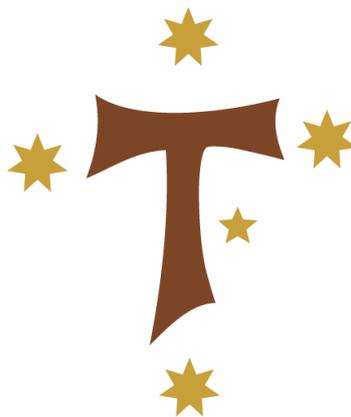


# **SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER PROMOTIONS MANUAL**

**A Resource for Promotion Officers and Fraternities**

**By the National Council of the  
Secular Franciscan Order Australia  
(*The National Fraternity of  
Ven. Lady Jacoba de Settisoli*)**

**2021**



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## INTRODUCTION

In 2018 the National Statutes of the Secular Franciscan Order in Australia were amended to include for the very first time the position of Promotions Officer at all levels of fraternity. The promotion of the Order has since become a duty that all OFS Councils are obliged to work towards.

In the past a significant amount of promotion for the Order was done by the devoted commitment of the Friar Minors. They were the backbone for the establishment of most the fraternities throughout Australia. With the steady decline in numbers of friars over the years, and the closure of many friaries throughout the country, promotions to the Secular Franciscan Order has been significantly impacted.

Since the time of the new Rule in 1978, and the General Constitutions of 2000, the management of the Secular Franciscan Order at all levels has depend more on the commitment of its members and less on the friars. Likewise, promotion of the Order is now the responsibility of individual local fraternities with the support of the higher Councils.

It is however important to clarify exactly what it is that we are trying to promote? In promoting the Order, we must first and foremost strive to promote the gospel way of life in the spirit of St Francis, and to encourage others to grow closer to God, for His glory alone. We are promoting a Way of Life, a more complete and perfect way to follow Jesus. We must not see promotions as a means to gain new members solely for the sake of ensuring the survival of the Order, or in order to afford paying levies, or for other trivial matters.

Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, perhaps we need to revisit the most successful ever promoter of the Order—St Francis himself! How did Francis promote? By example. St Francis simply lived what Christ had shown him to do, and through his example the Holy Spirit inspired the hearts of many to follow him.

In first place, St Francis promoted Jesus. He promoted the gospel way of life and taught others how they too can follow Jesus within their own state of life by perfectly observing the gospels. He promoted devotion to the Most Holy Trinity, to the Blessed Virgin Mary. He promoted conversion, penance, poverty, peace, creation, and the Heart of all of this—the Most Holy Sacrament in the Eucharist. St Francis' mission was to give all glory honour and praise to his God, and for the salvation of souls.

As followers of St Francis, we too share this charism to praise our God, a desire for union with Jesus, and for the salvation of all souls. As professed Secular Franciscans, this charism should already be our natural way of life and burning within us. When we live this charism openly, we too are able to set the example and allow the Holy Spirit to inspire others. When we live the gospel life perfectly, we set the foundation for attraction. Without this solid foundation promotion will fail before we even attempt to begin.

This is the first way in which each one of us are able to promote the Franciscan spirituality, and in turn the Secular Franciscan Order. Today we have also been blessed with an

astonishing number of services available to assist us in spreading the gospel message and educating people about the spirit of St Francis and of the Secular Franciscan Order.

The following Promotions Manual is an aid to assist Regional and Local Promotion Officers in making the most of the resources available to them in order to bring others to the perfection of the gospel, and for the greater glory of God.

## **THE GENERAL CONSTITUTIONS**

### Article 45

1. The promotion of vocations to the Order is a duty of all the brothers and sisters and is a sign of the vitality of the fraternities themselves.

The brothers and sisters, convinced of the validity of the Franciscan way of life, should pray that God may give the grace of the Franciscan vocation to new members.

2. Although nothing can substitute for the witness of each member and of the fraternity, the councils must adopt appropriate means to promote the secular Franciscan vocation.

## **THE NATIONAL STATUTES OF AUSTRALIA**

3.3.6 The National Promotions Officer has the following duties:

- a) to support and coordinate Regional Promotions Officers in activities that promote Secular Franciscan vocations (GC Art 45.2, NS 1.5)
- b) to collect, coordinate and distribute promotional resources to Regional Promotions Officers

6.3.4 The Regional Promotions Officer has the following duties:

- a) to support and coordinate Local Promotions Officers in activities that promote the Secular Franciscan vocation (GC 45.2);
- b) to collect and distribute promotional resources to Local Promotions Officers.

## 1. MEDIA

The media is one of the most effective ways to promote the OFS. Most diocese and parishes produce their own media publications such as newspapers, bulletins and online resources.

When contacting media outlets, it is ideal to make a phone call or even visit them in person to establish a personal contact. In this way they are more likely to remember you.

Regions and fraternities should always take the opportunity to contribute articles about any fraternity event, including:

- Professions/special anniversaries of profession;
- Retreats;
- Transitus;
- Feast day of St Francis;
- Promotion Day;
- Family Day;
- Blessings of the animals;
- Features on a particular member and their activity as a Secular Franciscan;
- Fraternity/regional apostolates. It is vital that people know the OFS's presence throughout the community and ways in which members continue to 'rebuild' the Church through various acts of charity.

It is vital that such events always be advertised in advance. Some advertising may incur a cost, however depending on your relationship with the publications editor they may be able to view this as an 'article' and offer it gratis.

Submitting articles on Franciscan themes may also be an effective way to reach like-minded people. Article may include:

- International Day of Peace;
- World Environment Day;
- Canonisation/beatification of an OFS member.

Tips when writing articles:

- Keep it limited to one page maximum;
- Tell your story simply;
- Always supply a clear high-resolution photo (minimum 3 megapixels), cropped if necessary;
- When advertising an event make sure to always include the who, what, when, where, why, as well as cost if applicable;
- Where practicable it may be beneficial to attach the OFS logo.

It is vital that all articles conclude with a short description of the OFS and some contact details. The following example may be used:

***Secular Franciscans are lay Catholic men and women who follow Jesus by living the gospel values in their everyday secular lives in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi. Their members come from all walks of life—married, single, career professionals, students,***

***young and old. Please visit their website for more information. Web: <http://www.ofsaustralia.org.au> Email: [national@ofsaustralia.org.au](mailto:national@ofsaustralia.org.au)***

### **1.1 CREATING AN AD**

Regions and fraternities may wish to opt for paid advertising, which offers the benefit of publishing your exact words.

