

What Makes a Secular Franciscan Different from Other Catholics?

PART 1 – What Makes Us Different?

All of us who are Catholics have many things in common.

- Most of us grew up attending Mass every Sunday.
- We go to confession every so often.
- We pray many of the same prayers: the Rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, the Memorare, the Angelus, and prayers asking for the intercession of our favorite saints.
- Some Catholics read a bit of Scripture every day and attend bible study
- and some may even pray the Liturgy of the Hours.

So, what makes Secular Franciscans different? Let us look at five things about Secular Franciscans that set us apart. (There may even be more than five, but we will tackle five.)

1-OUR PROFESSION—

- At Baptism we receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and become part of the Church.
- At Confirmation, the Holy Spirit prepares us to participate fully in the mission of the Church.

Profession, then, is our special opportunity. It is the further strengthening of the promises that were made for us (or that we made) at Baptism. Through the Spirit, we “bind ourselves more closely to the Church and work intently to rebuild the ecclesial community and fulfill its mission among all people.” (See Rite of Profession, Ritual p. 22)

If you read the Rite of Profession (Ritual pp. 18-26), you will see that at Profession, we make a commitment to live the Gospel by following in the footsteps of St. Francis. The special charism given to us by St. Francis is that he showed that the Gospel can be lived.

We, as Secular Franciscans, strive to do this in our daily lives. Therefore, we need to be thoroughly familiar with Scripture—especially the Gospels.

- At the Rite of Profession, we are presented with the book of the Gospels.
- At the Ceremony of Introduction and Welcoming, we are given a biography of St. Francis,
- and at the Rite of Admission, we are given a copy of the Rule of Life.
- All three of these gifts remind us that we are to internalize how St. Francis lived; how Jesus lived and taught; and how we are to live as Secular Franciscans.

At Profession,

- we promise to build a more fraternal and evangelical world based on the Gospel.
- We promise to be faithful to our vocation and to practice the spirit of service.
- We promise to bind ourselves more closely to the Church and to participate more fully in her mission.
- And we pledge to make fraternity a visible sign of the Church, a community of faith and love.

During the Rite of Profession, the candidates answer, “Yes, this is what I want,” in response to questions asked regarding these promises.

Read and consider the following words taken from the Rite of Profession:

+ The candidates say: “We ask to be admitted to profession of the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order and to make a permanent commitment to the gospel life. [Our formation] has strengthened

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us in the conviction that the Lord is calling us to observe the holy gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by following the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi.” (Ritual p. 20)

+ Finally, the WORDS OF PROFESSION are pronounced by the candidates:

“I, __, by the grace of God, renew my baptismal promises and consecrate myself to the service of his Kingdom. Therefore, in my secular state, (or as a member of the diocesan clergy), I promise to live all the days of my life the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the /secular Franciscan Order by observing its rule of life. May the grace of the Holy Spirit, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and our holy father St. Francis, and the fraternal bonds of community always be my help, so that I may reach the goal of perfect Christian love.”

For discussion or to answer in your journal: +After reading the promises of profession outlined above, discuss the ways in which you (if you are professed) are living them out in your daily life. (It would also be helpful to read the entire Rite on pp. 18-26 of the brown ritual.)

+Which of these promises have proved to be challenging to you?

+If you are in initial formation, 1-How do you see these promises lived out by the members of your fraternity? 2-Can you picture yourself living out these promises? 3-Please offer a few examples of what you would do both now and after Profession.

PART 2 - What Makes Us Different?

Now we will look at FRATERNITY.

Our Fraternity Life—How can anyone be a Franciscan without fraternity?

As much as St. Francis loved to find solitary places to pray, he always had friars nearby, and he always returned to fraternity life. He tells us, “The Lord gave me brothers...” (Testament)

Article 24 of our OFS Rule speaks of fraternity:

“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 fraternity. This communion continues with deceased brothers and sisters through prayer for them.”

“Fraternity is...

a call to build a community of love in harmony with all of God’s children and all of God’s creation to reflect Love back to the God of Love: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (FUN Manual “Fraternity and Francis” by Tom Bello, OFS—former National Minister)

For most of us, our experience of fraternity comes at the local level.

Although we find fraternity at the regional, national, and international levels,

- the local fraternity is the heartbeat of the Order.
- It is where we find mutual support in our faith.
- It is where we learn to carry out the promises we made at profession.

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- Fraternity is like a workshop where we practice universal kinship; patience; humility; simplicity; and acceptance of others.
- is where we keep our vocation alive.
- If fraternity life is well-lived, we will learn how to pray together and to work together to move the fraternity and the Church forward.
- We learn what it is to be a Franciscan by how we listen to one another,
- accept those who are different than we are,
- and by how we learn about the Franciscan charism together.
- Fraternity nourishes our vocation and helps us to bring the joy of knowing Christ to others both inside the fraternity and outside in our daily lives.

The structure and flow of our gatherings can help us to achieve what is outlined above. Belonging to a club or attending a business meeting is (or should be) a vastly different experience from participating in a fraternity gathering.

