

THE RULE OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER



LETTER OF THE FOUR MINISTERS GENERAL OF THE FRANCISCAN FAMILY

*To the Brothers and Sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order
on the occasion of granting the Rule,
approved for them by the Holy See*

It is with joy that we inform you that the Holy See, by means of the Apostolic Letter *Seraphicus Patriarcha* dated 24th June, 1978, and “under the ring of the Fisherman”, has approved the revised Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, which abrogates and replaces the preceding Rule of Pope Leo XIII. It is Pope Paul VI to whom we are indebted for this splendid gift, which he bestowed shortly before he departed this earth.

He loved you. Indeed, he demonstrated his love for the Secular Franciscan Order, and addressed you with unforgettable words, as in June 1968 and in 1971, on the occasion of the 750th anniversary of the *Memoriale propositi*.

Since 7th March, 1966, when the Sacred Congregation for Religious granted permission to begin to bring up to date legislation for the Secular Franciscan Order, the journey has been long and arduous. We wish to underline the work of the brothers and sisters and of fraternities, both through the publication of various forms of life, of Way of Life and Journeys, and through the tireless work of the Presidency of the International Council since it was established in 1973.

Such work has been of major importance in seeking the ways of the Spirit and most efficacious in making known the presence and the vitality of the Franciscan charism to the People of God in our day.

Not only is the Rule that we present to you today the fruit of this work. The Church commends it to you as a *rule of life*.

Attend first and foremost to its evangelical content; welcome the Franciscan message that it contains and the guidance it offers you in living according to the holy Gospel. A cornerstone of the renewal that we hope for, is to return to the origins, to the spiritual experience of Saint Francis of Assisi and of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, who received their inspiration and guidance from him. This is the intention behind the inclusion of the *Earlier Admonition and Exhortation (rescensio prior)* as the Prologue, and in the constant references to the teaching and example of Saint Francis. Another cornerstone is openness to the Spirit in the signs of the times.

Supported by these two cornerstones, you should be able to put into practice the invitation of the Rule to be creative and to exercise co-responsibility. In some cases, this creativity should find expression in the form of statutes. Indeed, the Rule, Article 3, states as a general norm: “Its application will be set out in the General Constitutions and particular Statutes.”

We, the Franciscan Ministers, together with all our friars are ever ready and open to offer you all our assistance so that we may walk together in the way of the Lord.



With these sentiments we are pleased to present the revised Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order to the Presidency of the International Council, and, through this Council, to all Secular Franciscans who will receive it as a rule and life.

Rome, 4th October 1978

Fr. Costantin Koser
General Minister OFM

Fr. Vitale M. Bommarco
General Minister OFM Conv.

Fr. Pasquale Rywalski
General Minister OFM Cap.

Fr. Roland Faley
General Minister T.O.R.



+THE APOSTOLIC LETTER OF APPROVAL

THE RULE OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

Pope Paul VI

In Perpetuity

The Seraphic Patriarch Saint Francis of Assisi, during his life and even after his beautiful death, not only attracted many to serve God in the religious family founded by him but also drew numerous members of the laity to enter his communities while remaining in the world as far as possible. Moreover, to use the words of our Predecessor Pius IX: “it seems ... that there was never anyone in whom there shone forth more vividly and who resembled more the image of Jesus Christ and the evangelical form of life than Francis. Accordingly he who was called the Herald of the Great King, was rightly hailed as “another Christ” for he presented himself to his contemporaries and to future ages as Christ returned to life. Consequently, he still lives as such in the eyes of men and will continue to live for all ages to come.” [*Rite expiatis*, 30 April 1926, AAS, [18] 1926, p. 154.]

We are happy that the “Franciscan Charism” today is still a force for the good of the Church and the human community, despite the infiltration of doctrines and tendencies that alienate people from God and from the supernatural.

With praiseworthy initiative and with common accord the four Franciscan families have striven for ten years to prepare a new Rule for the Franciscan Third Order Secular, or as it is now called, the Secular Franciscan Order. This was necessary because of the changed conditions of the times and because of the teaching and encouragement given them by the Second Vatican Council.

Therefore, our dearly beloved sons, the four Ministers General of the Franciscan Order, have requested that we approve the Rule presented to us. Following the example of some of our predecessors, the latest being Pope Leo XIII, we have willingly decided to grant their request. In this way, nurturing the hope that the form of life preached by that admirable man of Assisi will gain a new impetus and will flourish vigorously, and having consulted with the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, which has diligently examined and carefully evaluated the text, we approve and confirm with our apostolic authority and sanction the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, provided that it agrees with the copy in the archives of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, beginning with the words *Inter spirituales familias*, and the last are *ad normam Constitutionum, petenda*



By this Letter and our apostolic authority, we abrogate the previous Rule of what was formerly called the Franciscan Third Order. Finally we decree that this letter remain in effect now and in the future, regardless of anything contrary.

