

1221-2021. 800 YEARS FROM PROCESSING OF THE MEMORIALE PROPOSITI

3rd CONTRIBUTION

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How to live the values of the Memoriale Propositi in today's context

Introduction

As an Order in the Church, a lay Order, the Secular Franciscan Order has a Rule that guides its members in living Christian values in the light of Franciscan spirituality in today's world, performing the role that the Second Vatican Council identified for them.

In order to understand HOW to live the values of the Memoriale Propositi in today's context, we must first analyse what those values are and find how they are reflected in the current Rule that the members of the OFS live (or try to live) to the full.

The Memoriale Propositi has the same goals as the Rule of 1978 and is addressed to the people of their own time. We might think that the values in Memoriale Propositi might not be useful for us and no longer valid for our day. However, since we are dealing here with values, they have a universal importance and create a foundation on which we build our life. Therefore, it is an exciting experience to set out in search of the similarities and common roots of both Rules.

Memoriale Propositi tells us from the start that it is a program of life of the brothers and sisters of penance living in their own houses and it fits quite well with what is found in Rule two of the current Rule when it states that "the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit strive for perfect charity (what Memoriale Propositi calls penance) in their own secular state.

What strikes the modern reader is the fact that rather than being a project of spiritual life, Memoriale Propositi seems to be a series of rules and prescriptions that make it seem like a heavy legal document, one that is certainly not attractive to the 21st century reader.

It has rules about clothing, of keeping certain periods of abstinence and fasting, the manner of prayer, about the frequency of confession, the way of living in fraternity and these very detailed norms are meticulous and exact.

Why is this necessary? Probably it was influenced by the monastic rules that had shaped life in medieval Europe. In their life the monks paid an almost obsessive attention to the rule, to aesthetic regulations and liturgy. The Brothers and Sisters of Penance, children of their day and age, found their model and inspiration in these "masters".

1. Rediscover the values of Memoriale Propositi

I believe that the Memoriale Propositi may actually be or is hiding a treasure, a well-hidden treasure. I think that in hunting for this treasure we would do well to use our current Rule as a map to follow to discover it.

1.1 Daily Life

Rule 11 says: "Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs." It seems to me that these words are a wonderful synthesis of all the prescriptions that the Memoriale Propositi offers us in regard to dress: the men shall dress

in humble, undyed cloth...; outer garments laced up and not open... the sisters shall wear an outer garment and tunic made of cloth of the same price and humble quality.

The goal to strive for is the same, that is that Secular Franciscans live in a just relationship with earthly goods. For us, our Rule gives us the spiritual ideal and we then put that ideal into practice in our lives. For our brothers and sisters of 800 years ago they began with a direct instruction (such as how to dress) and came to an understanding of the spiritual ideal (such as poverty and simplicity).

Without a doubt our Rule requires a notable maturation and continuous conversion. Our Rule is certainly more attractive because it allows us a certain amount of freedom and individuality, but also it is much, much more difficult because of the ease with which we tend to justify our shortcomings and make excuses for ourselves.

I offer a brief reflection on the question about the manner of dress. The penitential movement of Francis expected its members would assume a public commitment, which was marked by the "habit". This immediately distinguished those who had undertaken this life from all the others.

1.2 Abstinence and Fasting

Articles 6-11 of the *Memoriale Propositi* treat the topics of fasting and abstinence in great detail. For us, these topics are only mentioned in the General Constitutions: Article 13.3 and states that: 'penitential practices such as fasting and abstinence, traditional among Franciscan penitents, are acknowledged, appreciated and lived according to the general norms of the Church.'

Certainly, all the details of *Memoriale Propositi* mirror what was indicated by the Church. The penitents were included among the religious (although living in their own homes) the rules were much more demanding. However, although the form may be changed, the substance remains the same: live in a spirit of ongoing conversion.

1.3 Prayer

Personal prayer in its varied forms specified by the *Memoriale Propositi*, this too in great detail, must fill the day of the penitents. In Rule 8 our Rule goes to the heart of this topic: 'let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do'. This is the soil in which to work, and in order to make it fertile we are told: '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.'

We are told the very same things but in a different manner, in accordance with the times and cultures (after all, 800 years lie between us)!!

1.4 The Sacraments, Other Matters

I believe that the chapter concerning Confession and Communion is the point in which the change is most apparent (from Confession three times a year and Communion at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost). Today, at least in regard to Communion, there is a radical change; we know that there is a crisis in regard to the Sacrament of Confession, and so this topic is in need of a profound personal and fraternal reflection.