- Description of event, including theme and guest speakers;
- Time/day/venue of event;
- Cost;
- Contact details;
- Website ([www.ofsaustralia.org.au](http://www.ofsaustralia.org.au))

Many publications include a calendar of upcoming events. Depending on the publication these are sometimes free and may also be an ideal place to advertise local monthly fraternity meetings. Information to supply include:

- Time/day/venue of meetings;
- Contact details;
- A short description of the OFS (“Secular Franciscans are lay Catholic men and women to strive to follow Christ in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi”);
- Website ([www.ofsaustralia.org.au](http://www.ofsaustralia.org.au))

### **1.2 OTHER TIPS FOR DEALING WITH THE MEDIA**

For the purpose of marketing, it is important to supply attractive photos. Most readers are attracted to smiling faces, and where possible younger people.

If writing an article on behalf of the fraternity it is vital that the fraternity Council agrees on the content before it is submitted for publication.

Letters to the Editor in regards to a Franciscan cause (environment, poverty, etc) should always be in conformity with Franciscan spirituality. It is recommended to first pass such writing by an OFS Spiritual Assistant.

Where appropriate it may be ideal to invite the media to your event. Who knows, maybe they too might have a calling to the Order?

Some media may not always publish your article. Do not be upset or offended if this is the case. Maintaining a good relationship with the organisation increases the chances of having your material published.

Where media advertising may be out of the fraternity’s budget, it is always useful to design your own A4 poster and A5 flyers which can be supplied to church notice boards, Catholic bookshops, Catholic schools, universities, and other Catholic agencies.

## 2. EVENTS

### 2.1 PROMOTION DAYS

One of the most successful means of promoting the OFS is to hold an annual Promotions Day. Perhaps the most vital element of preparing for the day is successful advertisement. Channels to advertise include:

- diocesan newspapers, church bulletins (including churches throughout surrounding suburbs), diocesan/parish youth agencies, youth groups, Catholic universities and other university Catholic societies, all Catholic agencies.

Contacting your local diocesan office may be a helpful way to obtain a list of Catholic agencies and their contact details. It may even be possible for these agencies to advertise your events via their own channels.

In addition to advertising, members may like to extend personal invitations to those whom may show signs of a vocation to the OFS. Personal invitations should also be extended to local parish priests as well as the media.

It is preferable that the venue for a Promotions Day be held within a church complex. If however the event is specifically aimed at younger adults, it may be better to hold this on a campus, university chapel or where ever a young adults group meet.

The structure of the day should be well prepared and attractive.

- Perhaps two confident speakers could give personal testimonies. If possible, a younger speaker would be ideal;
- Speakers must stick to the point and not drag on too long. A suggested time limit is no more than ten minutes. Long drawn-out talks can often lose interest;
- Confident and clear speakers to explain the OFS and Franciscan spirituality. The presenters must be knowledgeable in all areas of the OFS and prepared to answer questions;
- A short DVD may be appropriate, however anything longer than 10 minutes may seem to drag on. Long films on St Francis should be avoided. Enquirers are not attending a film night; they want an information session from those who know;
- Prepare brochures and other promotional material to hand out on the day;
- It is important to collect the names and contact details of those enquiring, and to invite them to monthly fraternity meetings to continue their discernment;
- Refreshments must conclude the event. This gives the enquirers an opportunity to have one-on-one conversations with members;
- The event must be well supported by all members of the fraternity;
- Information sessions should not exceed two hours. It is advisable not to overload those enquiring with information, but to make the session relevant and attractive;
- In union with the first order friars, it is essential to have their full support and presence on the day. They may like to give a short talk on Franciscan spirituality, or a personal testimony, not exceeding ten minutes. It is reminded that the event is run by the OFS members, not the friars.

(A suggested Promotion Day talk is attached in the Appendix of this Manual)

## **2.2 FAMILY DAYS**

Family Day is a gathering of all the three orders within Franciscan family, as well as the member's own immediate families. It is a social event and family orientated, offering enjoyable activities for all ages. It should not be seen as a mini-retreat, although some aspect of spirituality is strongly encouraged. This is an ideal way to bring other members of the immediate family, as well as friends, to meet the Franciscans and to know more about the OFS and Franciscan spirituality.

## **2.3 FRATERNITY MINI-RETREATS**

Fraternities may like to work in conjunction with their local parishes to host a mini retreat day. An engaging guest speaker with a Franciscan theme, as well as time for Mass and other devotions could be offered. This is an opportunity for the fraternity to give a short presentation about the OFS and hand out relevant promotional material. Advertising for such an event is crucial, and methods as stated earlier could be used.

Events such as the Family Day and mini retreat days should always be followed up with an article for the local Catholic publications. Don't forget to invite the media!

# **3. TALKS**

## **3.1 SPEAKING AT MASS**

One of the most direct and successful ways in promoting the OFS is by speaking at Masses. In this way we speak directly to those who are most likely to join. In the appendix of this Manual are suggested talks which may be used. Talks need not be more than 2-3 minutes.

In order to reach the largest audience, it is suggested for fraternities to organise talks throughout all the local parish Masses within their area.

Local fraternity councils could aim to speak to 3-4 different parishes each year. Over the course of several years this could potentially reach a thousand or more parishioners. As an example, in a small city which has thirty parishes, if members were able to speak at four parishes each year, over the course of three years they will have reached almost half of the Catholic population of that city.

For those fraternities in regional areas, an attempt could be made to speak to parishes within 100km radius of the fraternity. Many people in regional areas do not consider that a large distance to drive on a regular basis.

Some parishes prefer not to have speakers during the Mass. This must be respected. In such a situation it may be possible to ask the parish priest to place brochures in their publications rack.

Parish bulletins are also a successful way to promote the OFS. Many parishes are happy to advertise your regular fraternity meeting and other events such as promotion days, Transitus, feast day Mass, etc. Once again, these advertisements should be made in all surrounding parish bulletins/publications as well.

