

Chapter III Active Presence of the SFO in the Church and in Society

1. The SFO in the Franciscan Family

1.1. The Franciscan trilogy

The *Rule* of the Secular Franciscan Order begins with this forceful statement: “The Franciscan Family, as one among many spiritual families raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church, unites all members of the people of God—laity, religious, and priests—who recognize that they are called to follow Christ in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi. In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.”¹

The statement that Francis started three Orders occurs constantly in the Franciscan Sources. Thomas of Celano says in 1229: “Through his spreading message the Church of Christ is being renewed in both sexes according to his form, rule and teaching, and there is victory for the triple army of those being saved”² A little later (1234 or 1235), Julian of Speyer sees the three churches rebuilt by Francis as a sign of his work of rebuilding the Church through his three Orders. The question remains as to *how* Francis is the source of these three Franciscan Orders.

Thomas of Celano says of Francis: “He himself originally planted the Order of Lesser Brothers”³ and “wrote their rule.”⁴ Speaking of the church of San Damiano, he notes: “This is the blessed and holy place where the glorious religion and the most excellent Order of Poor Ladies and holy virgins had its happy beginning, about six years after the conversion of the blessed Francis and through that same blessed man.”⁵ He adds that they received their rule from Pope Gregory IX, at that time bishop of Ostia.⁶ For the Third Order he speaks in more general terms, saying: “Furthermore, to all he gave a norm of life and to those of every rank he sincerely pointed out the way to salvation.”⁷ Julian of Speyer, in the text cited above, says that Francis organized and arranged or coordinated three Orders.

In thus coordinating the three Orders, Francis allowed himself to be guided by the Spirit of the Lord. He was aware that the three Orders, each in its proper state, were related to the work of rebuilding the Church which the Lord had entrusted to him. Nothing in the sources indicates that Francis wished to give the First Order the task of guiding the Second or Third Order or being over them in some way. Rather it is clear that

¹ *Rule SFO*, 1.

² 1 C 37; FA:ED I, 216.

³ 1 C 38; FA:ED I, 217.

⁴ 1 C 32; FA:ED I, 210.

⁵ 1 C 18; FA:ED I, 197.

⁶ Cf. 1 C 20; FA:ED I, 199.

⁷ 1 C 37; FA:ED I, 216-17.

he wished to give all three Orders, each in fidelity to its own vocation, the responsibility to help each other and walk together in the ways of the Lord. Thus, those who enter the First, Second or Third Order become part of a life-giving reality in mutual communion, willed by God for the rebuilding of his Church.

We can conclude from the sources that the manner in which Francis is at the origin of each of the three Orders is by no means the same. For the First Order, Francis was the founder who gave it its name, wrote its Rule and guided it as general minister. The *Earlier Rule* says: “This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that Brother Francis petitioned the Lord Pope to grant and confirm for him; and he did grant and confirm it for him and his brothers present and to come. Brother Francis—and whoever is head of this religion—promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Innocent and his successors. Let all the brothers be bound to obey Brother Francis and his successors.”⁸ This is an Order with a centralized government, not bound to any particular territory but extending to the whole world. Governing power is in the hands of the general minister, at the service of the whole Order. The General Chapter has the power to decide the basic lines of the gospel life and even to remove the minister general, if necessary.

For the Second Order, Francis had to find other solutions. Clare herself says that she did penance according to the example and teaching of Francis, and that she and her few sisters promised obedience to him.⁹ In other words, Francis accepted Clare and her sisters into the circle of his Order. What was excluded for them was the itinerant apostolic life of the brothers, as well as the possibility of incorporating them into an existing monastery. The solution adopted was to establish a new house of monastic religious life, with a promise of loving care and special solicitude on the part of the First Order.¹⁰ Like all monasteries, the monastery of San Damiano was fully autonomous with its own form of life, written by Gregory IX.¹¹

The Third Order, or Order of the Brothers of Penance,¹² originated from Francis’s desire to provide new ways for men and women who wished to “do penance” following his preaching and example. It cannot be said with certainty that Francis instituted or founded the Order of Penitents, since it was present in the Church from the beginning. But he spared no efforts to give directions to those who, touched by his message, wished to “do penance.”¹³ Thus there arose groups of brothers of penance inspired by his experience of gospel life. Francis continued to feel close to them and felt in some way responsible for supporting them in their choice and making them associates in his call to rebuild the Church. Already in 1221 *Memoriale propositi* formulated special rules for the life and organization of groups of penitents, most of which had arisen in Franciscan circles.

⁸ Cf. ER, 1-3.

⁹ Cf. TestCl 24-26; CA:ED 58.

¹⁰ Cf. RCl 6.4; CA:ED 71-72.

¹¹ Cf. 1 C 20; FA:ED I, 199.

¹² Cf. LMj 4.6; FA:ED II, 553.

¹³ Cf. LtF; FA:ED I, 41ff.

Francis thus established the three Orders, institutionally autonomous and independent. Therefore their autonomous existence does not depend on the existence of the larger body. Their spiritual vitality, however, requires that they support each other “in life-giving union with each other.”¹⁴

The Secular Franciscan Order has its own way of living the Franciscan charism, just as the Friars Minor, the Poor Clares and the men and women religious of the Third Order. To be precise, the Secular Franciscan Order lives the Franciscan charism in its secular manner and does not share the particular charism of any Franciscan religious institute. It has its own place within the Family, in which it assumes the form of an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world, in which “the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state... [and]...pledge themselves to live the Gospel in the manner of Saint Francis.”¹⁵ The relationship that links religious Franciscans and Secular Franciscans is not a relationship in which the lay members share in the charism of their religious brothers and sisters. It is a relationship of “life-giving union with each other,”¹⁶ in which the Church is lived as communion and efforts are joined in a spirit of “cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church’s mission,” in order to render more effective our “response to the great challenges of our time, thanks to the combined contributions of the various gifts.”¹⁷

Concrete experience with the Secular Franciscan Order shows us the importance of encouraging “new experiences of communion and cooperation”¹⁸ between religious and laity. It is likewise important to recognize the fundamental ideas on which are based the relations between religious and laity who are inspired by the same spiritual vision. Two principal models can be distinguished. The first is based on the idea of *sharing gifts*, and the second is based on the idea of *sharing the charism*. Naturally the two models often mix in the daily relations between religious and laity.

1.2. The field cultivated by Francis

In the history of the Church Francis was the first to found a religious trilogy. Because he could not use the brothers’ itinerant form of life for the women’s communities and the groups of penitents, he had to institute the Second and Third Orders. These two Orders, by their very nature, require that they be autonomous, even though related to each other and to the First Order.

Francis and Clare knew very well that under the rules of the Fourth Lateran Council the Second Order must be part of the monastic type of religious life, into which they would have to incorporate the values of their spirituality. Clare, the little plant of the most blessed father Francis, always did everything in her power to remain in the Franciscan Family. In her *Rule*, she promises “obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope

¹⁴ *Rule SFO*, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 1.

¹⁷ VC, 54.

¹⁸ VC, 55.

Innocent and his successors,” which is a statement of her Order’s autonomy and its direct link to the Holy See. She also safeguards its link to the Franciscan Family by adding: “And as, at the beginning of her conversion she, together with her sisters, promised obedience to Blessed Francis, so now she promises his successors to observe the same obedience inviolably.”¹⁹ To assure the Poor Ladies of this vital link, Francis promised for himself and his brothers to have “loving care and special solicitude” for them.²⁰ This loving care for the little plants growing in the field cultivated by Francis always implies great respect for their specific nature and autonomy.

The same thing applies to the Third Order, which grew up in the field tilled by Francis. Its roots lie in the pre-existing Order of Penitents, but closely linked to the Franciscan Family. It embraces penitents who are living in the married state as well as penitents who are living under a promise of chastity, individually or in community. The latter could enter “regular” religious life with the approval of their project by ecclesiastical authority. This option, which already existed in the canon law of the time, favored the birth of the Third Order Regular as well as a host of religious congregations of Franciscan Tertiaries. In the course of history it was not always easy for the Third Order, secular or regular, to maintain a balance between its autonomy and its link to the First Order and the entire Franciscan Family.

In the field cultivated by Francis many little plants grew up, rooted in the Franciscan charism and linked to one another. Within the First Order there grew up the three great branches of the Observants, the Conventuals and the Capuchins, each one fully autonomous and proud to have Francis as their one and only Seraphic Father. Within the Second Order there flourished various federations and branches of Poor Clares, Urbanists, Capuchinesses and others, formed from many autonomous monasteries and linked to the various branches of the First Order. The greatest development was seen within the Third Order, both religious and secular. We find here the Third Order Regular, almost in mutual relationship with the three great branches of the First Order. We also find a great number of different religious communities, old and modern, each autonomous but linked in some way to the great Franciscan Family. Today they profess their own particular Rule and collaborate in the International Federation of the TOR. Finally, there is the Secular Franciscan Order, set up as an organic union of all the Catholic fraternities in the world, divided into fraternities at various levels: local, regional, national and international.

