assistant. Such dependence is often desired by the seculars themselves, because they are not ready to assume their own responsibility. In those cases the fraternities lose significance in their ecclesiastical and social surroundings.

In general there is still a considerable need for formation to autonomy. This topic needs to be developed especially in initial formation and the first years after profession, but also through programs of ongoing formation. Often, the help of the assistants will still be indispensable for this formation. One sign of autonomy is willingness to accept responsibility on the part of the fraternity council.

Another problem is the relationship between the self-government of the SFO and the role of the spiritual and pastoral assistant in the fraternity and in the council. The spirituality of the SFO is not a kind of “mirrored” spirituality in which one reflects the spirituality of the religious. An exchange of gifts is impossible if the SFO is seen only as an aid for the life and mission of the religious; there will be no exchange if the religious who assist the SFO want to “colonize” it by enforcing their own vision of the Franciscan charism and Franciscan values. There is still need for deeper theoretical and practical reflection on the basic outlines of a *secular* Franciscan spirituality for our times. The assistant should offer his *help*, often really needed, but he should be attentive and respect the authority of the council and minister of the fraternity.

What has been said so far regarding autonomy also holds for the Franciscan Youth (FY). The model *National Statutes of the Franciscan Youth* say: “The local fraternity is animated and guided by a council composed of the president, vice-president and at least one councillor, elected...by the local fraternity.... Besides them, the SFO representative and the spiritual assistant are also members of the council.”⁹⁹ Not only the animators and assistants, but also the Secular Franciscans involved in FY must be very careful not to take over direction of the fraternity in the council.

⁹⁸ From the Lecture by Emanuela De Nunzio.

⁹⁹ *Modello degli Statuti nazionali della GiFra*, 35.

The documents concerning FY say nothing about the means for financing FY. The SFO, since it is responsible for FY, will need to help it financially. Nevertheless the FY fraternities must make an effort to generate means of their own so as to have the necessary degree of autonomy.

7. Formation

7.1. Agents and leaders of formation

The *Constitutions* rightly recall that “the brothers and sisters are responsible for their own formation, developing in an ever more perfect way the vocation received from the Lord.”¹⁰⁰ But with regard to responsibility in formation they add: “Mindful that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of formation and always attentive to collaboration with him, those responsible for formation are: the candidate, the entire fraternity, the council with the minister, the master of formation, and the assistant.”¹⁰¹

7.2. Agents

7.2.1. The Holy Spirit

“It is not only through the sacraments and the ministries that the Holy Spirit makes the people holy, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts ‘at will to each individual,’ he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts, he makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church, as it is written, ‘the manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit.’”¹⁰²

The Holy Spirit is the source of their vocation, the principal agent of formation, and the soul of fraternal living.¹⁰³

The Holy Spirit:

- gives birth to the new life that makes us sharers in the divine nature and bears witness that we are children of God (Cf. Jn 3:5-8; 2Pt 1:4; Rom 8:14-16);
- reveals and communicates our fundamental call to holiness (Cf. Eph 1:4-5), and becomes the principle and source of its realization by conforming us to Christ, making us sharers in his life as Son: love for the Father and for our brothers and sisters (Cf. Gal 4:6; 5:25);
- teaches us what is necessary for the following of Christ (Cf. Jn 14:26; 16:3-14);
- strengthens our inner being by giving us the power to understand the greatness of the mystery of Christ and his love that surpasses all knowledge (Cf. Eph 3:16-19);

¹⁰⁰ *Const.*, 37.3.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 37.2.

¹⁰² *LG*, 12.

¹⁰³ Cf. *Const.*, 11; 37.2.

- enriches us with gifts and special graces that enable us to assume offices and services for the common good (Cf. 1Cor 12:4-11);
- gives us strength to bear witness to Christ, teaches us how to act and what to say in emergencies (Cf. Acts 1:8; 8:14-17; Lk 12:11-12);
- consoles, counsels, assists and sustains us in the various circumstances of life; helps our weakness and intercedes for us (Cf. Jn 14:16-17.26; Rom 8,26-27);
- joins us to the resurrection of Christ (Cf. Rom 8,11).

