

Historical Outline Of The Secular Franciscan Order

Saint Francis founded three Orders.

When St. Francis of Assisi started living his Gospel life, he did not foresee the number of people that would want to follow him. To each of them he gave a Rule of life. He started with the First Order (Order of Friars Minor),. Then St. Clare asked to be able to live his form of life as well, but could not live with the friars in the same way as they did, and so Francis allowed them to live an enclosed life. This was then called the Second Order (Poor Clares). Some married people too, felt inspired by his life and preaching and some even tried to abandon their families and homes to follow him. Francis told them to go back to their homes and lives and wait to receive further instructions from him. He then had a Rule written for them that was simple and clear, so that lay people could live within the loving bonds of the Sacrament of Marriage with its responsibilities for children and love and serve the Lord by caring for their fellow human beings in most need in the world. The followers of this Rule started being called the Order of Penance, later the Third Order, and today the Secular Franciscan Order

Blessed Luchesio Modestini, a farmer and later a trader, and his wife Bonadonna of Poggibonsi (both died 1260), had heard St Francis preach and met him. This encounter changed their lives. Tradition has it that these two were the first to receive the habit from the hands of St. Francis and he was certainly the first Secular Franciscan Beatified because of his holiness.

The First Formal Rule: *Memoriale Propositi* (1221/1228)

The Order of Penance is mentioned officially for the first time as an organised body in a document of Pope Honorius III (16 December 1221).

The first version of their Rule *Memoriale Propositi* was written in 1221 by Cardinal Hugolino which borrowed heavily from a similar Rule of life for another group, called Humiliati, approved by Pope Innocent III in 1201.

The Spiritual assistance to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance from 1227 to 1284

It seems that after the death of St. Francis (1226) the friars Minor were actively involved in the spiritual direction of the Order of Penance till 1232. With the election of Brother Elias as Minister General of the First Order in the Chapter of 1232, things changed. He was not in favour of the friars taking responsibility for the Order of Penance. Other General Ministers followed the same policy with some brief exceptions, like the one of 1247, when the provincial ministers of the friars in Italy were permanent visitators to the Order of Penance. This was enshrined in the Secular Franciscan Rule of Pope Nicholas IV (1289)

From historical information it seems that gradually various fraternities became more united among themselves, and at the time of St. Bonaventure they were already organised into provinces governed by a provincial minister of their own.

In 1284, the Visitor of the Order of Penance composed a rule which was confirmed by Pope Nicholas IV, who was himself a Franciscan before being elected pope. This rule was practically identical to the *Memoriale propositi* of 1228, and was to be observed by all the fraternities of the Order of Penance. The decree of publication recognises St. Francis as the founder of Order of Penance.

Another document issued by the same Pope in 1290 decreed that the Visitors of all the Franciscan fraternities had to be Franciscan Friars because both Orders were founded by St. Francis. This Rule remained valid till 1884 (almost 600 years) when it was revised by Pope Leo XIII.

The Growth of the Order of Penance in the XIII, XIV and XV Centuries

The most significant factor that manifested the magnificence of the Franciscan movement in the 13th century was the surprising rise in numbers and importance of the Order of Penance. The Gospel ideal of love and peace sanctified family life, work and everyday chores placing all members as equals in the same Christian brotherhood. Thus, in this new Order, there was no difference between kings and subjects, nobles and commoners, literate and simple workers. In a list of 57 members of a fraternity in the Italian city of Bologna, drawn up in 1257, the occupation of each member was recorded. It included lawyers, clerks, barbers, shoemakers, carpenters, upholsterers, paper manufacturers, bakers, pharmacists and tanners.

In this century, the experience of war was frequent. The only persons who were exempted from the obligation to take oaths were members of the clergy and religious. Even though brothers and sisters of the Order of Penance were not religious, the Church (who had much authority in a society that was entirely Christian), protected them from such obligations because in living a public life of penance, they were now serving another “landlord” – Jesus Christ himself.

The ecclesiastical status of the Penitents received its supreme recognition in the Exemption from civil law, which meant they could not be summoned except to appear before an ecclesiastical court. According to the Rule, any legal disputes arising between brothers or with non-members were to be settled, as far as possible, within the brotherhood itself, with the friars Minor acting as mediators; and when fraternal agreement of this kind proved to be impossible, the case was put before the diocesan bishop. This procedure was laid down by the statutes of the Brescia fraternity, issued about 1270, and was followed by Celestine V in his dealings with the Aquila fraternity in 1294.

