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*)**

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION 1

1. MEDIA 3

1.1 CREATING AN AD 4

1.2 OTHER TIPS FOR DEALING WITH THE MEDIA 4

2. EVENTS 5

2.1 PROMOTION DAYS 5

2.2 FAMILY DAYS 6

2.3 FRATERNITY MINI-RETREATS 6

3. TALKS 6

3.1 SPEAKING AT MASS 6

3.2 SPEAKING AT EVENTS 7

3.3 YOUTH GROUPS 7

4. INTERNET 8

4.1 EMAIL LISTS 8

4.2 WEBSITES/FACEBOOK 8

5. SCHOOLS 9

6. PRIESTS & BISHOPS 10

7. PERSONAL PROMOTION 11

APPENDIX 12

Church Talk 1 13

Church Talk 2 13

Promotion Day Talk 15

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 undertaken through the devoted commitment of the Friar Minors. They were the backbone in the establishment of most of the fraternities throughout Australia. With the steady decline in the number of friars over the years, and the closure of many friaries throughout the country, the promotion of 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 depended more on the commitment of its members and less on the friars. Likewise, the 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 of following Jesus. We must not see promotions as a means of gaining new members solely for the sake of ensuring the survival of the Order, affording the payment of levies, or for other trivial matters.

Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, perhaps we need to revisit the most successful 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 the first place, St Francis promoted Jesus. He promoted the Gospel way of life and taught others how they too could follow Jesus within their own state of life by faithfully observing the Gospel. He promoted devotion to the Most Holy Trinity and 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 God, and to work for the salvation of souls.

As followers of St Francis, we too share this charism to praise 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, 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 faithfully, 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 is 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 intended 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 dioceses 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 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 of the OFS's presence throughout the community and the ways in which members continue to 'rebuild' the Church through various acts of charity.

Such events should always be advertised in advance. Some advertising may incur a cost; however, depending on your relationship with the publication 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. Articles 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**

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)

- 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 includes:
- 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)

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 regarding a Franciscan cause (environment, poverty, etc.) should always be in conformity with Franciscan spirituality. It is recommended to first have such writing reviewed by an OFS Spiritual Assistant.

Where appropriate, it may be beneficial to invite the media to your event. They too may be inspired to learn more about the Order and its way of life.

Some media outlets 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 posters 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 in preparing for the day is successful advertising. Channels for advertising include:

- diocesan newspapers, church bulletins (including churches throughout surrounding suburbs), diocesan and parish youth agencies, youth groups, Catholic universities and other university Catholic societies, and other 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 who 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 within a church complex. If, however, the event is specifically aimed at younger adults, it may be better to hold it on a campus, at a university chapel, or wherever a young adults group meets.

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 remain focused and not speak for too long. A suggested time limit is no more than ten minutes. Long, drawn-out talks can often lose interest;
- Confident and clear speakers should explain the OFS and Franciscan spirituality and be 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 are attending an information session led by those with knowledge and experience;
- Prepare brochures and other promotional material to distribute 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 should conclude the event. This gives 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 enquirers 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 wish to give a short talk on Franciscan spirituality or a personal testimony, not exceeding ten minutes. It should be remembered that the event is organised 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 three Orders within the Franciscan family, as well as the members' own immediate families. It is a social and family-orientated event, 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 learn more about the OFS and Franciscan spirituality.

2.3 FRATERNITY MINI-RETREATS

Fraternities may wish 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 the methods stated earlier could be used.

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

3. TALKS

3.1 SPEAKING AT MASS

One of the most direct and successful ways of 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 that fraternities organise talks throughout all local parish Masses within their area.

Local fraternity councils could aim to speak at 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 with thirty parishes, if members were able to speak at four parishes each year, over the course of three years they would 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 a 100 km radius of the fraternity. Many people in regional areas do not consider this a large distance to drive on a regular basis.

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

Parish bulletins are also a successful way to promote the OFS. Many parishes are happy to advertise regular fraternity meetings and other events such as Promotions Days, Transitus,

Feast Day Masses, etc. Once again, these advertisements should also be placed in all surrounding parish bulletins and publications.