1.3. Sharing a charism

The concept of “sharing a charism,” as described in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*,²¹ refers to relationships between religious and lay people that are different from those presented under the heading “exchange of gifts.” The concept of “sharing a charism” implies closer participation in the life of a religious institute than “exchange of gifts.” “The laity are...invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and

¹⁹ RCI 1.3-4; CA:ED 64.

²⁰ FormViv 2; CA:ED 312.

²¹ Cf. VC, 54-56.

mission” of the various Institutes of consecrated life.²² It facilitates “more intense cooperation between consecrated persons and the laity in view of the Institute’s mission.”²³ It can develop into forms of associate membership or of sharing fully “for a certain period of time the Institute’s community life and its particular dedication to contemplation or the apostolate.”²⁴ Note the much closer participation in the internal life of the Institute than in the case considered before.

It is worth noting that the concept of “sharing a charism” is present in the Secular Franciscan Order not only in their relationship with Franciscan religious, but also in their relationship with “those who, without belonging to the SFO, wish to share its experiences and activities.”²⁵ The Franciscan Youth, with a world-wide membership of about 50,000 young people and for whom the SFO considers itself particularly responsible, “is formed by those young people who feel called by the Holy Spirit to share the experience of the Christian life in fraternity, in the light of the message of Saint Francis of Assisi, deepening their own vocation within the context of the Secular Franciscan Order.”²⁶ “The members of the Franciscan Youth consider the Rule of the SFO as an inspirational document for the growth of their own Christian and Franciscan vocation either individually or in a group.”²⁷ These youth are animated and assisted by secular and religious Franciscans together. Apart from the youth, a certain number of people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, want in some way to share in the charism of the SFO and participate in its life and activities. Already in 1995 the Presidency of the International Council of the SFO felt the need to give some guidelines for associate membership in the SFO and for “friends of Saint Francis” who feel attracted by Saint Francis of Assisi and want to be close to the Franciscan Family.

Another way, unexpected perhaps, of “sharing a charism” is the fact that the SFO, in the past and in the present, has given birth and is giving birth to various religious Congregations. The same thing is happening in some of the new lay movements in the Church. There has been no formal research on this, but an impressive number of Franciscan religious Congregations started out as small groups of Secular Franciscan who decided to pool their resources, to live and pray together and to consecrate themselves to God by private vows. Most of them were following the Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis approved by Pope Leo X in 1521; nowadays they follow the Third Order Religious Rule, approved by Pope John Paul II in 1982. But even today some Secular Institutes follow the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order approved by Pope Paul VI in 1978. Besides the members of these Institutes of Consecrated Life, there are also Secular Franciscans “who commit themselves with private vows to live in the spirit of the beatitudes and to make themselves more disposed to contemplation and to the service of the fraternities” and who can be “a great help in the spiritual and apostolic development of the SFO. These brothers and sisters may gather in groups according to

²² *Ibidem*, 54.

²³ *Ibidem*, 55.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 56.

²⁵ *Const.*, 103.1.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 96.2.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 96.3.

statutes approved by the national council, or when these groups spread beyond the borders of a nation, by the Presidency of the International Council of the SFO.”²⁸

It is worth noting that the concept of “sharing a charism” affirms the leadership of those sharing the charism over those participating in it. For religious who are sharing their charism with lay people, it means that the religious are expected to be the leaders in their relationship with the laity. The religious appear as models to be imitated as far as possible. “Moved by the examples of holiness of the consecrated members, lay men and women will experience at first hand the spirit of the evangelical counsels,...in order to transform the world according to God’s design.”²⁹ The religious are seen not only as “expert guides in the spiritual life,”³⁰ but also as those bearing final responsibility. Any “initiatives involving lay persons at the decision-making level, in order to be considered the work of a specific Institute, must promote the ends of that Institute and be carried out under its responsibility. Therefore, if lay persons take on a directive role, they will be accountable for their actions to the competent superiors.”³¹

This relationship between religious and lay people benefits both, and “the participation of the laity often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate.”³² This sharing in the charism of a religious Institute, “which draws from the riches of the consecrated life, should be held in great esteem.”³³ “Consecrated persons should remember that before all else they must be expert guides in the spiritual life,” whereas “the laity should offer religious families the invaluable contribution of their ‘being in the world’ and their specific service.”³⁴

This view of the relationship between religious and laity has by no means been absent in the history of the Secular Franciscan Order. It still lingers in the minds of quite a number of both religious and secular Franciscans all over the world. It has produced fruits of holiness and great works of charity in the past and in the present, but it has been, and still is, the cause of much misunderstanding and even conflict between religious and secular Franciscans.

The first and most important consequence of this view is the affirmation of the religious as the real leaders and lack of autonomy on the part of the laity. Initiatives either originate from the religious or need to be approved by them. Secular Franciscans espousing this view look to the religious as their models and leaders, inwardly and outwardly. They offer valuable assistance to Franciscan religious, participate in their activities, in their prayer, and even at times share in their community life. According to the Rule given by Pope Leo XIII to the SFO in 1883, and even more according to the General Constitutions of 1957, the Secular Franciscan Order is animated and guided by

²⁸ *Const.*, 36.1-2.

²⁹ *VC*, 55.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 56.

³² *Ibidem*, 55.

³³ *Ibidem*, 56.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 55.

the religious: “The superiors of the four Franciscan Families govern the Third Order normally through the general, national, provincial and regional commissaries, and through the local directors.”³⁵ “The internal government of a fraternity, as a moral person within the Third Order, belongs to the council of the fraternity. This council consists of the minister prefect and councilors, and constitutes also the advisory board of the director.”³⁶ It is only with the *Rule* approved by Pope Paul VI in 1978 that the SFO regained its autonomy. The present *General Constitutions*, approved in 1990, express this autonomy in more detail and see it as strongly related to both unity and secularity.

This shows us a second consequence of “sharing a charism,” which is singularity and lack of unity. In this view, each religious institute that shares its charism with the laity should have its own lay movement. The Secular Franciscan Order used to be divided into four obediences based on the four Orders assisting it. This division has been overcome in all countries.³⁷ But it still continues in the mind of many religious and secular Franciscans. Often enough one hears the question, “How many Secular Franciscans are there in the world?” When the answer is, “About 400,000,” the next question is often, “Yes, but how many are *ours* (OFM, OFMConv, OFMCap, TOR)?” Then one has to start to explain that there are no “obediential” Secular Franciscans and that the Secular Franciscan Order belongs to *itself* and not to the brothers.

A third consequence of “sharing a charism” is special attention to aspects of the charism that are important to the religious, while elements specific to the seculars are often overlooked. Taken to the extreme, this would deny a specific secular spirituality to the Secular Franciscan Order and have it live a mirrored spirituality and a charism received from the religious Franciscans. According to this view, to be a real Franciscan one needs to be a religious, as were Saint Francis and his brothers, the first Friars Minor. If this is not possible there is a second choice, to enter the Third Order, founded by Saint Francis himself for those who would like to follow him but cannot leave their family, house or children. In this view, the personal and devotional aspects of Franciscan spirituality are dominant, and little attention is given to active social and political involvement. This view is often implicit in the insistence of certain Secular Franciscans or their spiritual assistants to allow the Seculars to wear a kind of religious habit. The point in question is not the habit itself, but the confusion of ideas that causes the attachment to this outward sign of belonging to the Franciscan Family.

1.4. Different expressions of the same charism

Religious and secular fraternities within the Franciscan Family make present the charism of Saint Francis “in various ways and forms.”³⁸ The Franciscan Family is a communion of different expressions of the unique charism of Saint Francis. Franciscan religious should foster unity and communion with all members of the Franciscan Family because all belong to the same “spiritual family” and all participate in the same charism.

³⁵ *Const. 1957*, Art. 105.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, Art. 120.

³⁷ In Italy they are working hard and confidently toward this unity, even though there is still suffering and conflicts.

³⁸ *Rule SFO*, 1.

In such an understanding, the SFO must be recognized as an autonomous Franciscan Order within the communion of the Franciscan Family, and necessary for the *fullness* of the Franciscan charism.³⁹ Religious Order Franciscans need to recognize that the Secular Franciscan complements their own. The SFO is on an equal footing with all other components of the Franciscan Family. It is important to know this fact and to make it known. It is clear that responsibility for communion between Seculars and religious is based on the will of Church not just on the desire of the Franciscan Orders.⁴⁰

It is necessary to insist again on the need for clear and objective concepts regarding the relationship between religious and laity who draw inspiration from them. “In whatever activity or ministry they are involved, consecrated persons should remember that before all else they must be expert guides in the spiritual life, and in this perspective they should cultivate ‘the most precious gift: the spirit.’ For their part, the laity should offer religious families the invaluable contribution of their ‘being in the world’ and their specific service.”⁴¹ Only in this way can we unite our efforts “with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church’s mission. This helps to give a clearer and more complete picture of the Church herself, while rendering more effective the response to the great challenges of our time, thanks to the combined contributions of the various gifts.”⁴²

This relationship is also one of love and solidarity. If one member of the Franciscan Family is suffering, all Franciscans suffer. It is a communion or sharing of spiritual goods. Each activity of a single fraternity within the Franciscan Family has or could have consequences for the whole Family. Let us not forget also the ecclesial and human aspects of our communion, our help and our collaboration. Secular Franciscans are often looking to their religious brothers and sisters for encouragement, support and spiritual assistance.