Suspicion of heresy was always liable to fall upon any secular organisation of evangelical tendencies. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Order of Penance suffered a very harsh ordeal of this kind, coinciding with the bad times through which the First Order was passing. The persecution campaign was based on the similarity of life style between the Brothers and Sisters of Penance and the group of Beghards, Béguins and Fraticelli, whose errors were condemned at the Council of Vienne. Clement V gave orders for the necessary investigations to be made, and, when the orthodoxy of the accused had been established,

he confirmed the Rule of Nicholas IV in 1308. The Council's condemnation of other groups did not, therefore, affect the Order of Penance.

This, combined with the appalling situation created in the fourteenth century by the Black Death and the Great Schism, caused a marked decrease in the number of tertiaries, according to evidence offered by Bartholomew of Pisa; but even so there were still a great many of them. Some statistics for 1385 put the number of brotherhoods in the care of the Friars Minor at 244, of which 141 were in Italy and in the East, 23 in Spain, 29 in France, 37 in the German countries and 8 in the British Isles.

In the fifteenth century there was a revival, due mainly to the energetic propagation of the Third Order, as it was now called, by the great Observant preachers, especially St. Bernardino, St. John of Capistrano, and Bernardino de Bustis. Evidence of this new expansion is given by St. Antoninus of Florence (d. 1459) when he writes about the ecclesiastical character of the tertiaries, known in Italy as *pinzocheri* as early as the thirteenth century: his evidence is made all the more valuable by the fact that he was a Dominican: "The doctors do not discuss the Third Order of St. Dominic as much as they do that of St. Francis," he says, "for there are few Dominican tertiaries in these parts (Italy), and hardly any of the male sex; while many of both sexes have adopted the Rule and the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis, some living as hermits, others acting as hospitallers, and others assembled together in congregations." He adds that, because of their large numbers, Franciscan tertiaries were not exempt from interdict as the Dominicans were. So it was not mere rhetoric when Bernardino de Bustis exclaimed in one of his sermons: "the Order is great in numbers. The whole of Christendom is full of men and women who truly observe the Rule of the tertiaries".

The environment in which this evangelical holiness developed was the Christian life itself in all its many aspects, and it invariably crystallized into apostolic or charitable projects. In Rome the tertiaries ran four benevolent homes; at Cortona they maintained the Hospital of Mercy; in Florence there was the famous Hospital of St. Paul, where the tertiary infirmarians were popularly known as *bonomini*; at Imola they were in charge of the Hospital of St. Francis until 1488; at Piacenza there was a whole series of splendid foundations which were in no way inferior to the best run welfare institutions of today; poor sisters and female pilgrims were given shelter at the Hospital of St. Elizabeth: the brotherhood owned a number of houses which it let at a low rent to needy tertiaries; it was the mission of one group of tertiaries to reclaim fallen women. At Modena the tertiaries organized assistance for poor people who were ashamed to beg by collecting alms for them; at Reggio Emilia, from 1238, the tertiaries visited the poor in their own homes and kept a dispensary and a food store, both free of charge, for the benefit of poor people of any category, whether laymen, clerks, or religious; in Paris, in 1300, Guy de Joinville founded a tertiary brotherhood of infirmarians; at Mons, in Belgium, the tertiaries gave free tuition to fifty poor children; in other towns there were tertiary priests dedicated to training young men for the priesthood: in Naples Queen Sancha, who became a tertiary and then a Poor Clare, founded two nunneries, St. Mary Magdalen and St. Mary of Egypt, for homeless women. Any number of similar examples could be given, not only in Italy, but in all European countries.

The Third Order in the XVI, XVII, and XVIII Centuries

During and after the Renaissance, the character of the Third Order underwent a very noticeable change. First of all a profound decline took place in Italy, where humanists found the "pinzocheri" concept of life lacking in taste, and in countries where the protestant reform, which was diametrically opposite to Franciscan ideals, had taken a firm hold. At the same time, however, there was a new upsurge of enthusiasm for the "Seraphic Army" (the third Order) in Spain and Portugal, in Spain's European dominions - Naples, Lombardy, and Flanders-and in the New World

The change in the penitential habit was symptomatic of this. The original long tunic, severe and simple in shape, which by the end of the thirteenth century had come to be the tertiaries' most obvious distinguishing feature, striking the same note of austerity in palaces and workshops, eventually became too much of a sacrifice for people in high positions, and too much of an encumbrance for craftsmen as they went about their work, In view of the many complaints he had received, Julius II decided in 1508 to establish the scapular as a special form of habit for the tertiaries: this consisted of two broad lengths of woollen cloth covering the back and chest, and held in at the waist by a cord. This garment could easily be concealed underneath any kind of outer clothing. As time passed, especially after a concession by Clement XI in 1704, it decreased in size until it assumed the form of two small pieces of material hanging on tapes, without coming into contact with the cord.