Given at Rome at St. Peter's, under the ring of the Fisherman, on June 24, 1978, the 16th year of our pontificate.

† **Johannes Card. Villot**
Secretary of State

(A.A.S. 70 [1978] pp. 454-5)



Prologue
**EARLIER EXHORTATION OF SAINT FRANCIS TO THE BROTHERS
AND SISTERS OF PENANCE (LtF 1)***

In the Name of the Lord!

Concerning those who do Penance

¹All those who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole mind, with their whole strength (Mk 12:30) and love their neighbour as themselves, ²who hate their bodies with their vices and sins (Mt 22:39), ³who receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴and who produce worthy fruits of Penance.

⁵O how happy and blessed are these men and women while they do such things and persevere in doing them, ⁶because the *Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them* (Is 11:2) and *make its home and dwelling place* (Jn 14:23) among them, ⁷and they are children of the heavenly Father whose (Mt 5:45) works they do, and they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 12:50).

⁸We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹We are brothers to Him when we do *the will of the Father who is in heaven* (Mt 12:50).

¹⁰We are mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through a divine love (1Cor 6:20) and a pure and sincere conscience and give birth to him through a holy activity which must shine as an example before others (Mt 5:16).

¹¹O how glorious it is to have a holy and great Father in heaven! ¹²O how holy, consoling to have such a beautiful and wonderful Spouse! ¹³O how holy and how loving, gratifying, humbling, peace-giving, sweet, worthy of love, and, above all things, desirable: to have such a Brother and such a Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for his sheep (Jn 10:15) and prayed to his Father saying:

¹⁴*Holy Father, in your name* (Jn 17:11) *save those whom you have given me in the world; they were yours and you gave them to me* (Jn 17:6). ¹⁵*The words that You gave to me I have given to them, and they have accepted them and have believed in truth that I have come from You and they have known that you have sent me* (Jn 17:8). ¹⁶*I pray for them and not for the world* (Jn 17:9). ¹⁷*Bless and sanctify them* (Jn 17:17). *I sanctify myself for them* (Jn 17:19). ¹⁸*I pray not only for them, but for those who will believe in me through their word* (Jn 17:20) *that they may be sanctified in being one as we are* (Jn 17:11). ¹⁹*I wish, Father, that where I am, they also may be with me that they may see my glory* (Jn 17:24) *in your kingdom. Amen* (Mt 20:21).

* This is translated and printed in the new Omnibus, Eds Armstrong, R.J, Wayne Hellman J. A., Short, W. J, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (FA:ED), London, NY and Manila, NCP, 1999, Earlier Exhortation (1LtF), p. 41.



Concerning those who do not do Penance

¹All those men and women who are not living in penance, ²who do not receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, ³who practise vice and sin and walk after the evil concupiscence and the evil desires of their flesh, ⁴who do not observe what they have promised to the Lord, ⁵and who in their body serve the world and the cares of this life: ⁶They are held captive by the devil, whose children they are, and whose works they do (Jn 8:41) ⁷They are blind because they do not see the true light, our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁸They do not possess spiritual wisdom because they do not have the Son of God, the true wisdom of the Father. ⁹It is said of them: *Their wisdom has been swallowed up* (Ps 107[106]:27), and *Cursed are those who turn away from your commands* (Ps 119[118]:21). ¹⁰They see and acknowledge, know and do evil, and knowingly lose their souls.

¹¹See you blind ones, deceived by your enemies: the flesh, the world and the devil, because it is sweet for the body to sin and it is bitter to serve God, ¹²for every vice and sin flow and *proceed from the human heart* (Mt 15:19, Mk 7:21) as the Lord says in the gospel. ¹³And you have nothing in this world or in that to come. ¹⁴And you think you will possess this world's vanities for a long time, but you are deceived because a day and hour will come of which you give no thought, which you do not know, and of which you are unaware when the body becomes weak, death approaches, and it dies a bitter death. ¹⁵And no matter where, when, or how a person dies in the guilt of sin without penance and satisfaction, if he can perform an act of satisfaction and does not do so, the devil snatches his soul away from its body with such anguish and distress that no one can know [what it is like] except the one receiving it. ¹⁶And every talent, ability, *knowledge and wisdom* (2 Chr 1:12) they think they have will be taken away from them (Lk 8:18, Mk 4:25). ¹⁷And they leave their wealth to their relatives and friends who take and divide it afterward say: "May his soul be cursed because he could have given us more and acquired more than what he distributed to us." ¹⁸Worms eat his body and so body and soul perish in this brief world and they will go to hell where they will be tortured forever.