1.5. Exchange of gifts

The term “exchange of gifts” appears six times in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*,⁴³ all of them in the context of inter-related independent entities who are able to enrich each other and to be enriched by one another. This “exchange of gifts” can “contribute to an inculturation of the Gospel which purifies, strengthens and ennobles the treasures found in the cultures of all peoples.”⁴⁴ It will make religious and laity “participate more effectively in the Church's mission”⁴⁵ in renewed “faithfulness to the Holy Spirit, who is the source of communion and unceasing newness of life,”⁴⁶ and who gives the Church “a unity of fellowship and service; furnishing and directing her with

³⁹ Cf. *Capuchin Constitutions*, 95. See Constitutions of the Friars Minor, Conventuals, TOR.

⁴⁰ Cf. K. Schindler, *Figure and Role of the Assistant*, in *Koinonia* 1994, 3, 2-4.

⁴¹ VC, 55.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 54.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 47, 54, 62, 82, 85, 101.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 47.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 54

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 62

various gifts, both hierarchical and charismatic.”⁴⁷ The “exchange of gifts,” mutual knowledge and “co-operation in common undertakings of service and of witness, ... show the will to journey together towards perfect unity along the path of truth and love.”⁴⁸

Therefore Secular Franciscans are called to live the Gospel after the manner of Saint Francis in the world, just as their religious brothers and sisters are called to live the same Gospel by leaving the world. “The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people.”⁴⁹ In the same way, “the rule and life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity”⁵⁰ and “the form of life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis is to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, in poverty and in chastity.”⁵¹

Secular Franciscans in fact have their own Order, with its own *Rule* of life, approved by the Pope, and its own *Ritual* and *General Constitutions*, approved by the respective Roman Congregations. They have their own leaders, elected by themselves, at all levels: local, regional, national and international. The general minister of the Secular Franciscan Order is a member of the Conference of the Franciscan Family, together with the four religious Franciscan general ministers and the president of the International Conference of Franciscan religious of the Third Order Regular (CFI-TOR). It is evident that such a situation has profound effects on the relationships between secular and religious Franciscans.

The Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters are Franciscans as much as all other Franciscans, but in a different way. It is only together (“in various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other”) that we are able to make present the Franciscan charism in the life and mission of the Church. Both religious and Seculars try to live the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as brothers and sisters, having but one Father, who is in heaven. All of us try to place our will in the will of the Father,⁵² to live without anything of our own⁵³ and, with a clean heart and spirit, never cease to adore and to see the Lord God living and true.⁵⁴

Secular Franciscans have their own way of living basic Franciscan values, as expressed in their *Rule*: “A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they

⁴⁷ *Ibidem.*, 85.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*, 101.

⁴⁹ *Rule SFO*, 4.

⁵⁰ LR 1,1; FA:ED I, 100.

⁵¹ *Rule TOR*, 1,1.

⁵² Cf. 2LrF 52; FA:ED I, 49.

⁵³ Cf. LR 1,1; FA:ED I, 100.

⁵⁴ Cf. Adm 16,2; FA:ED I, .

shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ.”⁵⁵ “They should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which bear the imprint of the Most High, and they should strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship.”⁵⁶ “Uniting themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed his will into the Father’s hands, let them faithfully fulfill the duties proper to their various circumstances of life.”⁵⁷ “Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs. Let them be mindful that according to the Gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God’s children. Thus, in the spirit of the beatitudes, and as pilgrims and strangers on their way to the home of the Father, they should strive to purify their hearts from every tendency and yearning for possession and power.”⁵⁸ “Witnessing to the good yet to come and obliged to acquire purity of heart because of the vocation they have embraced, they should set themselves free to love God and their brothers and sisters.”⁵⁹ “In their family they should cultivate the Franciscan spirit of peace, fidelity, and respect for life, striving to make of it a sign of a world already renewed in Christ. By living the grace of matrimony, husbands and wives in particular should bear witness in the world to the love of Christ for his Church. They should joyfully accompany their children on their human and spiritual journey by providing a simple and open Christian education and being attentive to the vocation of each child.”⁶⁰

Inspired by these basic values, Secular Franciscans have always seen their personal witness in the environment in which they live and their service for building up the Kingdom of God within the situations of this world as their preferred apostolate.⁶¹ They have been and are most active in the field of practical charity: care for poor and destitute people, care for the sick and the aged. One of the oldest hospitals in Madrid is owned and run by the local SFO fraternity of San Francisco el Grande. There are several old people’s homes owned and run by local fraternities in various countries: Venezuela, Guatemala, Spain, Italy, Brazil. But most often, Secular Franciscans co-operate in programs run by others, like feeding school children in Caracas, helping in the soup kitchen in Dublin, collecting and sorting used clothing in Milan, preparing meals for the poor in San Salvador, visiting people in the home for the elderly in Brno, etc. A special characteristic of Secular Franciscans is their ability to see specific needs and offer simple and concrete solutions. They will take their own initiatives but often prefer to collaborate with existing organizations.

The communion between Religious and Seculars must be life-giving and mutual. It requires the participation of the Seculars in the daily life of the religious community (prayer, meals, recreation), and the participation and collaboration of all the friars (not just the assistants) in the spiritual guidance, in the formation, and in the apostolic activities of the SFO Fraternity. It would also be a good idea to organize common

⁵⁵ *Rule SFO*, 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 17.

⁶¹ *Cf. Const.*, 17.

retreats, as well as common studies of the charism, the history, spirituality and practical aspects of the Franciscan charism. One concrete contribution to communion is the inter-Franciscan news about common areas of interest, Franciscan problems and activities.

A fraternal relationship between the members of the Franciscan Family implies respect and love for the different forms of the single Franciscan charism. Communion with the SFO means that the friars must know, love and help the SFO. The Church has entrusted five specific ministries or areas of apostolic activity to the SFO: justice and peace, the world of work, the family, creation, hope and joy. The friars will be able to participate in these ministries of the SFO.

The relationships of communion between the Franciscan Orders are not to be sought at the juridic or institutional level, but at the level of mutual exchange, sharing a charism and support of one another in the vocation to rebuild the Church. The Conference of the Franciscan Family was set up precisely to help us “make present the charism of our common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.”⁶²

Andrea Boni, OFM, says: “The mission entrusted to the three Franciscan Orders...requires the combined action of the friars of the First Order, the penitents of the Third Order and the contemplative sacrifice of the sisters of the Second Order. In the post-conciliar reorganization of the triple army coordinated by Saint Francis, Franciscans must look to the third millennium in the history of the Church with clear minds and renewed enthusiasm in constructing their history. They have been entrusted by God with the task of rebuilding his house. The Church is rebuilt with the same tools with which it was constructed: evangelization and witness of life. In their coordinated salvific activity Franciscans realize a ‘corporeal’ communion, based on the fact that they are members of the same body. This practical corporeality must be expressed in terms of shared responsibility on the part of the First, Second and Third Order whenever the whole great Franciscan Family is engaged in its own proper activity.”⁶³

1.6. Exchange of gifts between Secular Franciscans and Spiritual Assistants

“The assistant is a bond of communion between his Order and the SFO.” He is “a witness...of the fraternal affection of the religious towards the Secular Franciscans.”⁶⁴ These statements mean that communion and fraternal affection ought to be normal in our mutual relationships. All the local religious fraternities and the whole province should know and love the Secular Franciscans. Only in this way can an assistant be a true sign of a genuine existing reality. This new awareness in our religious provinces should be fostered, proclaimed and developed in every country where the Franciscan Family is present.

In the context of assistance, this exchange of gifts benefits both secular and religious Franciscans in manifold ways. On the spiritual level, it helps both religious and

⁶² *Rule SFO*, 1.

⁶³ A. Boni, OFM, *Tres Ordines hic ordinat*, p. 179-180.

⁶⁴ *Const.*, 89.3.

seculars to become more conscious of their own specific calling in the Church. Being an assistant to the Secular Franciscan Order means above all meeting people who are inspired by Saint Francis, celebrating the beauty of life and dancing with children, being with youngsters whose eyes are pure and whose bodies are chaste, dining with fraternity leaders, sitting at the bedside of sick and elderly brothers and sisters.

Serving as a spiritual assistant to the Secular Franciscan Order has been and still is an opportunity to inspire the Seculars to engage in politics and economics based on the Gospel. The Secular Franciscans and their spiritual assistants are facing problems of bioethics, abortion, euthanasia, exploitation, wanton destruction of nature, consumerism, racism and religious fanaticism. Assisting Secular Franciscans means also talking about educating youth today, helping young people prepare for marriage, listening to the stories of the elderly. Serving as assistant to the SFO means that many doors open, from the entrance of the UN headquarters in New York to the shack of a poor leper on the shore of the Indian Ocean. Assisting the SFO means covering many miles with Franciscan brothers and sisters in the relative comfort of an airplane or private car, but also in the cramped space of a bush-taxi or tracking along the road to nowhere.

This exchange of gifts also helps the assistant to grow as a Franciscan religious, desiring above all things “to have the Spirit of the Lord and its holy activity.”⁶⁵ As religious, our task is to be people of God, to give Spirit and life to our secular sisters and brothers, to speak to them about God.⁶⁶ The reason is because the Secular Franciscans can manage everything else themselves, but what they expect from us is inspiration, enthusiasm, love—yes, being madly in love with God.