The seriousness with which the tertiaries took their vows, regarded by them as a commitment to holiness and renunciation, was succeeded by a more outward piety expressed by ostentatious enthusiasm among the upper classes and mass enlistment among the ordinary faithful. The Third Order in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries was able to boast a brilliant catalogue of illustrious figures, but few saints.

In the seventeenth century the gravitation toward the "Seraphic Army" became more general, mainly owing to the energy deployed by the various branches of the First Order, who gave matters relating to the renewal and propagation of the Third Order a place in capitular decrees and constitutions. The General Chapter of Toledo (1633) said in its decrees for the restoration of the Third Order: "It has declined to such a degree, principally because of the negligence of our religious, that in some provinces and nations it may be considered as extinct". It ordered the method used in Spain, where the Third Order is a shining example," to be adopted for bringing about its restoration in other places.

In Italy there were flourishing brotherhoods in every city. Both the civil and the church aristocracy were proud to belong to the Third Order. In Spain and Portugal enthusiasm reached incredible heights under Philip III and Philip IV. In 1644 the Lisbon brotherhood, founded by that indefatigable apostle of the Third Order Father Ignatius Garcia, alone had 11,000 members. In Madrid there were over 25,000 tertiaries in 1689. In France the main promoters of the Third Order were the Capuchins, the most distinguished of whom were Joseph du Tremblay, Leonard de Paris, and Ives de Paris. In Belgium it was limited almost exclusively to the upper classes, and failed to become popular with the common people. In Germany, Ireland, and England, too, there was an enthusiastic response.

After Nicholas IV the authority of the First Order over the Third remained unchanged. It had been endangered by the spread of tertiary communities leading a communal life, which had their own chapels and their own independent activities from the end of the thirteenth century, and by the confusion resulting from the Great Schism. A Bull of December 9 1428, Martin V once more put all communities of lay tertiaries firmly and inexorably under the control of the First Order's minister general and provincials. This decree was eventually implemented everywhere. Sixtus IV extended it to all countries, giving the Observant and Conventual Superiors equal authority over the Third Order. This authority consisted of the power to visit the brotherhoods, to instruct and correct the tertiaries, to invest them with the habit and accept their profession, and to assign a visitor or confessor from the Order to each group.

Not only were changes made in the rule of the Third Order before the time of Leo XIII, but the rule was also supplemented by additions from the very beginning. During the thirteenth century, individual fraternities added regulations of their own. But after Nicholas IV had given a uniform rule to all the tertiaries and confirmed it by a papal bull in 1289, the rule itself was left intact; and the additions took the form statutes or constitutions, either for a certain section of the Third Order or for the entire Order.

The tertiaries in the Recollect Franciscan Province of St. Denis, in France, for instance, had special constitutions in addition to the rule of Nicholas IV before 1677.

Very important were the constitutions of the Third Order which were drawn up in 1686, and then solemnly sanctioned by the bull *Ecclesiae Catholicae* of Innocent XI, June 28, 1689. The latter added these constitutions to the rule of Nicholas IV, and once more approved of that rule. The constitutions approved in 1957 are prefaced by a decree of approbation by the Sacred Congregation of Religious, which calls attention to the fact that "Blessed Pope Innocent XI, solicitously composed or sanctioned new statutes." Innocent XI was pope from 1676 to 1689, and was beatified in 1956.

Thus the constitutions of Bl. Innocent XI made detailed provisions for well-organized and well-governed fraternities of the Third Order

Subsequently, Innocent XII (1691-1700) also ordered that these constitutions be observed in their entirety. However, this was enforced and put into practice only in Italy and Spain.

The Rule from Pope Leo XIII (1884) to the Second Vatican Council

Since the middle of the nineteenth century several important factors have played their part in the development of a new and unexpected prosperity for the Third Order: the restoration of the First Order in all its different branches with a more social and practical sense of its apostolate, and a keener awareness of Franciscan modes of action; the wave of sympathy for St. Francis which began in intellectual circles; and with firm papal support. The first step was to make use of the printed word through periodicals, which would disseminate Franciscan ideals and create links between the different brotherhoods. There was a much greater increase in the number of these publications during and after the pontificate of Leo

XIII, so that by 1919 there were as many as 164 throughout the world, a figure which increased still further over the next ten years.