The *Rule* describes the action of the Holy Spirit on the candidate as:

- *antecedent*: he prepares for each one the “welcoming family,” the Franciscan family raised up by him in the Church;¹⁰⁴
- *stimulating*: he “moves” the candidate to enter that family in order to follow Jesus Christ after the manner of Saint Francis;¹⁰⁵
- *illuminating and strengthening*: he leads the candidate into the truth, into the mystery of Christ, in the Church and in liturgical actions, especially the Eucharist,¹⁰⁶ as Saint Francis writes: “It is the Spirit of the Lord that lives in its faithful, that receives the Body and Blood of the Lord. All others who do not share in this same Spirit and presume to receive him eat and drink judgment on themselves”¹⁰⁷

7.2.2. Saint Francis

During his lifetime Francis was filled with the Holy Spirit, and acted and spoke under his influence.¹⁰⁸ He believed that:

- like Christ, his brothers had been born of a poor mother by the power of the Holy Spirit, whom he regarded as general minister of the Order;¹⁰⁹
- in order to follow the footprints of Jesus Christ we must be interiorly cleansed, enlightened and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit;¹¹⁰
- the new person, the one who sees with the eyes of Jesus and acts in the spirit of the Gospel, is the one who has “the Spirit of the Lord and its holy activity,”¹¹¹
- the Spirit leads us to the knowledge of spiritual realities even without human instruction,¹¹² joins the faithful soul to Jesus Christ and makes that soul the spouse of Christ.¹¹³

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Rule SFO*, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Adm I, 13-14; FA:ED I, 129.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. 2C 46, 52.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. 2C 193; LMj III,10.

¹¹⁰ Cf. LtOrd 51; FA:ED I, 120.

¹¹¹ LR X, 8; FA:ED I, 105.

¹¹² Cf. 2C 191; FA:ED II, 369-70.

¹¹³ Cf. 1LtF I, 8; FA:ED I, 42 (Prologue to the Rule)

7.2.3. The Candidate

The candidate is the chief agent and center, the subject and the object of formation, which concerns each one directly and involves each one personally.

The results of the formative process are linked to the candidate's cooperation with the action of the Holy Spirit, and to the candidate's active collaboration with the work of the leaders of the fraternity on the candidate's behalf.

Moved by the "impulse" of the Holy Spirit inviting the candidate to seek the perfection of charity in his or her own state of life by living the Gospel after the manner of Saint Francis as laid out in the *Rule* of the SFO,¹¹⁴ the candidate begins the process of formation that leads to the clarification of ideas and prepares each one to make the choice of vocation, a choice ratified by the promise to lead a gospel way of life, that is by Profession, which seals the candidate's "membership" in the SFO.

This commitment should lead each one to work so as to:

- act responsibly toward God, oneself and the SFO by analyzing calmly and seriously the motives that impel one to begin the Franciscan experience, by examining one's abilities and character, and by taking into account future difficulties, whether subjective or objective, which may arise as a consequence of one's choice;
- open oneself with complete docility to the light of the Holy Spirit and the assistance offered by those responsible, so as to judge the genuineness of the "impulse" to the Franciscan way of life and its significance for the candidate, the discernment employed in making this assessment, and the responsibility to act in accord with it;
- acquire and use evangelical discernment, which comes from the light and power of the Gospel and from a gift of the Holy Spirit. As a principle of knowledge, this discernment allows the candidate to see God's call in the various circumstances of life; as a criterion of interpretation, it helps each one to choose among the different values that can present themselves, and among the maze of difficulties and possibilities, negative elements and reasons for hope;
- use this discernment to avoid isolating positive indications from one another, regarding them as absolutes, in such a way that they seem to be in contradiction and to conflict with one another; and perceive, even when the indications are negative, whatever is of value and waiting to be extracted and used to the full;
- cultivate those human qualities necessary for the development of a balanced personality tending toward human and Christian maturity, which is marked by a profound harmony within the persons, by a full and conscious possession of the truth, by a capacity for giving oneself, fully aware of one's particular responsibilities as a member of both civil and church communities, and as a genuine witness to the faith in every area of life: family, professional, social, political.