In exchange, our secular brothers and sisters will give us their love and sympathy, their material support and help. They will be with us, defending us and helping us to get out of trouble. They are long-suffering, courteous, humble and accommodating with us religious. They will help us in our apostolic activities and charitable ventures. They will even give us their own sons and daughters to join our ranks. But on one condition: that we are truly religious, people of God, living our own specific calling the best we can.

Religious and Secular Franciscans have a common mission of evangelization. The friars should therefore be eager to offer spiritual assistance and share in the efforts of the SFO to transform the temporal order according to the spirit of the Gospel.⁶⁷ The friars are called to pool their spiritual and apostolic efforts with the other religious branches of the Franciscan Family and with the SFO.

This communion could also be expressed through collaboration in vocational promotion for both secular and religious Franciscan life. If it is true that the Third Order of Saint Francis has its origin in communion with Saint Francis, there is no reason why the Franciscan friars and sisters cannot be inspirations for a secular Franciscan vocation.

⁶⁵ LR 10,8; FA:ED I, 105.

⁶⁶ I remember what one spiritual assistant said to me: “I still have ringing in my ears the cry of one of our Secular Franciscan sisters: ‘Tell me about God!’”

⁶⁷ Cf. Constitutions TOR, 159. See General Constitutions, OFM, OFMConv and OFMCap.

Both religious and secular Franciscans are in the process of renewal and “return to the origins” initiated by the Second Vatican Council. Communion and collaboration in this process is bound to be fruitful for both.

2. Church life of the Lay Franciscans

2.1. Called to follow Christ in the mission of the Church

It is already forty years since Vatican II,⁶⁸ and its “rich doctrinal, spiritual and pastoral patrimony” continues to nourish deep reflection on the “nature, dignity, spirituality, mission and responsibility” of the Christian laity in the Church and in the world.”

This global rethinking, a true grace of the Spirit who leads the Church of Christ along the paths of history, is taken up by John Paul II and harmoniously proposed again by him in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*. The Pope’s intention is to “stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share, both as a group and as individuals, in the communion and mission of the Church.”⁶⁹

Following the essential lines of this magisterial document, we will highlight the specific meaning of the gift and responsibility of the Franciscan laity, who live their ecclesial vocation as baptized laity, within the mission of the Church.

2.2. Dignity and ecclesial mission of the Christian laity

The topic of the identity and ecclesial dignity of the Christian laity is dealt with by the Church’s magisterium in a special way beginning with Vatican II. Within a renewed ecclesiology of communion one could begin to speak of the laity no longer in a negative way, saying what they are not, but rather positively, describing what they are for the Church and identifying their position within it. This step forward was made possible by some ecclesiological choices made by the Council, especially that of presenting the Church as the People of God, which is entered through faith and baptism. This choice allowed a strong recovery of the baptismal priesthood, affirmed as “common to all the baptized,” before any other differentiation due to different charisms or ministries, given or raised up by the Spirit.

Another choice has led to a rediscovery of the service of the entire Church on behalf of the world. The Church, as the People of God in pilgrimage through history toward the fullness of the blessed homeland, is essentially missionary. It owes the world the announcement of the Gospel and collaboration with all persons of good will for the realization of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, gifted by the Holy Spirit with suitable

⁶⁸ Chapter IV of the book by Carlo Dallari, OFM, *I laici francescani... Consacrati a Dio per la vita del Mondo*. Assisi 1994, Ed. Porziuncola, Biblioteca Testi di formazione a cura dell’OFS 3, pp. 91-93.

⁶⁹ CL, 2.

charisms and ministries, it is called to exist not for itself but for Christ and for the world. All in the Church are responsible for this mission, according to their state or condition due to the particular vocation of each baptized person. All can bring about in themselves this holiness, with which the Holy Spirit has endowed his Church, by responding to their own vocation and committing themselves to the mission common to all.

In this full context, the dignity and the ecclesial role of the Christian laity are emphasized. They are no longer considered second-class Christians (those who are *not* priests or those who are *not* religious), but have the same ecclesial dignity as priests and religious, since they are equal to them through baptism and belong with full right to the Church of Christ. In conclusion, as the Council says, the Christian laity are those who “by baptism are incorporated into Christ, are constituted the People of God, who have been made sharers in their own way in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ and play their part in carrying out the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.”⁷⁰

This passage contains a series of ways to deepen our understanding of the identity of the Christian laity.

The first identifies the sacrament of baptism as the basis of the title to ecclesial dignity for all the faithful: “Baptism regenerates us in the life of the Son of God; unites us to Christ and to his Body, the Church; anoints us in the Holy Spirit, making us spiritual temples.”⁷¹ The new Christian life, of which baptism is the first expression, consists in the believer’s participation in the life of God or better in the coming of God “who creates new things” in human history. Thus what characterizes the Christian as such is his or her acceptance of this God in faith, an event fully manifested in the sacramental celebration of baptism.

The second way leads to a rediscovery of the common priesthood: “The lay faithful participate, for their part, in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King.”⁷² They participate:

- in *priestly* service, because baptism, by uniting them to Christ and to the Church, makes them capable of offering themselves and all their activities as a spiritual sacrifice pleasing to God;
- in *prophetic* service, because it enables them to welcome his Word, to live it in themselves and to witness to it in the Church, and with the Church in the world;
- in *kingly* service, because it qualifies them for service to the Kingdom of God and its mission in history: “They exercise their kingship as Christians, above all in the spiritual combat in which they seek to overcome in themselves the kingdom of sin, and then to make a gift of themselves so as to serve, in justice and in charity, Jesus who is himself present in all his brothers and sisters, especially in the very least.”⁷³ Conformed to Christ, “Lord and King of the universe,” the laity have

⁷⁰ LG, 31.

⁷¹ CL, 10.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 14.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

before them, as their final goal, to be like their Lord, who came to serve and to give his life for his brothers. This “kingly” service extends to all creatures, since it belongs to the laity in particular to “restore to creation all its original value. In ordering creation to the authentic well-being of humanity in an activity governed by the life of grace, they share in the exercise of the power with which the Risen Christ draws all things to himself and subjects them along with himself to the Father, so that God might be everything to everyone.”⁷⁴

The third way is to carry out, on their part, the mission of all Christian people. In the Church, to which they belong through baptism, they occupy themselves specifically with temporal realities and with witnessing to the Kingdom of God present in the world.

The dignity of the laity is further exalted by the fact that they, personally, aspire to the final purpose of the Church itself, namely holiness: “We come to the full sense of the dignity of the lay faithful if we consider the prime and fundamental vocation that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity.”⁷⁵ It belongs to the blessed Trinity to make every baptized person holy. Therefore in the Church, through baptism, the laity too can call themselves “saints” and for this reason enabled and committed to show holiness of being through holiness of doing. This doing is the expression of life in the Spirit through faith, hope and charity, and its specific field is participation in the human activities proper to one who lives in “the world.”

In fact, the laity “must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ.”⁷⁶ And so “flight from the world” or attachment to the spirituality of a religious Order can no longer be considered as the only way to attain sanctity. All Christians may stay in the ecclesial situation in which they are called to live their proper vocation, because whatever may be their state, as such they are “active subjects” of the Church’s mission and of the call to holiness.⁷⁷ So, “such a vocation ought to be called an essential and inseparable element of the new life of baptism, and therefore an element which determines their dignity. At the same time the vocation to holiness is intimately connected to mission and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the world.”⁷⁸ Therefore the Christian laity also fulfill the mission of building up the Church by bringing to holiness that portion of the Church which they themselves are; and, in this sanctity, the Church finds the essential condition for bringing Christ to the world and the world to Christ.

2.3. The laity today

⁷⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, 16.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 17.

⁷⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 17.

To say that the twenty-first century in the Church will be the age of the laity⁷⁹ takes nothing away from the ordained ministry or from consecrated life. Just as there is no Eucharist, and hence no Church, without the sacramental priesthood, so there can be no “civilization of love” or sanctification of the heart of the world without laity who live the Church as a mystery of missionary communion. In the second century, the *Letter to Diognetus* expressed the same truth: “The Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body.”

Christians already participate in the mission of Christ through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist. Through these privileged encounters with Christ, every disciple is called to the “perfection of charity.” Forty years after the Second Vatican Council this statement might seem obvious. But it is by no means so for those millions of laity all over the world who might continue to think that Jesus was speaking to someone else when he said: “Go...and make disciples of all nations.”⁸⁰

In every great apostolic work there are risks. In the Church equality is based on complementarity of different vocations, each one equally worthy, each one necessary and a support to the other, but each one quite distinct from the other. In the world the term “equality” has come to mean identity and interchangeability of roles, a leveling of all differences in the name of radical egalitarianism and individualism. But such ideas are completely foreign to the “catholic” or universal nature of the Church. In fact it is the will of God that all be saved, and Christ and his Catholic Church, through the Holy Spirit, are sent so that the Father’s will may be fulfilled for all and the order of love permeate the whole of creation.