Of recent popes, all from Pius IX to John XXIII, belonged to the Franciscan Third Order before their accession to the pontificate, and all have singled it out for special attention. But it was Leo XIII who gave it preference and founded upon it his best hopes for the regeneration of Christian society. While still Bishop of Perugia he had used every possible means to encourage its growth in all the parishes of his diocese; this enthusiasm increased when he ascended the papal throne. He took advantage of the seventh centenary of the birth of St. Francis in 1882 to issue the encyclical *Auspicato concessum*, which was a fervent eulogy of the Franciscan Third Order and a strong exhortation to promote its expansion in every part of the world.

This clear-sighted pope realized, however, that the old Franciscan institution would never become an effective worldwide force capable of uniting all lay people of good will unless the spirit which had given birth to it was adapted to meet the demands of modern life; he therefore decided to modify the Rule. It was not just a question of modernizing it; the essential was to make it acceptable to the greatest possible number of people.

The new Rule was promulgated in the apostolic constitution *Misericors Dei Filius* of May 30 1884. Having taken this momentous step, the Pope lost no opportunity during the next few years of involving the whole Catholic episcopate in the propagation of the Third Order. The hierarchy responded obediently to the Pontiff's wishes, ordinary Christians were fired with enthusiasm and within a short time there were several million tertiaries. The movement even spread outside the Catholic Church. The Third Order of St. Francis was particularly successful in recruiting members of the Anglican Church at the end of the nineteenth century, using a different Rule, but the same name.

From 1893 through to 1921 various Third Order Congresses were held in numerous European cities. The 2nd International Congress held in Rome in 1921 celebrated the seventh centenary of the Third Order's foundation. Pope Benedict XV in his encyclical *Sacra pro pediem* urged the order to strengthen existing tertiary brotherhoods and to create others where there none. The result was an increase in numbers and greater patronage by bishops. Later Popes Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI made similar exhortations to bishops and the faithful.

Nevertheless, there was a decline in overall numbers possibly due to the formation of Catholic Action, to which St Francis was made patron and later a greatly increased role for the laity following the 2nd Vatican Council.

One important event was the publication in 1957 of the Third Order's constitutions by decree of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. These stressed the secular nature of the tertiary's vocation - secular holiness, secular apostolate - and outlined a program for committed Christian living that was realistic and up to date, especially as regards witnessing and working for peace and social justice. The possibility of replacing the scapular and cord with a medallion or badge was accepted. A distinction was drawn between external authority, exercised by the four ministers general of the First Order through general,

national, provincial and zonal commissaries and local directors, and the internal authority of local, zonal, provincial, national, general, and interbediential chapters.

The SFO – A Unified International Order with its Own Superiors

Before the revival of the SFO brought about by the second Rule of Leo XIII in 1884, the Third Order, though strong in numbers, was far from being a unified Order. In virtue of the bull of Pope Martin V, way back in 1289, which put all communities of lay tertiaries firmly and inexorably under the control of the First Order's Minister General and Provincials, all Third Order local fraternities were strictly bound to the Franciscan branch which gave them spiritual assistance.

They had virtually no link with one another. In this way, a local fraternity "belonged" or, better, was attached to a Friary of the First Order mainly due to the fact that each tertiary made his profession to the Friars, and not to the Third Order Minister, as today. The fraternities became even more isolated from one another with the division of the Franciscan Order in 1517 and the birth of the Capuchin Reform in 1528

The internal organisation of a local fraternity changed little throughout the centuries. It continued having as its main point of reference the Franciscan Friary assisting them, which was frequently the same place where the monthly meetings were held, or the First Order Fraternity that accepted their profession as members.

Not only was there a decline in Third Order numbers but membership had become a fashion that attracted many important figures in society, but did not imply any particular effort to live the Franciscan way of life indicated by St. Francis. Moreover, a good number of members tended to become members in all the other Third Orders or societies present in their town or village, obviously without being able to fulfil the obligations expected of them in virtue of their membership.

Others still joined simply to benefit from some of the privileges accorded to the members, most common of which, was the right to be buried in the burial site reserved for the deceased of Third Order and benefit from the masses and prayers for their souls by the surviving members of the fraternity and the friars.

For these and other reasons, many members would stop attending meetings sometime after their formation and profession. Thus, though the number of professed members could be quite high in a given fraternity, the number of members that actually attended the meetings was quite poor. This continued to be the situation in many places till the Second Vatican Council

The Changes brought by the Second Vatican Council

Secular Institutes - Living the Gospel Counsels Whilst Remaining in the World.