¹⁹In the love which is God (1 Jn 4:16) we beg all those whom these words reach to receive those fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ written above with divine love and kindness. ²⁰And let whoever does not know how to read have then read to them frequently. ²¹Because *they are spirit and life* (Jn 6:63), they should preserve them with a holy activity until the end. ²²And whoever has not done these things will be held accountable *before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ on the day of judgment* (Rom 14:10, Mt 12:36).



Chapter 1

THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER (OFS)¹

1.

The Franciscan family, as one among many spiritual families raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church², 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 St. Francis of Assisi³. 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 Church⁴.

2.

The Secular Franciscan Order holds a special place in this family circle. It is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful. In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of St. Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church⁵.

3.

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

Chapter 2

THE WAY OF LIFE

4.

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 people⁶.

Christ, the gift of the Father's love, is the way to him, the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the life which he has come to give abundantly⁷.

Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel⁸.

5.

Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of

¹ Also known as the Secular Franciscan Fraternity or, its earlier designation, the Franciscan Third Order, with the initials T.O.F.

² Vatican II, Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) 43.

³ Pius XII, *Discourse to the Tertiaries*, 1/7/1956.

⁴ Vatican II, Decree on Lay Apostolate (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) 4:8.

⁵ Can. 702, 1. **now: Can. 314.**

⁶ *1 Celano* 18:115 (*Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Volume 1 (1 FA:ED), The Saint, Life of Francis Thomas of Celano (1C) 18, page 196, 1C 115, p. 283.*)

⁷ Jn 3:16; 10:10; 14:6.

⁸ *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 30:8.



Christ in their brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church, and in liturgical activity. The faith of Saint Francis, who often said “I see nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God in this world except his most holy body and blood”⁹, should be the inspiration and pattern of their eucharistic life.

6.

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.

Called like Saint Francis to rebuild the Church and inspired by his example, let them devote themselves energetically to living in full communion with the pope, bishops, and priests, fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity¹⁰.

7.

United by their vocation as “brothers and sisters of penance”¹¹, and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls “conversion”. Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily¹².

On this road to renewal the sacrament of reconciliation is the privileged sign of the Father’s mercy and the source of grace¹³.

8.

As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do¹⁴.

Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.

9.

The Virgin Mary, humble servant of the Lord, was open to his every word and call. She was embraced by Francis with indescribable love and declared the protectress and advocate of his family¹⁵. The Secular Franciscans should express their ardent love for her by imitating her complete self-giving and by praying earnestly and confidently¹⁶.

10.

Uniting themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed his will into the Father’s hands, let them faithfully fulfil the duties proper to their various circumstances of life¹⁷. Let them also follow the poor and crucified Christ, witness to him even in difficulties and persecutions¹⁸.

⁹ Cf. *Test 10* (1 FA:ED, p. 125).

¹⁰ Paul VI, *Discourse to the Tertiaries*, 19/5/1971.

¹¹ *Memoriale propositi* (Introduction, address).

¹² *Lumen Gentium* 8; Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) 4; Apostolic Constitution “Paenitemini”, preamble.

¹³ Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) 18:b.

¹⁴ *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 4.

¹⁵ 2 *Celano* 198 (2 FA:ED, 2C 198, p. 374).

¹⁶ *Lumen Gentium* 67; *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 4.

¹⁷ *Lumen Gentium* 41.

¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium* 42:b.



11.

Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life¹⁹, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. 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 power²⁰.

12.

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 sisters²¹.

13.

As the Father sees in every person the features of his Son, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters²², so the Secular Franciscans with a gentle and courteous spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ²³.

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 shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ²⁴.

14.

Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively. Mindful that anyone "who follows Christ, the perfect man, becomes more of a man himself", let them exercise their responsibilities competently in Christian spirit of service²⁵.

15.

Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith²⁶.

16.

Let them esteem work both as a gift and as a sharing in the creation, redemption, and service of the human community²⁷.

¹⁹ *First Letter of St. Francis* 5 (1 FA:ED, *The Later Exhortation* (2Lt 5), p. 46).

²⁰ Rom. 8:17; *Lumen Gentium* 7:4.

²¹ *Admonitions of St. Francis* 16 (1 FA:ED, *Adm XVI*, p. 136); *First Letter* 70.

²² Rom. 8:29.

²³ *2 Celano* 85 (2 FA:ED, *2C* 85, p. 303); *First Letter* 26 (1 FA:ED, *2LtF* 26, p. 47); *First Rule* 7:13 (1 FA:ED, *ER* 7:14, p. 69).

²⁴ *First Rule* 9:3 (1 FA:ED, *ER* 9:2, p. 70); Mt 25:40.