In fraternity,

- we pray together with one another and with the whole church.
- We strengthen our vocation by learning about the Franciscan charism and the gospel during our ongoing formation sessions.
- and we experience conversion of heart as we interact with our brothers and sisters
- and reach out to others through our apostolates. Fraternity life is a gift!

For discussion or to answer in your journal

1. What is your favorite part of your local fraternity gathering? How does it strengthen your life as a Franciscan?
 2. What suggestions would you make to your local council to make your monthly gatherings even better? Be sure to tell why this would be valuable and how you would get it done.
 3. Thinking about positive experiences you have had of fraternity (remember, fraternity is not only the monthly gathering, but it is found wherever Franciscans gather), list two or three and try to say why they had a special impact on you.
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PART 3 - What Makes Secular Franciscans Different?

Let us look at our Rule and Constitutions—

We Secular Franciscans are blessed to have a Rule of Life and Constitutions approved by the Church. These documents guide us in living out the Franciscan charism.

We need to take the time to read the Rule frequently and pray about what the Prologue and each article tell us about our lives as Catholics and Franciscans.

This is one of the big advantages we have over other Catholics. For example, since our prologue is taken from the First Letter to the Faithful, **St. Francis himself is speaking directly to us when he reminds us that we are a people of penance and conversion.**

Chapter One of the Rule has only three articles, but it plants us firmly in the Franciscan family. It tells us that our Rule is approved by the Holy See and that we are linked down through the

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centuries to all those who have formed part of the three orders founded by St. Francis in the 13th century.

Chapter Two contains articles four through nineteen. Here we find the plan of life set out for us as Secular Franciscans.

We learn

- how we are to pray.
- how we are to we are to strive for daily conversion.
- how we are to follow in the footsteps of St. Francis in showing that the gospel can be lived.
- how we are to live in simplicity and humility; and
- how we are to reach out to all of our brothers and sisters and to all of creation.

Having this portion of the Rule is especially valuable to us on our daily journey to the Father. It is an advantage that other Catholics just do not have.

Chapter Three guides us in our fraternity life and tells us about the structure of our world-wide order and the purpose of our fraternity life.

The General Constitutions form a much longer document because they interpret the Rule and tell us how we are to carry out what is asked in the Rule. This document is also approved by the Holy See, and in promising to follow the Rule, we also promise to follow what is laid out in the Constitutions.

Here are the 17 essential elements of our Rule. The questions are to answer in your journal or to discuss with a partner.

1. To live the gospel according to the spirit of St. Francis
2. To be converted continually (metanoia)
3. To live as brothers and sisters to all people and all creation
4. To live in communion with Christ
5. To follow the poor and crucified Christ
6. To share in the life and mission of the Church
7. To share in the love of the Father
8. To be instruments of peace
9. To have a life of prayer that is personal, communal, and liturgical
10. To live in joy
11. To have a spirituality of a secular character
12. To be pilgrims on the way to the father
13. To participate in the Apostolate of the Laity
14. To be at the service of the less fortunate
15. To be loyal to the Church in an attitude of dialogue and collaboration with her ministers
16. To be open to the action of the Spirit
17. To live in simplicity, humility, and minority

+Which of the elements of our Rule have helped you in your daily life as a Franciscan? Please explain how.

+ Which of the elements are challenging for you? Why? How can you work to make them part of your life?

+See if you can pinpoint which articles address each of the elements.

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PART 4 - What Makes an OFS Different from Other Catholics?

Our Franciscan Spirituality—comes from the spirituality of our founder, St. Francis of Assisi. Franciscan spirituality is

- **Incarnational**,
- **Intensely Eucharistic**, and
- **Penitential**.

We often hear the words “**crib, cross, and Eucharist**” when learning about St. Francis’s spirituality. Francis was in awe of the Incarnation, the Kenosis (self-emptying) shown by God in becoming one of us. His devotion to the Incarnation is most obvious in the recreation at Greccio of the birth of Christ. But it goes much deeper. Francis wanted to imitate Jesus perfectly in all things so that he too would become a son of the Father, so much so that he became known as the “**mirror of Christ**.”

St. Francis’s constant contemplation of the cross is part of his devotion to the Incarnation. Here is God, who was not only **born in a lowly manger**, but God who was **willing to die the worst, most humiliating death possible** so that we could spend eternity with him. In order to imitate this death to self, Francis knew that **penance and daily conversion** (metanoia) were the only way to the father.

As he prayed on Mount La Verna, he asked two things:

1. **one, to let him experience the suffering Christ endured on the Holy Cross** and
2. **two, for him to experience the love in which He did it.**

Francis’s prayer was granted as he was imprinted with the **wounds of Christ in the Stigmata**. 8

And then, the **Eucharist**. Jesus is physically present with us every day under the appearances of bread and wine. We hear directly from Francis in the **First Letter to the Custodians**, “With all that is in me and more I beg you that, when it is fitting and you judge it expedient, you humbly beg the clergy to revere above all else the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and His holy names and the written words that sanctify His Body.