The renewal that was brought about by the Second Vatican Council for the whole Church sparked off a great change in the SFO too. This was mainly in virtue of the directives given in

the document *Perfectæ Caritatis* (Decree on the up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life – 28 October 1965) and subsequent documents, especially *Ecclesiae Sanctæ*. Hitherto, there were three categories in the faithful: the clerical, the religious and the lay. However, before the Council many new institutes were born which could not fit in any of these three categories, because they did not live together as religious, but professed the evangelical counsels continuing to live in the world. The Second Vatican Council saw that the Holy Spirit was reviving an old form of living the Gospel Life in the world – that of Secular institutes, among them the Third Order of St. Francis. Living the Gospel Counsels in the world became the fourth category to which a Catholic could adhere to. The great intuition of St. Francis finally found its officially recognized place in the Church!

From the Third Order of St. Francis to the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO).

Keeping in line with these initiatives of the Second Vatican Council, the Third Franciscan Order started being called the Secular Franciscan Order. This was done for two reasons: the first being that, for far too long, many regarded the Third Order as being somewhat third in importance rather than its being the third in chronological order to be founded by Saint Francis. The second reason was to bring the Third Franciscan Order in line with the Second Vatican Council, thus becoming a unified Secular Institute in its own right, under one General Minister for the whole Order, thus putting aside the historical divisions within the First Order. The Second Vatican Council strongly emphasized the layperson's vocation in the Church and set lay organizations committed to the Christian apostolate on the road to gradual independence, and it also felt it was necessary to recognize the autonomous nature of the Secular Franciscan Order, as the Third Order of St. Francis is now called. While still spiritually closely united with the First Order in the Spiritual Assistant, who is usually a Franciscan friar appointed by his own superiors to assist the SFO, is a member by right of the Council of any fraternity at all levels, but the SFO was juridically autonomous.

The Renewal of the Rule in 1978 by Pope Paul VI and the New Constitutions.

The Rule (1978)

The turning point came about in 1967 when an inter-obediential commission was established by the three General Ministers of the First Order and the General Minister of the Third Order Regular (henceforth referred to as the Four General Ministers) for the Revision of the Rule. The drafting of a new general Rule was begun in 1968, and the difficult task was finally completed when Pope Paul VI, himself a member of the Secular Franciscan Order, promulgated it on June 24, 1978.

In 1973 the World Council of the Third Order was established by the Four General Ministers, and Manuela Mattioli was nominated President of the SFO International Council at interobediential level. Born in Florence, Italy, she moved to Caracas, Venezuela, in 1950 where she became a member of the Third Order (under Capuchin Assistance). She was re-elected President by the members of the one International Council in 1977 and finally, re-elected as the First General Minister of the SFO during the IV General Chapter of the SFO (first elective chapter) held in Madrid in 1984.

The Constitutions (2000)

With the promulgation of the new Canon Law in 1983, work could finally start to compile the new Constitutions. This work started during the General Chapter of 1984 and elaborated during the V General Chapter held in 1988 in Rome. On 8 September 1990 these were approved for an experimental period of six years. The final approval of the definitive General Constitutions was given by the Holy See in 8 December 2000.

The Full Unity of the SFO.

In the presentation to the 1996 General Chapter it was stated that the unification process of the Italian SFO was still in progress, whereas in the 1999 General Chapter it was referred that "the discussion on the time required and the way to reach this unification had become wider and deeper-rooted so much so that it involved the concept of the organic unity of the SFO and, as a result, its autonomy and even its secularity". After taking note of the entire process, the Chapter issued the Presidency a mandate "to pursue in every possible way the reinforcement of the SFO unity, autonomy and secularity", to convoke within 2002 the Elective Chapter of the Italian National Fraternity and to guarantee in the meantime the orderly development of the life of the regional and local fraternities.

This commitment brought the Italian SFO to the first unitary Elective National Chapter held from 27th April to 1st May 2002. It also contributed to the full recognition of the authority of the General Minister and the CIOFS Presidency by the Holy See and the Conference of the General Ministers of the First Order and TOR. Thus the SFO celebrated the X General Chapter (and IV Elective Chapter) of November 2002 held in Rome as a truly unified Order with General Superiors given full recognition by the Church and the Franciscan First Order.

The Situation of the Order Today.

In 2014 there were over 360,000 Secular Franciscan members in 116 countries around the world.

The Patron Saints for the world-wide Secular Franciscan Order are:

St Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231)

St Louis IX of France (1214-1270)

For centuries both St Elizabeth and St Louis have been seen and appreciated by the brothers and sisters of the OFS as saints who clearly manifest what Franciscan Secular life is all about.

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