### 3.2 SPEAKING AT EVENTS

Quite often there are many Catholic events that look for speakers. Fraternity members could offer to give a short ten-minute presentation about the OFS. Such events may include:

- Parish dinners;
- Cursillo;
- Men Alive;
- Vinnies functions;
- Catholic retreats;
- Catholic festivals;

(Suggested talking points can be found in the Appendix to this Manual)

### 3.3 YOUTH GROUPS

Although membership in the Secular Franciscan Order is open to adults of all ages, a special focus should be made to engage young adults.

Young adult Franciscan social events could be organised once or twice a year, including a special guest speaker (such as a Franciscan friar) on a Franciscan topic, as well as some devotion, and just as importantly—lots of food! Information about young adult groups in your area can be found through your local diocesan Office for the Youth.

Copies of the National Council's newsletter for the youth, 'The Young Franciscan' could be provided to those attending. A signup sheet for the newsletter should also be made available. Even though they may not ever read the newsletter, just by simply receiving the occasional email from the Secular Franciscan Order will help them remember the order exists.

Key points to remember when speaking at Masses and other events:

- Speakers need to be confident, articulate, and most importantly **animated**;
- It is ideal for speakers to memorise the text. People hear the message better when you speak to them rather than when you read to them;
- Always wear your Tau Cross;
- Leave brochures on the pews, or perhaps hand them out personally at the door as parishioners arrive;
- Make sure to leave brochures in the church's publications rack;
- For the sake of 'marketing' it is preferable to have a 'younger' member give a presentation.

## 4. INTERNET

### 4.1 EMAIL LISTS

Maintaining a current and accurate email list is vital. The following is a suggestion of those you may like to keep regularly updated about your events:

- All enquirers;
- All Catholic media sources;
- Diocesan media and youth offices;
- Schools/universities;
- Parish offices;
- Other Catholic agencies in your area (diocesan publications should list many of their local Catholic agencies).

It is vital that you always add any new enquirer to your newsletter email list. Many enquirers only ever make an initial enquiry but do not follow up by ever attending a fraternity meeting, so they are never included in the fraternity or regional email contact list. By immediately adding them to the newsletter list after their initial enquiry, enquirers will continue to receive the quarterly newsletters which may encourage them to follow up at a later time.

Most importantly, never bombard people with emails.

### 4.2 WEBSITES/FACEBOOK

Some regions and fraternities already have their own websites and Facebook page. The National Council's website and Facebook page attempts to advertise all OFS events scheduled throughout the country. If your fraternity has an event they would like to advertise please contact the National Council for inclusion on our 'Events' page. National Council's Email: [national@ofsaustralia.org.au](mailto:national@ofsaustralia.org.au)

Creating your own fraternity Facebook page is a simple procedure and a useful way to let others know what is happening in your fraternity. The most important rule to remember with Facebook is to be active. 'Like' other similar interest pages and remember to 'like' their posts. The more others see you interested in their page the more they will recognise the OFS name.

There are many Catholic agencies who would be more than happy to include your website link on their own websites. Diocesan websites in particular often include links to other Catholic groups within their diocese.

## 5. SCHOOLS

Although the number of truly devout Catholic families attending Catholic schools are small in numbers, this is still an important avenue to pursue. There are currently a number of Franciscan schools throughout Australia who would be appreciative of the support from the Secular Franciscan Order. For more information about Franciscan schools in your area please visit the Franciscan Schools Australia website:

<https://www.fsa.asn.au/fsa-member-schools/>

In conjunction with the Religious Education Coordinator, OFS members could present short talks on St Francis and Clare to students as part of their religion course. Themes could focus especially on Francis and Clare in their youth and their conversion away from worldly influences to the call of God. This could be especially beneficial for high school students.

For primary school students one cannot go wrong with speaking about Francis and the animals. The National Council's website has resources for children that could be printed for such a purpose.

<http://www.ofsaustralia.org.au/franciscan/franciscan-resources-for-children>

Fraternities may like to consider sponsoring a particular school project, such as a food drive for the poor, or even providing for the school gardens.

The fraternity's regular attendance and participation at school Masses always sets a positive example.

Fraternities may like to present school leavers (year 6 and year 12 students) with a Tau cross and a holy card of St Francis, or San Damiano Cross card.

A special award on behalf of the local Secular Franciscan fraternity can be given at school presentation nights, "For outstanding service to poor", or "Outstanding service in caring for God's environment."

Year 12 students may be handed a copy of the Young Franciscan Newsletter and encouraged to subscribe.

Fraternities may like to run an OFS stall at the local school fete.

Some schools may be willing to advertise your local fraternity meeting in the school newsletter, or even include an article about the OFS.

Fraternity Ministers may like to have a meeting with the school principal to discuss ways in which they can make their presence felt within the school community.

## 6. PRIESTS & BISHOPS

According to the General Constitution of the OFS, membership is also open to diocesan priests, bishops and deacons (GC 2.2). Every effort also needs to be made to educate diocesan priests and bishops on the benefits of joining the Secular Franciscan Order as a way to enhance their priestly vocation and add a deeper element of spirituality.

Fraternities may like to invite their parish priest to a local fraternity meeting and other events. Fraternities may like to present their priest with a small gift such as a book on Franciscan spirituality.

The National Council has produced a brochure on St John Vianney, the patron saint of diocesan priests who himself was a Secular Franciscan. This has been designed to inform diocesan clergy about the possibility of joining the OFS. Please contact the National Council if your region or fraternity require some copies. A digital copy can be found on our website: <http://www.ofsaustralia.org.au/downloads>

A special invitation should always be extended to the parish priest to celebrate Mass for the fraternity at least once a year.

When possible, the profession of new OFS members, as well as the instillation ceremony for a newly elected fraternity council would always benefit by taking place during the Sunday community Mass. This is a wonderful way for the whole faithful community to take part in the fraternity's celebration, and to create a larger awareness of the fraternity's existence.

Fraternities are also encouraged to personally invite their diocesan bishop to attend a fraternity meeting at least once a year and to give a spiritual input. The bishop may also be asked to celebrate Mass for the fraternity as part of the Sunday community Mass in the Cathedral. He could also be invited to say a few words about the OFS in his homily, or even to write a few words about the Order in his diocesan publications.

