

# *Conference of National Spiritual Assistants*

## Secular Franciscan Order

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A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF NOVEMBER 2023.

### **THE RULE AND LIFE OF THE LESSER BROTHERS IS THIS...**

On November 29<sup>th</sup> 1223 the Rule of the Order of the Friars Minor was formally approved by Pope Honorius III in papal bull *Solet Annuere*. What does this mean for the Franciscan movement today?

By 1223 the Franciscan family already embraced the friars, the poor ladies of San Damiano and a lay movement. Francis and the early brothers had received provisional approval from Pope Innocent III in 1209 to “live the Gospel”. It was this Gospel-centred life, modelled by Francis, that attracted others to form the Franciscan family. Clare on Easter Sunday in 1212 left her privileged life to join Francis in a life of poverty, starting a community near the small chapel of San Damiano. In 1213 Luchesi Modestini of Poggibonzi and his wife Buonadonna meeting with Francis inspired them to adopt a penitential life. Others joined them, forming what was to become the Secular Franciscans and the Third Order Regular. The movement formed around the personal example of Francis, living in response to the Gospel.

Another great influence on the nascent Franciscan movement was the Lateran IV Council in 1215. The movement itself was challenged by the ban on new religious rules. (Canon 13) The Council also placed an emphasis on the Eucharist which became a hallmark of the Franciscan theological outlook. (Canon 1) The provision of free education for clergy would influence the clericalization of the friars. (Canon 11) The calls for renewed crusade efforts would lead Francis ultimately to the Sultan and the Holy Land. Pope Innocent III’s penitential preaching invoking the Tau would see Francis and the Franciscan family to adopt it as their own. These experiences helped form the Franciscan movement.

By 1219 the Franciscan family was becoming a victim of its own success. No longer was Francis the immediate and personal influence on those joining the movement. The friars received criticism about their formation and discipline. The Church in response imposed a year of probation. The example of Clare and the San Damiano community was so respected by the Pope that he associated other communities with the movement. To bring some order he imposed a Benedictine way of life on the sisters communities, but Clare continued to assert her right to live a life of poverty. We know little of the early lay movement but we see evidence in the *Memoriale Propositi* for the need for a more formal statement on the life of the growing fraternities. Members of the Franciscan movement were now joining without seeing, hearing and learning directly from their founder.

The years 1219 to 1223 were a period of crisis for Francis. He was called back from the Holy Land to respond to the friars adopting non-Gospel rules, particularly on fasting. He returned to find the Order moving away from an experience of life on the streets. Initially the friars were the poor amongst the poor, working with their hands and begging for their food, now the growth in the number of educated friar priests represented a shift from the periphery to the centre. The friars moved into education, in response to the Lateran IV Council, seeing many of them physically move from the country or town outskirts to the city centre, to be near the Cathedral and Universities. Some friars, notably John Cappella, were managing institutions that cared for others. No longer were the friars at the mercy of the generosity of others but were becoming masters of their own future. They were losing a sense of relying on the providence of God that was so important to Francis.

Francis initially opposed many of these changes. We have the picture of Francis removing the tiles from the friary which housed student friars attending the University of Bologna. At the Chapters from 1220-1223 Francis faced growing confrontation about the direction of the Order. Some brothers called for the movement to adopt one of the existing rules rather than following the ongoing Gospel discernment that was the hallmark of the early movement. The Early Rule of 1221 evolved out of this tradition. Francis refused both the pressure of the friars and Cardinal Protector. He said he was inspired by the Lord to be a *new fool* not one led by *wisdom and knowledge* but through prayer and Gospel reflection. (*The Assisi Compilation* 18)

Francis no longer could rely on his personal example to form the friars. During these years Francis wrote many letters to express his views. However, Francis received continuing pressure from both the leading friars and the Papal Curia itself to provide a definitive legislative rule.

The Rule of 1223 is not the founding document of the Order but a confirmation of the Franciscan movement in the life of the Church. While the initial emphasis of the friars' life was one of minority, a life among and with the poor and powerless, the emphasis in the Rule of 1223 became poverty. While initially the friars lived at the periphery now they ministered in the center of the Church's life. Poverty was not assumed but imposed by the 1223 Rule so that they would be more dependent on others.

Francis in the Rule of 1223 mandated that all friars were equal, whether literate or illiterate, cleric or worker. They were to wear the same clothes and pray together as one community. They were to be one family despite differences. Again this was to address growing divisions amongst the friars between clerical and lay brothers, the educated and uneducated.

Clare, to achieve the same ends, argues for the right of poverty against the imposition of a Benedictine monastic life on the sisters. Both Francis and Clare, in her Rule approved in 1253, were trying to lead people into the Gospel life that they had experienced. Francis in the Rule of 1223, nor Clare in her Rule, considered they were writing a new rule but part of a continuing effort to codify their initial experiences of living the Gospel so that others could be led into it.

After the approval of the Rule of 1223 we see in Francis a renewed sense of peace and acceptance of what the Order had become. The recognition by the Church of the Rule of the Friars Minor in 1223 marks the definitive approval of the Franciscan movement in the life of the Church. It was no longer Francis' movement but belonged to the Church. It was no longer his role to guide and direct. It was now the responsibility of each Franciscan to bring alive the Gospel, guided by the Rule he had left them.

The move from minority to poverty as a core of the friars' Rule was to help the friars realize, despite leaving the periphery for the centre of the Church's life, that they needed to be dependent on God, on each other and on the community in which they lived.

Today the purpose of the Rules of life of the respective Franciscan family is to guide members into living the Gospel following the initial example of St Francis. They capture the experience and response of St Clare, Blessed Luchesius and Buonadonna, and the early Franciscan family. They lead and challenge us to bring the Gospel alive, after the example of St Francis. We bind ourselves to our respective Rules through Profession because we want to experience the Gospel life. We want the Gospel brought alive. This is what Francis wanted for the people of his time to experience. This is what we want to experience today. This is what the Church approved in 1223 and exhorts us to live today.

*.... subjects at the feet of holy Church, firm in faith, will always observe the poverty, humility and Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ which we firmly promised.*

Suggested reading:

Cusato, Michael. *Francis of Assisi: His Life, Vision and Companions*. Reaktion Books, London 2023. Chapters 5 & 6.

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