Memoriale Propositi states: Do not take up offensive arms against anyone and do not bear them. This is certainly a great value that, in order to be put into action, required a great effort, both spiritual and willpower, because it was normal to bear arms in Medieval times.

Our form of life is not so specific, but various Rules encourage non-violence as the path to follow today. This choice still requires great strength of spirit and will (Rules 11- 13, 15). Then, too, in Article 23.2 of the General Constitution the topic of refusing to bear arms is taken up again in more modern language in the statement: "they should respect the choice of those who, because of conscientious objection, refuse to bear arms."

1.5 Special Mass and Meeting Each Month

In these articles we find step by step what is also asked of us today. The monthly Mass and the meeting of the fraternity are values that we hold today, too. Covid has had a profound effect on the life of our fraternities. Its substitution by video conferences or formation webinars certainly does not have the same impact, but at least they have helped us not to lose contact.

There is the beautiful passage about the contribution of funds (a sore point for some and therefore a value that we would do well to examine and reflect on deeply), which Memoriale Propositi also offers practical examples concerning its use.

This celebration is helping me think that the Memoriale Propositi is not simply a manuscript that, once the anniversary is past, should be closed up again and shelved and forgotten until the next centenary. Rather, it is a living document that is still useful for us (me), offering guidelines that help in the concrete living out of the values that the rule proposes. Furthermore, it has been the guide and inspiration of many of our brothers and sisters.

What is striking today is the fact that the figure of the Spiritual Assistant is not yet defined: ... "if it be convenient at the time, they are to have some religious who is informed in the words of God to exhort them and strengthen them...".

4 1.6 Visiting the Sick, Burying the Dead

Here too the Memoriale Propositi is very specific and detailed. The value of these corporal works of mercy is very much alive in today's fraternities and the second part of article 19 motives us to perform these works "immersed in the Resurrection of Christ"

Beginning with article 25 until the end of the original Rule, in addition to discussing the topic of peace among the brothers and sisters in fraternity or of disputes with civil authorities, that we find are not treated directly in our present Rule. It discusses the topic of life in fraternity and offices and we find many similarities with the third part our Rule.

2. Something missing?

What perhaps is most striking is that in the Memoriale Propositi there is no inclusion or connection of the movements of the penitents with the other Franciscan groupings of the time. Therefore, to the seculars of our time this seems to be something lacking in regard to how we experience our relationship with the other Franciscan Orders, which the current Rule mentions and confirms in the

first three articles, inserting the OFS in its own right in the Church and the Franciscan Family (under the guidance of a Rule approved by the Pope).

A second idea the Memoriale Propositi is missing, but I think it is because we are living our vocation after a fundamental event, the Second Vatican Council; is that there are no direct references to the Gospel. Rule 4 of the present Rule states quite unequivocally: 'the Rule and Life is to observe the Gospel'. However, this was likely obvious to the brothers and sisters of 800 years ago.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as I have already mentioned, when this anniversary is over, let us not forget this treasure, but rather use it regularly and allow it to give continuity to the path of our Order. Why not get a little help from some of the prescriptions found in it to live fully the form of life that is our spiritual vocation. I believe I personally shall follow this advice that I am offering.

Questions for Discussion – by Joan Hanley, ofs

NB ***It is not necessary to answer all of the following questions. Fraternities can choose 3 or 4 questions that offer the best insights or are most relevant to them. Another alternative is to answer these questions over 2 meetings.***

1. ***“Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs.”*** Rule 11.
Discuss how we can live with a spirit of detachment from temporal goods?
2. ***“Let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls ‘conversion’:*** Rule 7
What do you do to ensure that ongoing conversion is at the centre of your life?
3. ***“So let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do”.*** Rule 8
 - a) How do prayer and contemplation fit into a secular life?
 - b) What forms of prayer are encouraged by our OFS Rule?
4. ***Sacraments and other matters:***
 - a) What kind of attitude can we bring to the reception and valuing of the sacraments?
 - b) What can we do as Secular Franciscans to promote the value of the sacraments?
 - c) As Secular Franciscans, we are called not to bear arms and to be peacemakers.
What does it mean to be a peacemaker?
5. ***Fraternity meetings***
 - a) Comment on how technology can be used to support our brothers and sisters who are not able to attend fraternity meetings?
 - b) How do we support those not familiar with, or equipped with, technology?