It is also most important for Regions and Fraternities to send letters of congratulations or condolences to priests and bishops on special events, such as welcoming them on their new appointment, special anniversaries, or on the occasion of a death. Sending your priest and bishop a Christmas and Easter card on behalf of the region/fraternity is most thoughtful. Although such communication should first and foremostly be regarded as an act of pastoral responsibility, this kind gesture will help maintain a healthy fraternal bond with our pastors.

Local and Regional Ministers may like to arrange a meeting with their diocesan bishop to discuss ways in which the OFS may be of better service throughout the diocese, and of ways in which the bishops may help in promoting the Order.

## 7. PERSONAL PROMOTION

Many of the ideas suggested throughout this Manual relate to the fraternity and regional level. However, each professed member is able to promote the Order in their own small ways:

- Always wear your Tau Cross pendant, or pin, on the outside of your clothing. People will often ask what that is for. This is a great way to start a Franciscan conversation;
- Have some brochures always ready in your car, or handbag to give to those whom you sense may have a vocation to the OFS. Personally invite such people to a fraternity meeting or an event;
- Share the Monthly Spiritual Messages and newsletters with others;
- Attend Catholic gatherings such as marches, processions, pilgrimages, and carry an OFS Banner;
- Visit a non-active member and invite to drive them to a fraternity meeting. There may be some members who have been inactive for so long that they no longer feel comfortable to attend on their own. Perhaps they just need someone to be with them and bring them along for that first time;
- Ask your local Catholic bookshop if you could leave some OFS brochures on the counter.

And finally, while we are approaching the 'end', have you considered having the letters "OFS" engraved onto your headstone after you die! If there is no more promotion you can do on this earth after you depart, then at least let everyone be reminded that you were a Secular Franciscan! And please ask your family members to mention this most important fact in your eulogy.

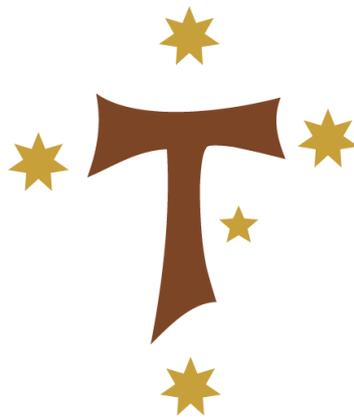
Perhaps we've left the most important way to promote for last. PRAY, PRAY, PRAY! Never underestimate the power of prayer. Some years ago, a certain local fraternity, on the brink of closing down, held a novena for new members. Within the following year they had six members in formation, all whom have since been professed.

Another member recalled the story of how he prayed at the tomb of St Francis for new members for his fraternity. The very next month they had six new enquirers!

The Holy Spirit responds to our prayers—they never go unheard. St Francis continually intercedes on behalf of all Secular Franciscans.

Pax et bonum!

# APPENDIX



- I. Church talks (1 & 2)
- II. Promotion Day Talk

## I.

### Church Talk 1

Good morning/evening, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am a Franciscan. You may not guess it by the way I'm dressed—I don't wear the long brown/grey robe (habit) as the Friars do. In fact, I am a Secular Franciscan and this Tau cross I am wearing is the habit of our Order.

Often, we are referred to as Third Order Franciscans. As you may know, the first order are the friars—priests and brothers, and the second order are the Poor Clare nuns. Many of us every-day Catholics, we love the Franciscan order, we love the spirituality of the Franciscan friars and nuns, and would love to live this spirituality in our own lives, however, most of us don't feel called to be priests or nuns, or perhaps some of us are already married and are unable to join a religious order. Most of us are actually called to remain in the secular world with our families, careers and so on.

So, we join what is known as the third order, or secular order. This is an order especially for lay people. Here, ordinary Catholics, like each one of you here, can join an official order of the Catholic Church and become full members of the Franciscan family, while remaining in the secular world. In other words, you live the Franciscan spirituality within your family life, in your day job, and throughout every day secular society. It is an order for married people, singles, those with careers, the retired, the young and old, from 18 years old till 100 and beyond!

St Francis actually established the third order himself. Today the Vatican, and all of the popes throughout our 800-year history recognise us as a real order of the Church. The Church recognises each one of our members as a real Franciscan, as equally Franciscan as the friars and nuns, even though we are lay.

As secular Franciscans we try our best to follow Jesus in the footsteps of St Francis in our everyday lives. St Francis felt an enormous love for God, and he tried his best to imitate Jesus and live the gospel life as perfectly as he possibly could. He did this by living simply and humbly. He was a man of peace, he was gentle and patient. He had a great love for the poor and marginalised in society. He also had a great love for all of God's creation and cared for the well-being of the environment. Last, but not least, Francis was full of God's joy.

We Secular Franciscans try to live all of these charisms in our lives—in our family lives, our work place, and all of secular society. If you feel that these charisms of St Francis resonate with you, then perhaps God is calling you to be a Secular Franciscan?

The fraternity in (City/town) meet once a month (time/day) and together we pray, have a discussion, usually about Franciscan spirituality. In fraternity we grow together and encourage one another in our spiritual lives. It's a great way for each one of us to continually develop in our lifelong spiritual formation.

For more info about the OFS please take one of our brochures. Please also come and see me after Mass for a chat. Thank you and God bless.

## Church Talk 2

Good morning/evening, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am a Franciscan. When people today hear of 'Franciscans', they usually think of friars, priests and nuns. It is unlikely they think of people working on a construction site, teachers in schools, doctors, mums and dads with umpteen children. In fact, the largest portion of the Franciscan Order is made up by the laity.

The Church recognises that the spirituality of the saints is not just reserved for those who give up the 'world' and join monasteries as consecrated religious. The Church invites all people of faith to celebrate in the spirit of the saints and to live the charism of these remarkable people in their family lives, the work place, and in all of secular society.

For 800 years now, the Church has opened the door to everyday lay Catholics, allowing them to join an official Order of the Church and become full members of the Franciscan family. It is known as the "Third Order", or "Secular Order." The Church recognises each one of these lay members as equally Franciscan as the first order friars and second order nuns.

Secular Franciscans today strive to live a life centered on Christ. By following in the footsteps of St Francis we seek to live the gospel life in the spirit of simplicity, peace, love and respect for God's creation, humility, joy and fraternity.