The risks, however, take second place when compared with the grace given by God for the new evangelization. The zeal of the laity can produce great things. Their charisms and services enrich the life of the Church. Their responsible participation will revitalize the Christian communion, and it bears renewed witness to the communion of saints. The ecclesial movements and groups are signs of the vitality of the faith of Christian lay people who are experiencing the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their families and workplaces.⁸¹ Many of them are committed to building ways of life that are more human, more just and less confrontational. For the Church, the mission of the laity is not a luxury or an extra. It is not pompous rhetoric. The times demand it. It is fundamental for the Church’s identity. Nothing can take the place of the laity.⁸²

In order for the Church to bear effective witness to Christ in the twenty-first century, the involvement of the laity in the evangelization of the culture is indispensable. It is an involvement that cannot be realized without a deep interior renewal and without repentance. It is an involvement that calls for a renewed awareness of belonging to the Church and a firmer and more convinced commitment to the missionary thrust of the

⁷⁹ From “Laity Today” – Information Service of the Pontifical Council for the Laity (n.19/1996), the second part of the message of Cardinal G. Francis Stafford, President of the Council.

⁸⁰ Mt 28:19.

⁸¹ Cf. Gal. 5:22.

⁸² Cf. Acts, 16.

Christian community. Only in this way will the Church be able to shine brightly as the *lumen Christi*, the light of Christ.

2.4. Lay Franciscans in the Church's mission

Lay Franciscans participate in the global mission of the entire People of God, in the specificity of their secular state. As baptized persons, they fulfill the mission of being witnesses in the world of God's sovereignty, of his saving initiative, and of the mysterious reality that human history is totally oriented toward him. As called to holiness, the laity bear witness to people that since the Incarnation the whole world is sacred, except for sin, and that conversion to God can be fully realized without "fleeing" from secular activities.

In short, Secular Franciscans are simply baptized lay persons, consecrated to the service of the Gospel according to the charism and example of Saint Francis. More specifically, given that their call is not a generic one, it must be remembered that, in the variety of charisms the Holy Spirit has given the Church for mission and sanctification, they are the ones who recognize that they are called to live the Gospel after the manner of Francis of Assisi⁸³ and are endowed with the grace of the Spirit in sufficient measure to respond to their vocation. This "modality" is described and codified in the normative documents of Secular Franciscan life: *Rule*, *General Constitutions* and *Ritual*. For this reason, what we are to say will be guided by the directives contained in these texts.

The membership and mission of the lay Franciscans in the Church are described by the *Rule* in an important passage: "They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their lives and words. Called like Saint Francis to rebuild the Church and inspired by his example...."⁸⁴

We find the same directives in the *General Constitutions*: "Called to work together in building up the Church as the sacrament of salvation for all and, through their baptism and profession made 'witnesses and instruments of her mission,' Secular Franciscans proclaim Christ by their life and words. Their preferred apostolate is personal witness in the environment in which they live and service for building up the Kingdom of God within the situation of this world."⁸⁵ And again in the *Ritual*: by perpetual profession of the *Rule* lay Franciscans commit themselves to work for the Church and for humanity;⁸⁶ to contribute to its good, to its never-ending renewal and to its mission among people.⁸⁷

Lay Franciscans are living members of the Church and instruments of its mission, summoned by the Spirit in a fraternity to serve the Kingdom of God in the situations of

⁸³ Cf. *Rule SFO*, 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 6.

⁸⁵ *Const.*, 17,1.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order*, Preface, 1.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, 14; 29.

this world, after the example of Saint Francis, whose work of rebuilding the Church they continue.

“Living members,” since Secular Franciscans recognize themselves in that communion of divine life which is the Church, and thus called to live personally its mission and take responsibility for it, in their own way.

The first way is in service to the Kingdom through building up the Church and the building of a more fraternal and evangelical world.

The second, implicit in the reference to the example of Saint Francis, is made explicit in the fraternity. Secular Franciscans live the Church’s mission “as brothers and sisters” or “in fraternity,” where the term “fraternity” is meant to indicate the basic structure of Franciscan life in a specific place, as “the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love.”⁸⁸ Lay Franciscans find in the fraternity “the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members.”⁸⁹ Through life in fraternity they are sent, in the Church and with the Church, together with all persons of good will, to all humanity in order to “build a more fraternal world,”⁹⁰ and bring about “universal kinship”⁹¹ with all creatures in an attitude of respect and appreciation, according to the plan of God, the Creator and Lord of all things.

Lay Franciscans are, by vocation, creators of fraternal relationships among people, docile instruments in the hands of Christ the universal reconciler and peacemaker. They should be attentive to welcome whatever of Christ is present in each person, and thus seek the collaboration of all people of good will. We find the same directives in the *Ritual*: lay Franciscans consecrate themselves to the Kingdom of God,⁹² this involves “living for the world,” with a “commitment to collaborate in building a more fraternal world.”⁹³ They are called to be in the world “a leaven of gospel life,”⁹⁴ to “give witness to the Kingdom of God and to build a more fraternal world based on the Gospel,”⁹⁵ “to serve for the glory of God and the fulfillment of his commandment to love others.”⁹⁶

In short, the mission of the lay Franciscans consists in the commitment to “rebuild the Church” according to their secular state, by working in the Church and with the Church, for a world in which people can live as brothers and sisters, recognizing that they are all children of the same heavenly Father and loving each other as Christ loved them. This mission is realized through the development of a form of life, the fraternity, which requires the communion of love as its source of strength.

⁸⁸ *Rule SFO*, 22.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 22.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 14.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 18.

⁹² Cf. *Ritual*, Chapter 2, 29.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, Preface, 14.d.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, Chapter 1, 12.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, Chapter 2, 29.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, Chapter 1, 12.

3. Missionary vocation of the Secular Franciscans

3.1. “Mission” means sending

Secular Franciscans, like all the baptized, are sent (missionaries) to the whole world to teach the values that followers of Jesus are to have. The first thing is to recognize the call of him who alone is the Holy One. The fact that the Father who created us did so using Christ as model and firstborn of all creation means that all creation is good, including our very selves. The fact that many do not believe this is a sad truth, and self-hatred seems to be the basic cause of personal and societal unhappiness. People who turn to violence, greed, ambition, pride, anger, envy, who give themselves over to lust or gluttony or laziness, are usually doing so because they have no other hope. And they think that happiness can be gained in this way. Our dependence on God’s faithful love for us is a matter of faith.

Systematized deviance from what we can actually accomplish (which we will term “dysfunction”) is the great sickness in wealthy societies today. It is shown in the pitiful attempts we make to be happy by having things. In poorer societies, this dysfunction infects people (and not just their leaders) by enticing them to desire to possess things rather than to achieve peace. In all the world today there is a great spiritual hunger for values, for recognition of the preciousness of human beings. Whatever we call this sickness, we know that there is only one cure: to give ourselves to God, who alone can make us whole again.

We are missionaries when we show the world that we are trying to let God deliver us from the foolishness of filling the void in our lives with power, prestige and possessions. The only real success story the world has ever heard is told about a poor Crib, a heavy Cross and an empty Tomb. How will others hear the story unless they are told? “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?” (Rom 10:14-15). Missionaries are not just priests and religious brothers or sisters who leave their homes and families and go around the world to serve others. There are also lay people who do this.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Pope Paul VI wrote: “Lay people, whose particular vocation places them in the midst of the world and in charge of the most varied temporal tasks, must for this very reason exercise a very special form of evangelization...to put to use every Christian and evangelical possibility latent but always present and active in the affairs of the world. Their own field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also

includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work, suffering.”⁹⁷

3.2. Secular Franciscan missionaries

Secular Franciscans carry out this mission:

- By living the Gospel: “They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people proclaiming Christ by their life and words.”⁹⁸ By changing society, beginning with themselves. This is done within families by couples showing marital love for one another. By families who raise children in love, not fear. Teaching respect for the elderly by showing that respect. By caring for the poor and making sincere efforts to change the situations of poverty. By being honest and paying what is owed others. Cardinal Martini of Milan, on January 1, 1999, in response to reporters’ questions of how people might make this a better world for all, said, “Pay for your bus rides.” That is a simple way of honesty and justice, one of many often overlooked in our desire to do wonderful things for God and other people. There is no free ride in the world today for anyone.

- By working in their parish. Be slow to criticize the parish priests, be quick to help out. Show others that you go to church not just for yourself, but that you see yourself as part of a community of believers. The task of the lay Franciscan missionary is to bring witness to every home within the area of their parish. The theme of the mission is to invite people to “open wide the doors to Christ.” The mission is ongoing and Secular Franciscans must always be in the front lines.

- By assisting Franciscan religious in their mission efforts, and by fostering mission awareness in their fraternities

- By serving as an SFO missionary. There are “Franciscan Partners,” “Franciscan Volunteers” and other groups around the world. In Italy there is a Secular Franciscan Mission Center, dedicated to raising mission awareness among the SFO, and training and sending Secular missionaries where they can work alongside the friars and sisters.

3.3 “Prophetic” vocation of the Secular Franciscans

Prophecy is not “foretelling the future” but showing God’s plan for humans by living the values of Jesus. This plan of God is spelled out in the commandments of the Lord Jesus: “‘Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:29-31). This is not easy to obey, but if we do not, how will people have hope today without prophets to bear witness to it? The

⁹⁷ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (= EN), 70.

