

THE YOUNG FRANCISCAN

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Rules

Rules, rules, rules! Why do we have so many rules? In fact, rules have always been around since the beginning of creation when God first gave Adam and Eve the rule not to eat from the trees in the centre of the garden. God also gave Moses the Ten Commandments, from which Moses then composed an extra 613 laws. Jesus upheld these Jewish laws and even gave new commandments to his disciples. The Church has always maintained rules, and today it consists of 1752 laws, also known as Canons. Rules exist throughout all society, from the Constitution of our land to driving laws and sporting rules.

A society that follows just laws enjoys stability and offers its citizens a certain degree of comfort. The same is valid for any person, family or group of people, large or small.

Religious Orders also have their own rules, and the Franciscans are no different. 2023 in fact, marks a significant milestone anniversary as the Franciscans celebrate 800 years of the Rule which was given by Saint Francis to his earliest friars and has remained their official Rule to this day.

But why are rules so important? They help create a rightly ordered structure and manner of living. They help us live more perfectly according to the plan which God wills for us. Observing just rules leads to beauty, to clarity of mind, body and soul. A lack of rules, on the other hand, lead to a lack of beauty, disorder, confusion and general chaos.

God himself is highly ordered. His entire plan for creation proceeded according to his own divine law, which even included the plan for a saviour to redeem mankind. His divinely ordered plan is observed through the perfect celestial alignment of the planets, our earthly seasonal calendars, our bodies, and the animal and plant world. Everything in the created world seems to follow a certain law of order and plan.

Heaven itself follows an orderly plan, for beauty demands order. The divinely ordered hierarchy of heaven is headed by the heavenly King and Queen. There follow the nine orders of angels each according to their own ordered rank, and within the heavenly court dwell the saints, whom as Jesus said, some will be first in the kingdom of heaven, while some will be last.

The liturgical rites in our Catholic Mass follow a structure of rules and rituals which express creation and beauty. The prayers, gestures, melodies and fragrances which have grown and developed over the past two millennia project heaven onto earth. Through the beauty of these rules and rituals, we give the highest glory and worship to God.

All creation follows a certain order. Everything that God has created came into being according to his divinely ordered plan and rule, which God himself looked at and said "It is very good"! Following rules is a participation in the orderly life of God, and gives us a snapshot of heaven itself, where there is no chaos or confusion.

800 Years of the Franciscan Rule



Confirmation of the Rule, by Giotto. (Public domain: Wikimedia Commons)

Over the next four years (2023-2026), the Franciscan family worldwide will celebrate a succession of 800-year anniversaries, beginning this year with the commemoration of the Franciscan Rule, and the Nativity of Greccio, the latter of which will be the focus of an upcoming edition of the Young Franciscan.

The Franciscan Rule of 1223, was approved by Pope Honorius III, on November 29, of that year, and has survived to this day as the one unifying Rule of the Franciscan friars. After eight centuries it continues to inspire its members on the path to holiness through an active living of the gospel life.

This was, however, not the initial Rule written by Francis. The original Rule was composed some years

earlier and consisted of a few passages from the gospels, including practical indications of how the friars were to live day to day as brothers within a fraternity. Sadly, this Rule did not survive, so the exact text is unknown. Then in 1221, Francis composed the 'Earlier Rule', consisting of twenty-three chapters, full of biblical quotations, practical instructions, spiritual arguments, and prayers. Finally, the 'Later Rule' of 1223, which we now celebrate, summarised all these parts into twelve clearer chapters.

It may seem a little strange to make such a significant celebration for a Rule. Yet, the Franciscan Rule is more than a set of legalistic "Do's" and "Don'ts" that squeeze all the joy out of life. Rather, the Franciscan Rule is a tool that

fulfils the lives of those who follow it to the fullest. It points its members to a particular way of life which ultimately leads to Christian perfection and a clearer path to heaven.

St Francis' intention was clearly spelt out in the opening line of his Rule, in which he stated,

"The Rule and Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ..."

Today, the essence of this Rule has been passed down to all generations of Franciscans. The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order also places this directive as the cornerstone for the Way of Life of its members, which states in a similar manner,

"The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by following in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made God the centre of his life with God and people.

Saint Francis places the gospel as the fundamental basis for all wishing to follow Christ. The gospels are not simply a good-read book. They point to a way of life that must be lived. For Saint Francis, the gospels became the original 'rule book', in which he lived every word of it to the best of his ability.

In his *Testament*, Francis expressed the importance of living a gospel life when he wrote,

“The Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and, in a few words, and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me”.

Having listened prayerfully to the words of Jesus Christ, Francis and his first brothers exclaimed: *“This is what we want; this is what we were seeking.”* And blessed Francis said: *‘This will be our rule’*”.

When we live the gospel life perfectly, we become like another Christ. And that’s precisely what St Francis became, like another Christ.

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 (2Cor3). Franciscans are called to go from gospel to life, and life to gospel. When we live the gospel life perfectly, we too become like another Christ.