The Secular Franciscan Order was founded by St Francis himself, and today is the largest Order in the Catholic Church, with around 400,000 members world-wide. It is an order precisely for those who are married, single, those with professional careers, students, the retired, young and old, from eighteen years right up until 100 and beyond.

You may have heard about the Secular Franciscan Order as there is a fraternity here in your parish/area. Our fraternity meet once a month (time/day) and together we pray, have a discussion, usually about Franciscan spirituality. In fraternity we grow together and encourage one another in our spiritual lives. It's a great way for each one of us to continually develop in our lifelong spiritual formation.

For more info about the OFS please take one of our brochures, and please come and see me after Mass for a chat.

Thank you and God bless.

## II.

### Promotion Day Talk

**(The total length of this talk is approximately 50 minutes. Fraternities may like to use all, or parts of this to form their presentation.)**

Good evening, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and thank you for coming today. You have all come because you want to know more about the Secular Franciscan Order. We often say that it really is the best kept secret in the Church today. There are so many Catholics who seem to know very little or nothing about it.

I am actually a Franciscan myself! You may not guess it by the way I'm dressed. I don't wear the long brown 'monks' robe, or habit as it is called, like the Franciscan friars do. In fact, I belong to the Secular Franciscan Order, and this Tau Cross that I am wearing is the official habit of our Order.

Now don't be scared by the word "Secular." Some people hear this word and think, O dear, "secular", that doesn't sound very holy! "Franciscan"—yeah, they are legit! How can these two words possibly go side by side? Some people think that we are probably some sort of new-age Franciscan group trying to change the Church's teachings on, well who know what anymore these days!

Often when we think about Orders of the Church, there seems to be a stereotype image of monks, friars and nuns in their long robes, walking around in medieval monasteries chanting their Gregorian chants, or spending all day on their knees in silent prayer. I bet most people don't think of a Franciscan as someone working in a construction site, teachers in schools, doctors, mums and dads with umpteen children.

Well, that's who we are—the latter. The Church recognises that the spirituality of the saints is not just reserved for those who give up the 'world' and join monasteries. It's not a private 'club' for a select few. The Church invites all people of faith to celebrate in the spirit of the saints and to live the charism of these remarkable people in our everyday lives, in our family lives, in the work place, and in all of secular society.

The Secular Franciscan Order is also known as the Franciscan Third Order. You may already be familiar with the first order friars (priests and brothers), and the second Order Poor Clare nuns. Many of us everyday Catholics love the Franciscan Order, we love the spirituality of St Francis of Assisi, and would love to live this spirituality in our everyday lives. However, most of us laity are not called to be priests or nuns, or perhaps some of us are married, therefore unable to join a religious order.

So, we join what is called the Third Order, or Secular Order. This is an order especially for lay people. Here, ordinary Catholics, like each one of you here today, can join an official order of the Catholic Church and become full members of the Franciscan family, while remaining in the secular world. In other words, we keep our families, day jobs and so on, and it is here in our everyday lives that we live the Franciscan spirituality. It is an order precisely for

married people, singles, those with careers, students, the retired, the young and old, from 18 years old, till 100 and beyond.

We are a canonically established order of the Catholic Church. Our order has been established by Rome—by the Pope himself. The Church recognises each one of our members as a real Franciscan, as equally Franciscan as the friars and nuns, even though we are lay.

One question we often hear is “So, what do you do?” As secular Franciscans we simply try our best to follow Jesus in the footsteps of St Francis in our everyday lives. That’s the short answer.

So that then begs the question, what did St Francis do?

Now for the long answer!

### **Our Charism – Love for God**

St Francis was simply a man in love, with God. God—the Most Holy Trinity—was first in his life, God was second, and God was third. Everything in his life revolved around God. Francis’ desire was to love, praise and worship God to the fullest. The Franciscan charism is first and foremost about an intense love for God.

For St Francis, the Eucharist was the most perfect way to experience God in this life. In fact, throughout all of the writings of Francis that still exist today, there was no other theme that he spoke of more than his love for the Eucharist. For St Francis, the sacraments were paramount in his life.

Francis was in constant search for God. In his quest to “find” God, he went beyond the perimeters of the physical church. Francis’ personal genius was that he was able to recognise the imprint of God in all of creation. In all created things Francis witnessed an image of God and of our Creator’s great love for us. It was through all of creation that Francis was able to rejoice and give endless praises to God.

### **Living the Gospel**

As a young man, Francis sought pleasure, joy and satisfaction in all the wrong places—in money, fine food and wine, fine clothing, extravagant spending, needless wealth, parties, self-glory and honour. Only after many years did he see that such a lifestyle filled him with a false sense of joy.

By the grace of God, Francis realised that the way to perfect joy was found in the gospels. It became his greatest desire to imitate Jesus and to live the Gospel of our Lord as perfectly as he possibly could. Francis literally lived the gospel message to the letter.

When one lives the gospel life perfectly, we become another Christ. And that's precisely what St Francis became—"Altus Christus". It is when we become another Christ that we begin to transform the world.

As Secular Franciscans we too become gospel people. We aim to live the gospel life, and to imitate Jesus as perfectly as we possibly can within our own particular state of life. And each one of us will do it differently. Someone who is single will live their gospel life differently to someone who is married; someone who is a career professional will live their gospel life differently to someone who is retired.

God does not want us to become a clone of St Francis, nor of any other saint. He has a different plan for each one of us. As Francis was dying, he said "I have done what was mine to do, may Christ now teach you what you are to do." In other words, as long as there are one-million Franciscans in the world, there will be one-million ways to be a Franciscan! Even though we all live our lives differently according to God's plan for each one of us, we all share the same charism and spirit that God had planted in St Francis.

The gospels are not just books to be read, the gospels are a way of life to be lived. Perhaps we can see it in the sense that in fact there are not only four gospels, but rather five; the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the gospel according to (*name people in the room – Tony, Margaret, etc*). We become the fifth gospel (although some claim the book of Isaiah to be the fifth gospel, in which case we then become the sixth gospel!)