¹¹⁴ Cf. *Rule SFO*, 2.

This requires of the candidate an openness to love for truth; to loyalty, to respect for others, to keeping one's word, to harmony, to balance in one's judgment and conduct, to an ability to relate to others. This last is especially important for one who wishes to become a member of the Franciscan Fraternity.

7.3. Those Responsible for Formation

Those responsible for formation must be capable of:

- supporting without dominating;
- providing conditions in which each candidate may find himself or herself;
- performing the duties of both action and reflection.

7.3.1. The Fraternity

The fraternity, whose lifestyle is intensely communal, profoundly ecclesial and dynamically missionary "is called to help the brothers and sisters in this journey by means of a warm welcome, prayer, and example"¹¹⁵

For this reason it must be like a school equipped to develop the Franciscan vocation and an ecclesial sense, and to animate the apostolic life of its members, so as to make genuine Secular Franciscans of those it has brought into the Order.

To foster such a way of life, it is recommended that they also look after the environment in which their meetings take place.

7.3.2. The Minister and the Council

The animator and guide of the fraternity is the council, of which the minister is the one primarily responsible.¹¹⁶ It is the council's duty to:¹¹⁷

- fix the program in conformity with higher directives;
- support the master of formation and keep abreast of his work so as to be able to judge its results and be in a position to accept or reject candidates for admission and profession;
- plan the meetings;
- promote the renewal and foster the growth of all the members.

7.3.3. The Master of Formation

The master of formation must be:¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ *Const.*, 37.3.

¹¹⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 51.1.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, 50.1.

¹¹⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, 52.3.

- qualified for the office and readily available, able to communicate and possessing the content he or she is called upon to pass on;
- conscious of the office, the Spirit of God, competence, obligation to the whole person, internal tensions;
- mindful of the charism of the founder and the deep roots that sustained it, interpreting this charism in light of the signs of the times and the new demands of Church and society;
- conscious of his or her position as being deputed by the fraternity;
- ready to foster the full and joyful incorporation of the candidates into the fraternity;
- careful about the way he or she relates to each individual;
- able to understand their experiences and motives;
- capable of choosing appropriate ways and times for correcting wrong conduct;
- in constant communication with the assistant and with other people who have responsibility in the fraternity.

In short, this brother or sister must be totally dedicated to the work as a personal response to the confidence placed in him or her and to the powerful plea for help.

7.3.4. The Spiritual Assistant

The spiritual assistant is a concrete sign of the communion and coresponsibility that exists between the First Order and the Third Order Regular in their relationships with the Secular Franciscan Order.¹¹⁹

In the fraternity he serves as a brother in Saint Francis and as a teacher and guide *in persona Christi e in nomine Ecclesiae* (“in the person of Christ and in the name of the Church”).¹²⁰

- As a brother, he shares the same ideal; partakes, though in a different way, of the same charism; and shares in the same mission of Francis. In this way he lives and facilitates that mutual and lifegiving communion among all the followers of Saint Francis.¹²¹
- As a teacher and guide, he reveals the Christ who saves, and through his priestly ministry he communicates Christ’s grace to the candidates so that they might exercise their common priesthood, the gift of all the baptized.¹²² In this way he fosters communion with the Church, guaranteeing the integrity of the faith and of ecclesiastical discipline.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Cf. *Rule SFO*, 26.

¹²⁰ Cf. *Pdv*, 20.

¹²¹ Cf. *Const.*, 89.3.

¹²² Cf. *PO*, 6; *Pdv*, 16,127.

¹²³ Cf. *CJC*, 305; *Const.*, 85.2; *Statutes for Assistance*, 2, 2-3.