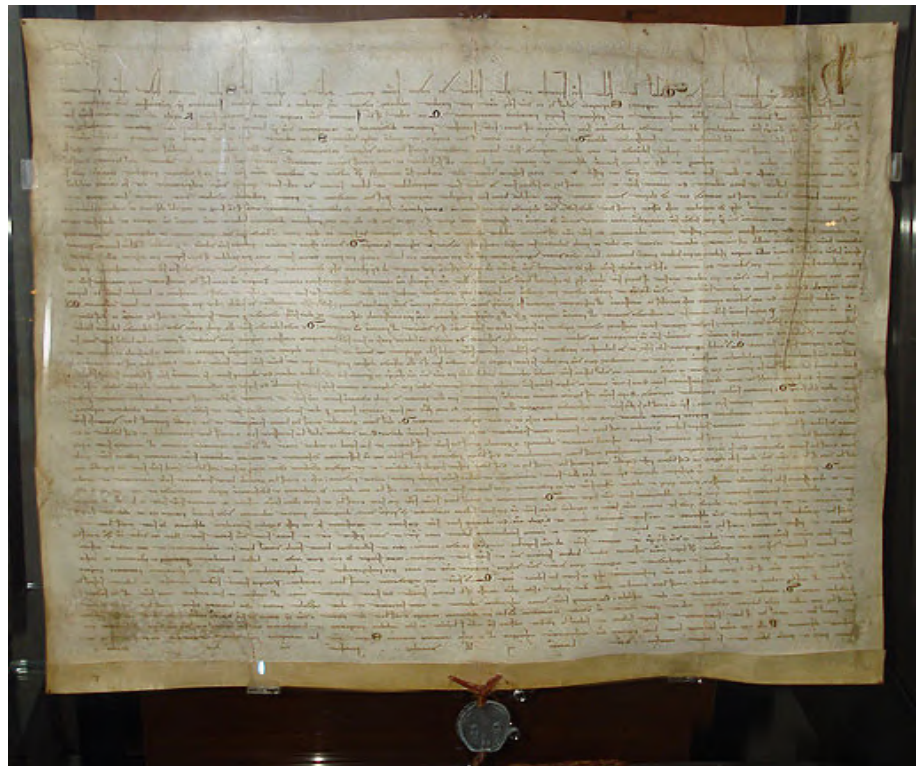
The Rule holds a very important place in the life of any Franciscan individual, in the structure of the Order, and of the wider Franciscan family. It guides us on the path to living a gospel life

and aids us in expressing the gospel life in a uniquely Franciscan way. The Rule could be seen as a shortened version of the Gospel adapted for Religious life.

Living a gospel life today is certainly not easy. In addition to that, following in the footsteps of St Francis takes it to a new level altogether. Professing to live one’s life according to a Rule is no small task, and places a great responsibility on the individual who chooses to do so. It is especially challenging to live a gospel life in a society where many gospel values are being ridiculed or seen as a thing of the past. This abandonment of gospel values has clearly

resulted in the rapid demise of our society today. Perhaps this is all the more reason why the Franciscan family has embraced the celebration of the Rule, as it is precisely in following the law of God, and living the gospel life, that each Franciscan rebuilds the Church, and in doing so, rebuilds society, bringing to it a certain peace, joy and stability.

For 800 years, the Rule of the Franciscans has inspired countless millions of its members to be a witness of Jesus Christ throughout the world. Today, it continues to attract people from all walks of life to testify to the good of God, humanity and of his glorious creation.



Regula Bullata, the Rule of the Franciscan friars, confirmed by Pope Honorius III. (Public domain: Wikimedia Commons)

Secular Franciscan Saints



Bl Amatus Ronconi

1238-1304

Born at Saldezzo, near Rimini, Amatus was orphaned at a young age and was brought up by a relative. Despite being urged to get married, he felt a stronger call to follow God through a life of penance and prayer. He then joined the Third Order of St Francis and began to live an isolated life as a hermit. He was despised as a fool by many, but evidence of his holiness was often revealed by a mysterious light that shone above his hut and heavenly songs that were heard from within. Amatus would only leave his hut to care for the poor and sick, or to walk the 800-kilometre pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela or other well-known holy shrines. He built several shelters for pilgrims and founded the hospital of St Mary of Mount Orciale, near Rimini, which is still in existence today. There he spent the final years of his life as a nurse caring for the sick. He attempted a fifth pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, however, it was recorded that an angel appeared to him and advised him not to go as he was soon to die. He died shortly afterwards at the age of sixty-six.

Bl Michelina of Pesaro

1300-1356

Michelina was born on the shores of the Adriatic Sea in Italy. Although she was a devout Christian woman, her heart was divided by her love for God and her attachment to the world. When she was still a teenager, Michelina married a nobleman, with whom she gave birth to a son. Yet, her devotion to her husband and son absorbed her heart much deeper than was appropriate. Her husband died when Michelina was only twenty years old, which caused her enormous grief. Her affection for her son then grew stronger, and her inordinate tenderness towards him may have proven detrimental to the boy's development. It was not long after that the boy himself fell sick and died. Although deeply sorrowful, Michelina was now able to free her heart from worldly goods and give it completely to God. She joined the Third Order of St Francis and gave herself generously in service to the poor. She became a mother to orphans, supported widows, nursed the sick, comforted the sorrowful, and opened her home as a refuge to all in need. She also practised many penances to atone for her former life of sin.

Twenty-seven Japanese Martyrs

From 1613-1638 Japan faced one of the most brutal Christian persecutions in its history, in which no less than 350 Franciscans were martyred for their faith. Among these were Bl Apollinaris Franco and twenty-seven of his followers belonging to the Third Order of St Francis. Although not much is known about each of these martyrs, one of his Third Order followers, Bl Lucy Freites, stood out in a special manner for her heroism. Holding up a crucifix, she led those who were to die with her to the place of execution, encouraging them and singing Christian hymns in which others joined her. Even while standing in the fire, by which she was burnt to death, she prayed for her country and warned her pagan executioners who were watching her die, to convert to the Christian faith. She cried out, "Can the Christian religion be false when it gives old women and delicate children so much courage and strength? Your gods are false and deceptive, but our God is real and true to his promises. He will receive us into his kingdom and grant us eternal bliss." Her body then sank into the fire, while her soul flew up to heaven.

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'Secular Franciscan Saints' are adapted from the Franciscan Book of Saints, by Marion A. Habig OFM