People learn about Jesus by reading the gospels. People can also learn about Jesus by seeing the way we live our lives. We become that living book. Our lives become a living gospel for all to read. As Secular Franciscans we are called to go from gospel to life, and life to gospel. When we live the gospel life perfectly, we too become another Christ. When we become another Christ, then we too can begin to change the world.

### **Poverty**

One of the major charisms of gospel living is 'poverty'. Now, this is the point where some enquirers run for the door—"Poverty! No Way! I'm not giving up my wealth, my comfort, and all my fancy things!"

Well, the good news is that, NO—you don't have to sell everything you own, or hand over your bank details and passwords to us. You can still keep your home, car, income, and your family too.

Even though Francis literally owned nothing, not even his own clothing, he understood poverty in a much deeper sense. Poverty for Francis meant a detachment from the world. He understood that there was only one thing in life that we truly need, and that is God.

Ultimately it is only God who can fill us with eternal joy. Every other joy that we receive through the world is only a passing joy, it comes and goes. That fancy new car that we once

bought, our electronic devices, or that new wardrobe of outfits that once brought us much pleasure, will one day pass and cease to fill us with joy.

The spirit of St Francis helps us to realise the craziness in wasting so much of our energy on things that will ultimately bring us no joy. This is especially true in today's high consumer culture. We must seek joy in the gift that will never run out—and that is the gift of God himself.

When Francis filled his heart with the desire for wealth and material pleasures, he left no room in his soul for the joys that only God could fill him with. Francis had to empty himself from the desires of the world. Only then, when he was empty, did he have the space to be filled to the brim with the infinite spiritual riches of God. This Poverty of Spirit allowed Francis to put his complete trust and dependence on God.

As Secular Franciscan, we too empty ourselves from worldly desires, and refocus our desire totally on God and of spiritual things. We make it hard for God to fill us with his spirit when our hearts desire worldly riches. The more we desire worldly riches and pleasures the less room we make for God in our lives. Jesus confirmed that we can't desire both God and money, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money". (Matt 6:24)

It is interesting however, that even though St Francis and his brothers lived total physical and monetary poverty, he never asked such harsh poverty of the secular Franciscans. Francis understood that the life of the Secular Franciscan was to remain in the "world", and to continue providing for the physical needs of their families. He understood that such poverty would be irresponsible on the part of those who need to raise a family. The Secular Franciscans in the time of Francis, as they are today, are called to contribute to the workforce and earn the wage that is rightfully owed to them.

There is nothing wrong with being financially well endowed, and in fact many of our members are. In light of the gospels and in the spirit of Francis, Secular Franciscans are careful not to indulge in excessive luxury, extravagant tastes and needless wealth. We are careful not to be caught up in the "must have" mentality of consumerism.

As Secular Franciscans, we are careful to never let material wealth satisfy us. We must not 'love' these items. Rather, we see them as gifts from God that have been given to help us in our work to serve God through others. Secular Franciscans are careful to not allow their bank accounts to become their treasure. Only God and the joys of heaven are our treasure. Many of our members are generous with the wealth they have been blessed with, and use it for the good of others. Of course, when we do use our wealth for the good of others it must always be within our means without depriving our own families of their needs.

The two patrons of the Secular Franciscan Order were in fact very wealthy. St Louis IX King of France, and St Elizabeth Queen of Hungary, both had vast wealth, money, palaces and possessions. However, they used all of this for the good of others, for feeding the poor who came to them every day, or funding the building of hospitals and other services.

There are many ways to live gospel poverty, and each one of us need to be careful and prudent in discerning the best way to live it.

Many people today think to themselves “what can I do to have more? What can I do to be richer?” the Franciscan spirit asks us, what can I do to have less, live simpler. How can I simplify my life so that I resemble more closely the poverty of Jesus?

### **Penance**

The Original Third Order Franciscans were called the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. The word ‘Penance’ is another one of those words that people seem to run away from. St Francis certainly lived a life of harsh penance and deprived himself of much comfort and pleasure.

It is true that we are continually called to offer small sacrifices to God every day, and this is what Jesus himself called us to do, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23).

Penance can also be understood in the same spirit as ‘Poverty’, in the sense that we can’t always have what we want. Sometimes we have to say ‘No’ to those little pleasures. Today we will often look at little children who get everything they want and refer to them as “spoilt little brats!” We know that a child who gets everything they want will not develop many admirable virtues.

We as adults must not become “spoilt *big* brats!” As Secular Franciscans we understand that God gives us, not what we want, but rather, what we need. It is hard to understand this sometimes. Often it seems that God has only filled us with suffering and hardship. Francis realised that such trials in fact were stepping stones to something greater. Such hardships are a way to help us develop in the virtues that God intended for us, so that we can grow closer to him in holiness.

The word ‘Penance’ can also be understood as a change of heart. It is moving closer to God in the way that He knows is best for us, even though it may sometimes hurt.

### **Humility**

Humility is another great gospel virtue. Francis’ humility was so profound that he considered himself the worst sinner in the world. He thought of himself as the most displeasing creature in God’s eyes. As Secular Franciscans we also strive for humility. We try not to blow our own horns and tell people of how great we all are, seeking praise, honour and glory. We are also careful not to place ourselves on a pedestal, but as the gospels calls us, we seek the lowest place at the wedding feast, and strive to be a servant to others, just as Jesus was.

In humility we recognise our littleness next to God. We realise that the only thing we can achieve on our own without the help of God is our sin. Just like St Francis, we too need to first realise the full extent of our sinfulness, and to lower ourselves before God.

St Francis was a great contemplator on the humility of God. He realised that from the Crib to the Cross, God completely emptied himself of all human honour, glory, wealth and power. Jesus entered into the world with nothing, and died with nothing. The total self-emptying and humility of Jesus was the model of humility for Francis.

### **Rebuild my Church**

St Francis was also known as a builder. What did he build? – Churches.

You may know the story of Francis' conversion, when he was one day praying in the old derelict church of San Damiano, just outside of Assisi. There he heard the voice of Jesus speak to him from the now famous San Damiano Cross, saying "Francis, Francis, go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins." It is interesting that throughout all of his life, this was the only direct mission that God gave to Francis—to rebuild the Church.

Taking this message literally, Francis began to repair the church stone by stone, not realising at that time that the church he was to repair was not the physical building, but rather the human Church, the body of Christ.