⁹⁸ *Rule SFO*, 6.

Catechism, citing *Lumen Gentium*, says: “‘The holy People of God shares also in Christ’s prophetic office,’ above all in the supernatural sense of faith that belongs to the whole People, lay and clergy, when it ‘unfailingly adheres to the faith...once for all delivered to the saints,’ and when it deepens its understanding and becomes Christ’s witness in the midst of this world.”⁹⁹

Society and the Church can be changed only by living true values. This is how lay Franciscans by refusing to bear arms helped to destroy the medieval feudal system. It is impossible to have a war if the soldiers will not fight. This example of conversion still shocks society and even the Church, to say the least. Saint Francis did not always preach with words, and at first his “radical ideas” made church leaders nervous, but the Gospel of Jesus cannot be swept under the rug. Secular Franciscans, once they are freed from the fear of what their neighbors and friends might think, can change society by openly living Christian values. This does not mean that we force others to accept our ways; it means only that we ourselves live the values and that invites others to do the same. But all men and women must be free to choose. Love cannot be forced.

There is a great need today to strengthen values everywhere, including within the Church. Selfishness and self-centeredness, stubborn insistence on our way of doing things, misuse of power and possessions, craving for prestige—these symptoms of spiritual illness are not limited to secular society today, in any culture. We are only human, and we are the Church; therefore the Church is always in need of reforming. Start with yourself, then work on others when you are sure you have made sufficient progress.

The Church calls Secular Franciscans to this! Secular Franciscans are more deeply involved in the society where they live than religious Franciscans can ever be. In the Church, Secular Franciscans can animate friars and sisters by sharing life (life-giving union with each other works both ways). They can animate discouraged parish priests by their loyalty, not offered uncritically, but flowing from a sense that together we are one Church. Sometimes we forget that priests are human beings and need to be loved!

It is within the parish that the SFO’s main work is done. A Secular Franciscan fraternity is a basic Christian community, approved by the Church, “...where the faithful can communicate the Word of God and express it in service and love to one another.”¹⁰⁰ Secular Franciscans who are truly living the Gospel, can give new life to their own parishes. Dysfunction can be overcome, but it can destroy individuals and societies (even parishes) if it is not dealt with. Societies, including the Church, need healing. The future is bright because Jesus, the Light of the world, lights it. Jesus is the answer. Are we clear about the questions? Do we understand the request of Jesus, “Repair my house”? God alone makes us into saints. Our task is to live what God sends us and invite others to do the same. This is the best way to promote Franciscan vocations, for the religious and the secular Orders.

⁹⁹ CCC, 785; LG, 12.

¹⁰⁰ CL, 26.

4. Ecclesial life of the SFO Fraternities

4.1. Life in Fraternity

The Secular Franciscan vocation is a call to live the Gospel in fraternity and in the world. The organizational structure, communion and sharing of goods are ordered towards this goal. What is more, this ideal is reflected in its presence and its mission in a specific place.

It seems appropriate to mention here some aspects of the SFO life in fraternity and the service of animation and guidance, as laid down in the *General Constitutions*.

4.1.1. Witness of fraternal life

Fraternal life must be witnessed and fostered in the concrete realities of life. The life-giving space of the secular Franciscan fraternity is not the sacristy, nor the church as a place where the Christian community meets, but the world itself. It is certain that fraternal life cannot be meaningful without a rich spiritual life, and it must be lived in the world because that is where the great Franciscan cloister is found,¹⁰¹ for if the world is the cloister for religious Franciscans, it is all the more so for Secular Franciscans. This requires that we pay close attention to the signs of the times in order to involve the fraternities and their members: “The SFO shall also support the commitment of the fraternities in their service to the world, and specifically to the life of society.”¹⁰²

4.1.2. Animation and guidance

According to the *Rule*, animation and guidance of a fraternity at any level is not personal (by the minister or president), but collegial (by the council with the minister): “On various levels, each fraternity is animated and guided by a council and minister (or president).”¹⁰³ This makes broader communication and coordination possible, in local fraternities and on the regional and national levels. Only shared joint responsibility can improve the service of animation and guidance of a fraternity.¹⁰⁴

4.1.3. Availability and service

In order to ensure proper animation and guidance of the fraternity at the various levels, recognizing that all the brothers and sisters are necessary but not indispensable, some very important amendments were adopted. These were based on experience, like the change that says “the outgoing minister cannot be elected vice-minister.”¹⁰⁵

4.1.4. Use of dialogue

¹⁰¹ “This, Lady, is our enclosure” (The Sacred Exchange, 63).

¹⁰² *Const.*, 28.2.

¹⁰³ *Rule SFO*, 21.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Const.*, 31.1; 61.3; 65.3; 69.2.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, 79.2.

Dialogue is always necessary for fraternal life, but it becomes even more important especially in the difficult or problematic situations in which a fraternity or one of its members can find itself. It is not always easy to speak in a group, and thus it may be better if this dialogue is conducted by the minister of the fraternity and the spiritual assistant, respecting the person and keeping the council informed.¹⁰⁶

4.1.5. Communion and subsidiarity

A sense of communion and subsidiarity among the fraternities serves to respect and foster the vitality of the councils: “This is a requirement of the communion among the fraternities, of the orderly collaboration among them, and of the unity of the SFO.”¹⁰⁷

The council on a higher level has a great responsibility for animating and guiding the fraternities on a lower level, when it is apparent that the life of those fraternities is in danger from misconduct by the minister or council. As an organ of communion and subsidiarity it can arrange a fraternal visit to the council in question and request a pastoral visit if necessary. After charitably and prudently evaluating the situation in the fraternity, it can “decide on the best way to proceed, not excluding the eventual removal of the council or leaders involved.”¹⁰⁸

4.1.6. Solidarity

A sign of maturity in fraternities and in each Secular Franciscan is their cooperation in economic responsibilities. This means acceptance of the expenditures decided in this area, but also solidarity in taking on the financial burden that other brothers and sisters cannot assume because of their poverty. Solidarity is not just a word; it involves the sharing of material goods. Solidarity and the sharing of material goods, not just spiritual things, presupposes a journey of solidarity in unity, which builds autonomy and proves responsibility in the vocation assumed.¹⁰⁹

4.2 International fraternity

This topic is considered as a unit because it is relevant for the life of all the fraternities at the other levels.

First, the *Constitutions* describe the international council as the highest governing body: “The International Council convened in General Chapter is the highest governing body of the SFO with legislative, deliberative and elective powers.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 58.1-3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 29.1.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 84.6.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*, 30.3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 70.3.

The international council has the duty and the competence to animate and guide the national fraternity,¹¹¹ “to promote and sustain the evangelical life” of the charism “within the secular condition” and “to increase the sense of unity of the SFO while respecting the pluralism of the persons and groups.”¹¹²

The Presidency of the CIOFS, whose task is “to coordinate, animate, and guide the SFO,”¹¹³ reinforces the bonds of communion, communication and collaboration at the world-wide level, offering its help “in a spirit of service, according to the circumstances,” and it strengthens “reciprocal relationships of collaboration between the SFO and the other components of the Franciscan Family at the world level.”¹¹⁴

The Presidency of the CIOFS directs and animates the Secular Franciscans in their various places of presence and mission in the Church and in society, in collaboration with “organizations and associations which defend the same values” and in order to reach its own goals.¹¹⁵

4.3. Formation

The *General Constitutions* invite us to continue to cultivate our vocation, to remain faithful to our identity and mission, to fulfill the responsibilities of our profession or work, including acquisition of the corresponding professional training “as the primary and fundamental contribution to building a more just and fraternal world,”¹¹⁶ adapting its forms to new and different situations of life. To cultivate Franciscan values in secular life, as well as to grow in our vocation and bear witness to it in “social and civil responsibilities,”¹¹⁷ necessarily requires formation. We have already spoken about this in Chapter 2, Section 7. Here we would like to point out some of its other aspects.

4.3.1. A specific vocation

The *General Constitutions*, following the *Rule*, are clear enough in reflecting and explaining the proper place the Secular Franciscan Order occupies in the Franciscan Family, with its secular dimension of the Franciscan charism. The *Rule* and *Constitutions* emphasize that “the vocation to the SFO is a specific vocation that gives form to the life and apostolic activity of its members.”¹¹⁸ Therefore, “those who are bound by a perpetual commitment to another religious family or institute of consecrated life” cannot be admitted to the SFO.¹¹⁹ Of course the reverse is also true in the sense that a Secular Franciscan who assumes another commitment ceases to belong to the SFO.

¹¹¹ Cf. *Ibidem*, 70.2.

¹¹² *Ibidem*, 71.1.a-b.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, 73.b.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 73.c.d.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, 73.e.f.g.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 20.2.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 20.2.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 2.1; Cf. *Rule SFO*, 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 2.1.

4.3.2. Initial formation

Formation must be not just intellectual, but life-giving and existential in order to help a brother or sister understand the form of evangelical life they wish to live. Only by knowing it can they come to love it; only by loving it can they communicate it to others. Formation helps them to deepen their sense of who they are as an Order and to feel part of it.