²⁵ *Lumen Gentium* 31; Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) 93.

²⁶ *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 14.

²⁷ *Gaudium et Spes* 67:2; *First Rule* 7:4 (1 FA:ED, *ER* 7:4, p. 68); *Second Rule* 5:1 (1 FA:ED, *LR* 5:2, p. 102).



17.

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 Christ²⁸.

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 child²⁹.

18.

Moreover they should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which “bear the imprint of the Most High”³⁰, and they should strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship.

19.

Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon³¹.

Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others³².

Since they are immersed in the resurrection of Christ, which gives true meaning to Sister Death, let them serenely tend toward the ultimate encounter with the Father³³.

Chapter 3

LIFE IN FRATERNITY

20.

The Secular Franciscan Order is divided into fraternities of various levels — local, regional, national, and international. Each one has its own moral personality in the Church³⁴. These various fraternities are coordinated and united according to the norm of this Rule and of the Constitutions.

21.

On various levels, each fraternity is animated and guided by a council and minister (or president) who are elected by the professed according to the Constitutions³⁵. Their service, which lasts for a definite period, is marked by a ready and willing spirit and is a duty of responsibility to each member and to the community.

Within themselves the fraternities are structured in different ways according to the norm of the constitutions, according to the various needs of their members and their regions, and under the guidance of their respective council.

²⁸ *Misericors Dei Filius* 2:8.

²⁹ *Lumen Gentium* 41:5; *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 30:2.3.

³⁰ *1 Celano* 80 (1 FA:ED, 1Cel 80, p. 250).

³¹ *Misericors Dei Filius* 2:9; *Legend of the Three Companions* 14:58 (2 FA:ED, L3C, 14:58, pp. 76 and 101-2).

³² *Admonitions of St. Francis* 21 (1 FA:ED, Adm. 21, p. 135); *First Rule* 7:15 (1 FA:ED, ER 7:16, p. 69).

³³ *Gaudium et Spes* 78:1-2.

³⁴ Can. 687. now: Can. 309.

³⁵ Can. 697. now: Can. 309.



22.

The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members³⁶.

23.

Requests for admission to the Secular Franciscan Order must be presented to the local fraternity, whose council decides upon the acceptance of new brothers and sisters³⁷. Admission into the Order is gradually attained through a time of initiation, a period of formation of at least one year, and profession of the Rule³⁸.

The entire community is engaged in this process of growth by its own manner of living. The age for profession and the distinctive Franciscan sign are regulated by the statutes³⁹. Profession by its nature is a permanent commitment.⁴⁰

Members who find themselves in particular difficulties should discuss their problems with the council in fraternal dialogue. Withdrawal or permanent dismissal from the Order, if necessary, is an act of the fraternity council according to the norm of the constitutions⁴¹.

24.

To foster communion among members, the council should organize regular and frequent meetings of the community as well as meeting with other Franciscan groups, especially with youth groups. It should adopt appropriate means for growth in Franciscan and ecclesial life and encourage everyone to a life of fraternity⁴². This communion continues with deceased brothers and sisters through prayer for them.⁴³

25.

Regarding expenses necessary for the life of the fraternity and the needs of worship, of the apostolate, and of charity, all the brothers and sisters should offer a contribution according to their means. Local fraternities should contribute toward the expenses of the higher fraternity councils⁴⁴.

³⁶ Pio XII, *Discourse to the Tertiaries* 3, 1/7/1956.

³⁷ Can. 694. [now: Can. 307](#).

³⁸ *Memoriale propositi* 29-30.

³⁹ *1 Celano* 22 ([1 FA:ED](#), [1Cel 22](#), p. 202).

⁴⁰ *Memoriale propositi* 31.

⁴¹ Can. 696. [now: Can. 308](#).

⁴² Can. 697. [now: Can. 309](#).

⁴³ *Memoriale propositi* 23.

⁴⁴ *Memoriale propositi* 20.



26.

As a concrete sign of communion and co-responsibility, the councils on various levels, in keeping with the constitutions, shall ask for suitable and well-prepared religious for spiritual assistance. They should make this request to the superiors of the four religious Franciscan families, to whom the Secular Fraternity has been united for centuries.

To promote fidelity to the charism as well as observance of the Rule and to receive greater support in the life of the fraternity, the minister or president, with the consent of the council, should take care to ask for a regular pastoral visit by the competent religious superiors as well as for a fraternal visit from those of the higher fraternities, according to the norm of the Constitutions⁴⁵.

*“And whoever observes these things
let him be blessed in Heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father,
and on earth with the blessing of His Beloved Son
with the Most Holy Spirit the Paraclete”*
(Blessing of St Francis found in The Testament of Francis)

⁴⁵ *Supra montem* ch. 16.