The Church is in ruins again today, because we, the body of Christ have turned away from the gospel life that Jesus taught us. So many seek a life of wealth, power, prestige, self-pleasure. These things destroy. The gospel life that Jesus taught us is simplicity, poverty, purity, humility, charity, love—these bring life.

Secular Franciscans are at the forefront of repairing the Church by bringing the gospel message back to secular society. We rebuild the Church by living these gospel virtues and by teaching others to live it as their way of life. As we know, the Church throughout the entire world is in desperate need of good builders!

By understanding that the Church is not just the physical building, but rather the people of God, Secular Franciscans strive to rebuild the Church through each and every person they encounter, beginning in the family home with our own spouses and children.

We also rebuild the Church through means of apostolate. Many of our members devote much of their time to charity work, such as St Vincent de Paul, pastoral care in hospitals, visiting the elderly and even those in prison. In these people we meet and serve Jesus.

St Francis was a man of apostolates, he loved to serve the lepers, the poor and marginalised. He was a man of action, he got his hands dirty. He went out among the people and became Christ to others. Secular Franciscans are not only people of deep prayer, but of

action too. Faith and action go hand in hand, and this is a major role in continuing the building of God's Church here on earth.

Often we think of apostolates as donating money to charities. That may be the case for some people who are not in a position to be physically active. We must remember however, that neither Jesus nor St Francis had any money. Rather they gave of themselves for the service of others.

### **Peace**

Peace-making was at the heart of St Francis. Perhaps his most famous peace-making mission was when he visited the Muslim Sultan in Egypt, three times, in order to bring peace between the Christians and Muslims. It is recorded that that Sultan actually converted and was baptised before he died thanks to the Christ-like love shown to him by Francis.

Secular Franciscans are at the forefront of promoting peace and goodwill. In fact, the very first Secular Franciscans 800 years ago brought peace to their region simply by refusing to take up arms and fight. By the end of Francis' life more than half of Italy had joined the Third Order. This brought so much peace upon the country that wars became few and far between as the people refused to fight.

As Secular Franciscan today we try to find peaceful resolutions in all difficult situations and never resort to violence or bad words. We especially strive to resist from destructive behaviour such as gossip, which Pope Francis compares to a nuclear weapon.

Over the centuries many of the popes believed that the Secular Franciscan Order would bring peace to the world—and why wouldn't it—if all faithful Catholics professed to live the gospel life, unattached to the desires of wealth, greed, and power, but rather concerned about living simply, humbly peacefully, charitably—this brings peace to the world.

### **Creation**

Most people today seem to associate St Francis with the environment, creation and especially the animals. Often people might say "I have a devotion to St Francis—I even have a St Francis bird-bath in my back yard!" well, that's a start!

St Francis was much more than just an animal lover. Francis saw all of creation as an outpouring of God's love, as a gratuitous gift from God. He recognised everything in creation as having been created by God, therefore everything in some way contains the imprint of God and is holy, from the smallest of worms, every blade of grass, leaf, mountain, fire, water, wind, the sun, moon and the stars, and of course, us—the human person. All of creation filled Francis with joy to constantly give praise to God.

Secular Franciscans also strive to recognise all of creation as holy. We must constantly remember that everything we see was created through Jesus and for Jesus. Therefore,

everything created by God has an element of holiness. It is only right that we constantly praise God and care for this holy gift he gave us, the environment and all living things—our earthly home.

### **The Church**

The Secular Franciscan Order is a canonically established Order of the Catholic Church. Our mission is to be the living Church in secular society, hence the name 'Secular Franciscan Order'. Precisely because we are lay, we can bring the gospel message into all areas of secular society where the religious cannot go.

As mentioned earlier, when people hear the word 'Franciscan' they automatically think of friars and nuns. Most people don't know that Franciscans are also lay people, those with families and jobs.

**We are not secularised Franciscans. We are Franciscans who live and work in the secular world.**

Because we are a canonically established Order of the Roman Catholic Church, it is most important that we live and work in unity with the Church, with the priests, bishops and pope. Not against it. If we are opposed to church teachings then we have no place in the order. If we support things such as abortion, contraception, married clergy, women priests, same sex marriage, then we are not in line with Church teachings. If you do support any of these things, then this is not the place for you. We have to be 100% on board with what the Church teaches and believes.

We believe in the Magisterium of the Church. We believe that it is the Holy Spirit who guides what the Church teaches. To think that the Church has its teachings wrong is to not trust in the Holy Spirit. Let us not forget that in the early Church there were many who believed in all Church teachings, except for one particular article of faith. Such people were excommunicated and called heretics! Sadly today there are many Catholic who do not believe in *many* article of faith. This must not be so with the Franciscans. Our job is to rebuild the Church, and we can only do this when we believe and trust whole-heartedly in the infallible teaching of the Holy Church.

St Francis, even though he was radical, he was also most orthodox. He worked together with the priests, bishops and popes to bring them back to the gospel way of life and thus repair the Church. He certainly had no desire to change the Church, but simply to bring it back to its roots. It is important for Secular Franciscans to also hold to such an orthodox faith. Our role in rebuilding the Church is not to go against our priests and bishops if we see them turning away from the gospel message, but rather working with them, to bring them and the Church back into conformity with the Way of Jesus.

Rebuilding the Church must first of all start with ourselves. Secular Franciscans must live moral lives as approved by the Church. Members must not live in adulterous relationships, or have unethical occupations or lifestyles. It is expected that anyone wishing to enter the

Order has already made a serious effort to be unattached to serious sin, and to give up any habits contrary to the faith.

The Secular Franciscan Rule speaks of daily conversion. If we are not prepared for complete conversion, if there is even just one sin that we prefer to hold on to, then the Order is not for you. We have to be prepared to be completely transformed into another Christ.

### **Prayer**

Prayer is central to our lives as Christians. St Francis himself lived a life of constant prayer throughout every moment of every day. God needs to be on our thoughts—all the time. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, he should be in the forefront of our minds. Prayer and contemplation should also be at the centre of the Franciscan way of life. It is the *soul* of who we are and what we do.

As people of the gospel, daily reading of the gospels and sacred scripture is vital for our quest to know and love Jesus. Members must be prepared to spend a few minutes minimum, each day reading from the bible.