Great emphasis is placed on initial formation, a time necessary for discernment and vocational maturation. A good initial formation, which is the foundation for ongoing formation, is also the basis for a “sense of belonging.” Allowance is made for the possibility of temporary profession: “Perpetual profession...may be preceded by a temporary profession, renewed annually. The total time of temporary profession may not be longer than three years.”¹²⁰ It is a way of prolonging initial formation, avoiding the risk of superficial enthusiasm and subsequent defections from the fraternity.

4.3.3. Ongoing formation

Initial formation will bear fruit only if formation is permanent or ongoing. This requires time and effort. The monthly meeting alone cannot serve as sufficient formation. Fraternities are asked to give “special attention to the formation of the newly professed and of the temporarily professed, to help them become fully mature in their vocation and develop a true sense of belonging.”¹²¹ Ongoing formation is recognized as indispensable if the horizon of our fraternal, ecclesial, social life is open, as was that of Francis who repeatedly said, “Let us begin, brothers ...”¹²²

Important moments of formation, besides the formation program as such, are the chapter of the fraternity at every level, in which the fraternity studies, discusses and decides “questions regarding its own life and organization;”¹²³ remembrance of the deceased brothers and sisters,¹²⁴ through whom the roots of Secular Franciscan life are sunk deep in the past, but also reach out to the future; financial transparency and care for the goods of the fraternity.¹²⁵ These are sensitive temporal realities, but they can reflect clearly a sense of fraternity and solidarity.

4.4. Secular Franciscans in ecclesial communities

In the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* we read that they, sharing the mission of Christ, priest, prophet and king, have an active part of their own in the life and activity of the Church. It goes on to say that their activity within ecclesial communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors is unable to obtain its full effect.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ *Const.*, 42.2.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*, 44.2.

¹²² 1 C, 103.

¹²³ *Const.*, 49.2.

¹²⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*, 53.4.

¹²⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, 50.2; 62.2.i; 66.2.j.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 10.

The *Rule* of the SFO, in full agreement with the conciliar directions, invites us to become “witnesses and instruments” of the Church’s mission, inspired by Francis of Assisi who felt himself called by the crucifix of San Damiano to “rebuild the Church.”¹²⁷

About our duty to be actively present in the local Church, there is no doubt or discussion. On the practical level, however, we sometimes meet difficulties and contradictions. Often it is hard to develop formation programs and deepen fraternal life because of the excessive activity and work being undertaken by Secular Franciscans. They are extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, they are ministers of the Word, they are involved in the various social activities of the local Church, and sometimes all their spare time is taken up. Their presence at fraternity meetings? “I can’t because I have to perform another service.” Their participation in a retreat or formation seminar? “I can’t because the pastor needs me on the weekend.” Election to a position in the fraternity? “I can’t accept because I am already president of this, secretary of that....” And so it goes.

They are caught up in an excess of activity that does not leave enough “vital space” in which to be together in the manner and forms of an authentic fraternity. In order to exist and develop, there needs to be sharing, revision of life, time for prayer and formation, and also time for common recreation. There needs to be space for helping each other learn to dialogue and communicate in order to support each other when difficulties arise, to pray better. There needs to be space where “fraternal communion” is made tangible and in which we are called to be responsible for each other’s growth. On this subject the *General Constitutions* say: “The sense of co-responsibility of the members requires personal presence, witness, prayer and active collaboration, in accordance with each one’s situation and possible obligations for the animation of the fraternity.”¹²⁸ Fraternal life is so important that this is the only article of the *Constitutions* in which we find such a strong verb: “requires.” All the other articles use an exhortatory form, not the imperative.

At this point you will ask: How can Secular Franciscans commit themselves to “repair the Church” with that creativity and co-responsibility to which the Pauline *Rule* urges us? This vital and delicate question demands careful discernment by the council and the whole fraternity, because the situation must be evaluated concretely in the individual local situations.

To discern the missionary presence of the Secular Franciscans in the Church, we need to reflect on a certain individualism, typical of modern culture, that has introduced itself more or less openly into the life of the fraternity’s members. Too many individual apostolic activities are a sign of it. Many brothers and sisters choose apostolic programs and activities without considering those of the fraternity. The fraternity then has great difficulty taking up and carrying out its own community apostolic work because of the unavailability of the individual members.

¹²⁷ *Rule SFO*, 6.

¹²⁸ *Const.*, 30.2.

It seems that many Secular Franciscans find an apostolic task chosen on their own initiative, or offered them as individuals, more rewarding than one that places them, more or less anonymously, in a community activity. Nothing strengthens and consolidates a fraternity so much as a work done together, sharing pain and satisfaction, success and failure, joys and disappointments. A work done together gives opportunities to ask for advice, to support each other, to share experiences, to integrate each one's gifts and abilities with those of the others, however different.

Apostolates that a member feels it necessary to take on individually must be subordinated to those of the community, or at the very least coordinated with them, always in dialogue with the council and the fraternity. The *General Constitutions* say: "The fraternities [note that it does not say "the Secular Franciscans"]...should seek to cooperate in the animation of the parochial community, in the liturgy and in fraternal relations. They [the subject is still "the fraternities"] should integrate themselves into the pastoral apostolate as a whole, with preference for those activities more congenial to the Secular Franciscan tradition and spirituality."¹²⁹ This article should be grounds for reflection for many SFO fraternities in their missionary activity and cooperation with the local Churches.

Linked to the subject just treated is the subject of Secular Franciscans who belong to a host of groups and movements in the parish. This going back and forth from one spirituality to another is a sign of spiritual weakness, psychological instability and immaturity in one's decision to observe the Gospel.

5. Mission of the SFO in the world

5.1. Vatican II: pastoral Council

The term "pastoral" has many meanings. Ordinarily it is taken to refer to the activity undertaken by pastors: bishops, parish priests and other clerics. The term however should be understood as referring to all those who in some way are involved in activities whose purpose is to proclaim and/or share in salvation. Salvation in fact is mediated through the sacraments. But it also comes through other "ways" that are not in the strict sense sacramental, for example at the personal level of witness, communication and gestures.

The obligation to engage in the work of mediation requires that the mediator be aware of being in the middle, between the source of salvation, God, and its recipients, all people. Therefore, the intrinsic purpose of every pastoral activity should be to establish contact between God and people. Each person must be put in the condition of understanding the message of salvation. However, each one remains free to accept or reject it.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*, 102.1.

It is important that whoever mediates salvation knows who is the Savior, God; what salvation is all about, the Gospel; and for whom it is intended, each individual. Each single person lives in a particular environment, which continually changes his or her mentality, culture, life-style. Therefore, to be effective, pastoral ministry (it would be better to call it “salvific mediation”) must be continually reviewed and updated. If people, the recipients of salvific mediation, change, the style of pastoral ministry must also change.

The Second Vatican Council has been described as a “pastoral council.” To understand what this description means, it is necessary to go back and reread the document issued to convene the Council, the Apostolic Constitution *Humanae salutis*, December 25, 1961.

The document opens with the Lord’s promise, “I will be with you always, even to the end of time,” in order to assert that the Lord is present even in our times. Characteristic of our times, says John XXIII, is a “changing over to a new era,” which calls for the Church to undertake “tasks of immense seriousness and extent, as in the more tragic periods of her history.” The text pinpoints what this means: “It is a question of putting the modern world in touch with the inspiring and inexhaustible forces of the Gospel, a world that boasts of its successes in the technical and scientific field, but also bears the effects of being in a temporal order, which some want to reorganize without benefit of God.”

The modern world is thus presented as ambivalent. Good and evil are intertwined; before anything else, therefore, what is required is the exercise of discernment according to the standards of “the signs of the times.” The changes that characterize the modern world are primarily of the cultural order. The Second World War was instigated by cultural changes and it in turn instigated cultural changes. Therefore, the response the Church must give is primarily cultural, and secondly practical-operational. In other words, it is a question of creating a new synthesis between the inexhaustible forces of the Gospel and the opportunities emerging from the cultural and social circumstances in which people are living at this point in history.

The pastoral quality of Vatican II, therefore, is to be understood as the Church’s commitment to re-establish relations between the human being and Christ, between society and Christ, between scientific and technological gains and Christ. In fulfilling this mission, the Church must be aware of being inserted into this modern world, of being in solidarity with it, and of carrying out in it the task of leavening, directing it toward eternal realities and goods.

These directions are systematically spelled out in *Gaudium et spes*, which for this reason is called a pastoral constitution. But if she is to carry out a mission of this kind, the Church must renew herself, in her self-understanding rather than in her mission.