3 They should hold as precious the chalices, corporals, appointments of the altar, and everything that pertains to the sacrifice.

4 If the most holy Body of the Lord is very poorly reserved in any place, let It be placed and locked up in a precious place according to the command of the Church. Let It be carried about with great reverence and administered to others with discernment.”

All of this is wrapped in Sacred Scripture. Francis gives us our **spiritual focus**. He lived by the words of the Gospel, and **we imitate him in our reading and praying of and living out the gospel**.

Rule Article 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 people**. 6. Christ, the gift of the Father’s love, is the way to him, the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the life which he has come to give abundantly 7. **Secular Franciscans should devote themselves, especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel.**”

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Article 5. “Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters. 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.”

Article 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.”

For discussion or to answer in your journal.

+What is the center of your Franciscan prayer life? How does this compare to Francis’s example?

+After reading the articles of our Rule that talk of our Franciscan spirituality, what might you want to work toward changing or improving how you pray each day?

+The Mass, the Gospel, the Liturgy of the Hours—reflect on how each of these fits into your prayer life. Share (or make note) of how they affect your relationship with Jesus and with others.

PART 5 - Our Relationship to the Founder

Our knowledge of and relationship to our founder is an important part of our lives as Franciscans. We trace the founding of our Order to one of the greatest of the Church’s saints who sets the example for us.

- As a matter of fact, at our profession, we promise to live the gospel by following in the footsteps of St. Francis. (See Rite of Profession quoted in week #1.)

We are blessed to have writings by St. Francis to rely on to ensure that we remain faithful to the Franciscan charism. Reading his prayers and letters gives us years of material for meditation and imitation and makes clear the path we are to follow.

There are some **30 writings known to have been composed by St. Francis or which have been reliably attributed to him.** These constitute a real treasure for Franciscans. By comparison, only four writings by Francis’s contemporary St. Dominic, founder of the Dominicans, survive. The writings of St. Francis offer Secular Franciscans an opportunity to encounter him personally. They let St. Francis speak for himself.

Over the course of one’s life as a Secular Franciscan, there is time to read everything written by St. Francis, but to begin, consider **the five documents listed below.** Each of these, along with a brief and informative introduction, can be accessed in the three-volume set Early Documents or at the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition website, <https://franciscantradition.org/>.

- **The Prayer Before the Crucifix** — This simple and short prayer for conversion is Francis’s plea for God’s mercy to “enlighten the darkness” of his heart and to give him the spiritual gifts necessary to obey God’s command [FA:ED, vol. 1, p. 40](#)
- **The Earlier Exhortation (The first version of the Letter to the Faithful)** serves as the Prologue to the Secular Franciscan Rule of 1978. Addressed to the Brothers and

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Sisters of Penance, it offers a form of life Francis intended for the lay penitents associated with his movement. [Earlier Exhortation: FA:ED, vol. 1, p. 41](#)

- **A Letter to a Minister** reveals how important mercy and minority were to Francis and presents his own idea of servant leadership. [FA:ED, vol. 1, p. 97](#)
- **The Admonitions** are a collection of undated writings by St. Francis that are a window on how Francis understood the gospel life and how he viewed life in fraternity. [FA:ED, vol. 1, p. 128](#)
- **A Letter to Brother Leo** presents Francis as an intimate and caring brother. There is no way of knowing the circumstances Francis refers to—specifically, a conversation between him and Leo along the road—but there is no mistaking Francis’s love and compassion. [FA:ED, vol. 1, p. 122](#)
- **The Canticle of Brother Sun** is Francis’s great poem of praise to God through his creatures. It makes explicit the connection between Francis and nature (kinship with creation) and establishes Francis as a poet and troubadour of God. [CA:ED, p. 391](#)

An irony of our time is that the writing most associated with St. Francis is one he never wrote: the “Prayer of St. Francis,” also called the “Peace Prayer (“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...”) likely originated in France around 1912, first appearing in a spiritual magazine published in Paris. Although devout, these words were never uttered by Francis and should not eclipse his authentic prayers. Similarly, many sayings attributed to Francis (e.g., “[Preach the gospel; if necessary, use words.](#)”) are not found in the [documents](#). The authoritative sources will yield a trove of inspiring quotations more trustworthy and meaningful than those erroneously attributed to him on internet pages and elsewhere.

Along with being thoroughly familiar with our **Rule of Life and with the Gospels, we should also know about and internalize the life and writings of St. Francis.** In this way, the Franciscan charism becomes firmly implanted in our minds and hearts, and we are more easily able to live out our vocation as Secular Franciscans.

Thank you to National Formation Commission member, Justin Carisio, OFS, for his collaboration on this post.

To discuss or to answer in your journal.

- +Why do you suppose the writings of the founder of an order would be of great assistance to his or her followers? Please explain.
- +Please read some or all of the readings referenced above.
- –Note what touched you.
- –What did you read that will strengthen your vocation? Why?
- –Which one would you choose to share with your fraternity? How would you present it?