The greatest form of prayer is of course the Holy Mass. Where possible, we are encouraged to attend Mass on weekdays as well as Sundays, to spend time in adoration, and to participate fully in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and regular reconciliation.

It is also a strong recommendation that our members regularly pray in the Divine office, the official prayers of the Church.

### **Mary**

One other person who is so important to the Franciscan family is Mary, our Lord's Mother and our Mother. Francis named her the protectress of the entire Franciscan family. It is vital that we have a great love and devotion to her. Quite simply said, if we don't have a love for Mary then we simply can't be Franciscan!

### **Joy**

One of the most notable charisms of St Francis was his unending spirit of joy. Towards the end of his life Francis' physical suffering was unbearable. He endured much bodily suffering from the years of ill treatment. He also suffered from blindness, not to mention the horrendous pain of the stigmata (the crucifixion wounds of Jesus in his own flesh).

However, it's remarkable that throughout all of his suffering Francis wrote what is perhaps his best-known work, 'The Canticle of the Creatures'. In this work, Francis joyfully gives praise to God for all of creation, including Sister Death. There was no amount of suffering that could extinguish the spirit of joy alive in Francis.

St Francis had a burst of joy that was infectious. This is one reason the order grew so quickly. The people of Francis' days saw that when you live the gospel way of life perfectly, one can only be filled with an incredible joy. Such joy should be the natural disposition of every Christian. Even though sadness's do come our way, there is no amount of sadness or suffering that cannot be overcome through our love and faith in God.

### **Pope Francis**

How wonderful is it that our current Pope chose the name Francis of Assisi. Pope Francis clearly sees that the example of St Francis is exactly what the world is desperately crying out for today.

Our world has gone mad with consumerism, greed, wealth and power. In a time when the church has diminished in many parts of the world; and in the wake of a worldwide scandal where the church has almost hit rock bottom, the pope, by choosing the name 'Francis', has shown that the spirit of St Francis is exactly what we need today to rebuild our broken church.

If the pope sees the importance of St Francis in today's world, then all of us are called to embrace this spirit, and walk in the footsteps of St Francis.

### **Fraternity**

One of the most important aspects of belonging to the Secular Franciscan Order is fraternity. For each member this is our biggest obligation. It is important that, as much as possible, members attend their monthly gatherings.

St Francis lived with his brothers. Today the friars live in community with each other. The Poor Clare nuns live in community in their convents. However, we seculars live with our families—not with other Secular Franciscan members.

That's why it is important to come together once a month in fraternity and share that community spirit. The fraternity becomes our spiritual family, and here we come together with other members to pray and continue our ongoing spiritual formation each month. As a family we encourage and help one another to live the Franciscan spirit in our everyday lives. As some of our members say, in fraternity we "recharge our batteries!"

Our fraternities really do become a family where we share in each other's joys and sorrows. Often in between monthly gatherings members catch up for lunch, a cuppa, or just pay a visit to say "hi". The Secular Franciscan Order is all about family.

## **Rule**

As briefly mentioned earlier, we have a rule. Now don't be scared of the word "Rule". A rule is not something that restricts our life style, rather it is liberating. Following the Rule guides us to live the gospel life more perfectly. Our Rule is our spiritual guide, it is based on the gospels and calls us to go from gospel to life and life to gospel.

When one takes time to study the rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, you see it is a real gem in the Catholic Church today. It would have to be one of the great treasures given to the laity by the Church. There does not seem to be any other Rule of guidelines that puts lay Catholics at the forefront of bringing the Gospel life to secular society.

## **Joining the Order**

Joining any order of the church is a vocation and a calling. Being a Secular Franciscan is a lifelong commitment, so a time of prayerful discernment is required.

The Secular Franciscan Order is not a club, a pious prayer group or fellowship group. It's not the RSL where as long as you pay your membership fees, you're in. It is an order of the church for the laity. Once you're professed the only way out is in a box! It's a bit like a marriage—if you can't commit for life, then don't do it!

And just like any couple, you don't actually need to get married in order to be in a loving relationship. Anyone can be in a relationship without being married. However, marriage brings that relationship to a new level. It sanctifies the relationship of the man and woman and brings their bond into a closer union with God.

It's the same as living the Franciscan spirituality. You don't need to join the Franciscan Order to live the charism. There are many people who live the spirit of Francis without being members. However, being a professed Franciscan brings us into a closer union with God, the Church, and the Franciscan family. We belong to that very Order that St Francis himself established 800 years ago. We become a professed Franciscan in the eyes of God.

## **Conclusion**

The mission of St Francis was to live the gospels and rebuild the Church on the foundations of love for God, prayer and contemplation, poverty, simplicity, humility, charity, joy, and a love for creation.

The gospel life is a life of perfection, and that's what we seek, PERFECTION—we don't ask for much! Simply joining the Franciscan Order does not make one holy. Just by wearing our Tau Cross doesn't make us holy. There are many paths to holiness which many non-Franciscan saints have walked as well. However, the path to holiness that God showed us through St Francis is a very powerful way. This is evident in the sheer number of Franciscan saints and blessed who have walked this spiritual path. In fact, there are more saints and

blesseds among the Secular Franciscans than there is in the first and second orders combined.

Being a Franciscan is not about the external symbols we wear; it is about the internal spirit of who we are. Being a Franciscan is not about what we do, rather it is about who are we transformed into—Another Christ. St Francis is our guide and inspiration to becoming Christ-like.

Perhaps none of our fraternity members will ever become canonised saints, however, striving for gospel perfection in the spirit of simplicity, humility, is the purest path to sainthood that there is.

If you're looking for a path to holiness that so many others have walked, maybe the Secular Franciscan Order is right for you?! I hope you might pray about it.

### **How to join the OFS**

#### **Prerequisites**

- 18 years of age and above
- Good catholic standing.
- clear signs of vocation
- Unattached to any other order of the church.
- Interested in knowing St Francis
- Have a spirit of conversion

#### **Three stages of joining**

1. Initial enquiry. Attend meetings for 6-12 months.
2. Request Admission into the order. A period of formation begins that lasts from 12-24 months.
3. After the time of formation is completed, members make their life-long profession to the Order.