5.2. Secular Franciscan mission

The vocation of the Secular Franciscans is “to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi,”¹³⁰ which expresses itself “in their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities.”¹³¹ The vocation of the Secular Franciscans is a call to mission through life and word, for they live in the ordinary circumstances of ordinary citizens.¹³²

Given the place that the Secular occupies or should occupy in the Church, as we see in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in *Christifideles laici*, stress has been placed on the distinctive place of mission in the charism of the SFO. Although the articles of the second chapter of the *Rule* are in themselves rich in content and very concrete, the *General Constitutions* wanted to emphasize two things to which our society is especially devoted:

- the ability to actively put forward “initiatives that care for creation” and “establish circumstances of living and environment which would not be a threat to the human person”¹³³
- living the Franciscan spirit in the family,¹³⁴ and reaching out to the many people, in society and in the Church, who live in difficult family situations: “... single, widows, single parents, separated, divorced—who are living in difficult situations.”¹³⁵ Human and Christian warmth can help to recognize and alleviate the wounds, even if they cannot be healed, always in the spirit of the beatitudes.¹³⁶

5.3. Participation of Franciscans in the mission of the Church

In carrying out their own specific mission, Franciscans cannot regard themselves as being outside the Church and her mission. In this, Saint Francis is our outstanding model. He was aware of being in the Church, of having been given a mandate to “repair the Church,” of needing to extend the Church by proclaiming the Gospel of Christ beyond its institutional boundaries. Above all, Saint Francis had the clear and ongoing awareness of having to “change himself,” of having to “continually engage in self-conversion.”

In Saint Francis, the task of mission in the Church and for the Church has its roots in his unceasing search for the will of God in contemplation. Therefore, what he proposed did not stem from his own wishes and designs, but solely from his readiness to become a “poor instrument” of God’s will. Starting from this premise, Saint Francis inserted a process of renewal into the Church: a cultural renewal rather than an institutional one.

As a founder, Saint Francis remains the model to which all Franciscans must refer. But it is not a question of materially repeating what he has done; it is a question of

¹³⁰ *Rule SFO*, 4.

¹³¹ CL, 17; Cf. *Const.*, 17.

¹³² Cf. LG, 35.

¹³³ *Const.*, 18.4.

¹³⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*, 24.1.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*, 24.2.

¹³⁶ *Rule SFO*, 11; LG, 38; AA, 4; GS, 72.

reinterpreting the model with reference to today's ecclesial and socio-cultural context. With regard to the ecclesial context, it is impossible not to refer to Vatican II and the process of renewal deriving from it. With regard to the socio-cultural context, it is necessary to take note of the basic fact that Saint Francis acted in the context of Christendom. We must live and act in the context of the end of Christendom, and in the year 2000 marked by profound global changes.

It is not easy to be and to live as Christians and as Franciscans in this period of transition, but we cannot live outside it. We must be capable of discernment: socio-cultural discernment and discernment of faith. The recent Popes have urged us to "take notice of our responsibilities" to renew our charism and mission.¹³⁷ Today's world looks to Saint Francis as to a "model of a human being" rather than as a "model of a Christian."¹³⁸

In this context, the typical character of the Franciscan charism can be understood only if we start with the Franciscan Movement in its globality: brothers, sisters and lay people. No single component part can express it in its totality. Thus "reciprocity," the exchange of gifts between the various members of the Franciscan Family, becomes necessary. Reciprocity implies the acknowledgement of diversity and the readiness "to give and receive gifts."

Through analogy with all that is taking place in the Church at this point in human history, it also becomes necessary for Franciscans to recognize the eminent role of lay people. Franciscan lay people enable us to understand better the original charism of Saint Francis. Franciscan lay people are indispensable for infusing into the present world "the spirit of Saint Francis;" they are indispensable for the development of the Franciscan mission. For this reason, Franciscan lay people are formed to be what they should be, without exploitation or dependency, but in full and total autonomy.

From lay Franciscans can come a first-rate contribution to making Franciscan ecumenism more concrete. They do not carry on their backs the painful history of the friars and the sisters. They are less tied to the requirements of the legal element. Perhaps, and to a degree, they incarnate the charism of Saint Francis in a more authentic form, as they leave to one side the institutional and legal externals. The autonomy of the lay Franciscans can be seen and experienced as one of the signs of the times, a real Franciscan innovation. We must not forget, however, that it all has to be seen as a contribution to the mission of the Church in the contemporary world.

5.4. Fidelity to one's charism

The *General Constitutions* say: "Fidelity to their own charism, Franciscan and secular, the witness of building fraternity, sincerely and openly, are their principal

¹³⁷ Cf. discourses to the general chapters by Paul VI and John Paul II, which contain very valuable guidelines.

¹³⁸ Cf. the spirit of Assisi, starting in 1982, and especially from 1986

services to the Church, which is the community of love. They should be recognized in it by their ‘being,’ from which their mission springs.”¹³⁹

Emanuela De Nunzio, who was general minister at the time, was asked this question in an interview: “What do you Secular Franciscans do?” Behind the question there was a reflection of our utilitarian and technocratic culture, which tends to evaluate the importance of things and people according to their immediate functionality. This bothered her a little, and she replied: “The question is badly put. Ask me *who we are*, and then I can also tell you *what we do*.”

If it is true that the charisms are gifts given by the Holy Spirit to the Church for the good of the community, Secular Franciscans must feel the responsibility of making this gift shine in the local Church in which they live and work. This is the priority of “being” over “doing.”

The Franciscan general ministers, in their letter on the *Vocation and Mission of the Franciscan Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, invited the Secular Franciscans “to deepen the Secular Franciscan vocation in such a way that there is harmonious agreement between vigorous affirmation of their own identity as a public association and their active and cordial presence in the local Church: such a relation should not assume the style of a compromise dictated by circumstances, but must spring from the very roots of their vocation.”¹⁴⁰

And then there is the “witness of the fraternity.” We should not forget that fraternal communion, as such, is already apostolic and contributes to the work of evangelization. It would be marvelous if it could be said of our fraternities as of the first Christian communities, “See how they love one another!”

5.5. SFO in the Mission *Ad gentes*

The Secular Franciscan Order also wishes to rediscover a renewed obligation of lay Franciscans in the area of evangelization, in the mission *ad gentes*, as a concrete sign of collaboration “in building up the Church as the sacrament of salvation for all...,”¹⁴¹ “fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity.”¹⁴²

5.5.1. Why are lay Franciscans at the service of the mission *Ad gentes*?

Why the mission of lay Franciscans *ad gentes*? Because the “general obligation”¹⁴³ to strive so that “the divine message of salvation may be known and

¹³⁹ *Const.*, 100.3.

¹⁴⁰ Letter of the four general ministers of the Franciscan Family: *Vocation and Mission of the Lay Franciscan Faithful in the Church and in the World*, 1989, 22.

¹⁴¹ *Const.*, 17; Cf. *Rule SFO*, 1. In September 1998 the Secular Franciscan Order instituted the CE.MI SFO (Missionary Center, SFO) to animate the missions in the local fraternities, form animators and co-ordinate the missionary drive *ad gentes* of lay Franciscans.

¹⁴² *Rule SFO*, 6.

¹⁴³ CJC, can. 225.

accepted by all people throughout the world,¹⁴⁴ and to proclaim Christ “by their life and words,”¹⁴⁵ “ready to promote common initiatives...in order to work together to spread the Gospel, remove the causes of marginalization, and serve the cause of peace,”¹⁴⁶ cannot help but affect or concern Secular Franciscans, since through baptism and profession they are witnesses and instruments of the Church’s mission.¹⁴⁷

Today much is said about charitable service and social justice as privileged areas for new forms of lay commitment. But John Paul II in his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* reminds us right from the beginning that missionary evangelization is “the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity in the modern world.”¹⁴⁸

5.5.2. How can lay Franciscans work for the mission *Ad gentes*?

As is revealed in the Acts of the Apostles, the mission in the Church was originally seen as being a community effort of the local church which needed “missionaries” to go forth to new frontiers.

Based on this experience, but moved by the force of the mandate of the Risen One given to the Christian community gathered in the Cenacle (“the eleven and their companions” Lk 24:33), the Church has recently called the laity to rediscover the missionary dimension of their own Christian vocation. In the same decree *Ad gentes* the Church invites the laity to participate as witnesses and living instruments in her saving mission by nurturing in themselves and in others a knowledge and love of the missions, and by offering—in their families, in Catholic associations and in schools—support of every kind so that the gift of faith they have received might be shared.¹⁴⁹ “In fact, wherever possible, the laity should be prepared, in more immediate cooperation with the hierarchy, to fulfill a special mission of proclaiming the Gospel and communicating Christian teachings....”¹⁵⁰

5.5.3. Give the little that you have

What attitude should our fraternities assume toward the universal call to the mission *ad gentes*, “You also go” (Mt 20:4)? How can we answer positively, despite the many difficulties, internal and external, in the life of our fraternities?

Let us stop for a moment to reflect on the biblical passage of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes: “As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them...and he began to teach them many things... [He said to them], ‘You give them something to eat.’ ... Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he...gave

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*

¹⁴⁵ *Rule SFO*, 6.

¹⁴⁶ *Const.*, 98.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 17.

¹⁴⁸ *Redemptoris Missio*, 2.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. *Ad gentes* (= AG), 41.

¹⁵⁰ AG, 21.

them to his disciples to set before the people.... And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.”¹⁵¹

Only to the extent that we commit ourselves to collaborate with the Lord (“You give them something to eat”), without making useless human excuses, will we give generously of our poverty (the five loaves and two fishes), moved by the growing number of men and women (about four billion) who still do not know Christ. Then the people (*Ad gentes*) without a shepherd will be able to experience the abundance of God’s love (“all ate and were filled”).

¹⁵¹ Mk 6:34-44.