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, special focus should be given to engaging 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 form of devotion and, just as importantly—lots of food! Information about young adult groups in your area can be obtained through your local diocesan Office for Youth.

Copies of the National Council's youth newsletter, The Young Franciscan, could be provided to those attending. A sign-up sheet for the newsletter should also be made available. Even if they do not read the newsletter, simply receiving the occasional email from the Secular Franciscan Order may help them remember that the Order exists.

Key points to remembers 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 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 the presentation.

4. INTERNET

4.1 EMAIL LISTS

Maintaining a current and accurate email list is vital. The following is a suggestion of those whom 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 important to always add any new enquirer to your newsletter email list. Many enquirers only ever make an initial enquiry but do not follow up by attending a fraternity meeting, and 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 pages. The National Council's website and Facebook page attempt to advertise all OFS events scheduled throughout the country. If your fraternity has an event that it would like to advertise, please contact the National Council for inclusion on the 'Events' page.
National Council's Email: 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 within your fraternity. The most important rule to remember with Facebook is to remain active. 'Like' other pages of similar interest and remember to 'like' their posts. The more others see your interest in their page, the more they will recognise the OFS name.

There are many Catholic agencies that 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 may be small, this is still an important avenue to pursue. There are currently a number of Franciscan schools throughout Australia that would appreciate the support of 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 St 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 wish to consider sponsoring a particular school project, such as a food drive for the poor, or even contributing to the school gardens.

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

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

A special award on behalf of the local Secular Franciscan fraternity can be given at school presentation nights, such as: "For Outstanding Service to the Poor", or "Outstanding Service in Caring for God's Creation."

Year 12 students may be given 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 wish to meet 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 Constitutions of the OFS, membership is also open to diocesan priests, bishops, and deacons (GC 2.2). Every effort should also be made to educate diocesan priests and bishops on the benefits of joining the Secular Franciscan Order as a way of enhancing their priestly vocation and deepening their spirituality.

Fraternities may wish to invite their parish priest to a local fraternity meeting and other events. Fraternities may also wish 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 requires copies. A digital copy can be found on the 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 installation ceremony for a newly elected fraternity council, would benefit from 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 greater awareness of the fraternity's presence.

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 reflection. 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 important for Regions and Fraternities to send letters of congratulations or condolences to priests and bishops on special occasions, such as welcoming them on a 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 or fraternity is also a thoughtful gesture. Although such communication should first and foremost 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 wish to arrange a meeting with their diocesan bishop to discuss ways in which the OFS may be of greater service throughout the diocese, and ways in which the bishop may assist in promoting the Order.

7. PERSONAL PROMOTION

Many of the ideas suggested throughout this Manual relate to the fraternity and regional levels. 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 it is. This is a great way to begin a Franciscan conversation;
- Always keep some brochures 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 event;
- Share the Monthly Spiritual Messages and newsletters with others;
- Attend Catholic gatherings such as marches, processions, and pilgrimages, and carry an OFS banner;
- Visit a non-active member and offer 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 attending on their own. Perhaps they simply need someone to accompany them and bring them along for the 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 on your headstone? If there is no further promotion we can undertake on this earth after our departure, then at least let it be remembered that you were a Secular Franciscan. Family members may also be encouraged to mention this important aspect of one's vocation in the eulogy.

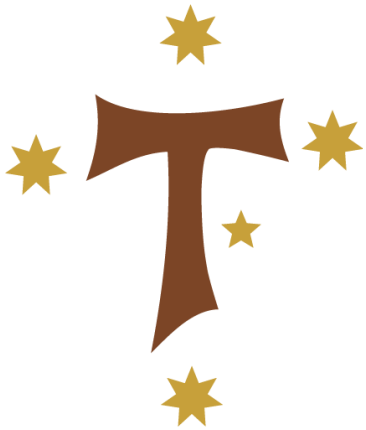
Perhaps we have left the most important way to promote for last—PRAY, PRAY, PRAY! Never underestimate the power of prayer. Some years ago, a certain local fraternity, on the brink of closing down, held a novena for new members. Within the following year, they had six members in formation, all of whom 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 for 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 realise it by the way I am dressed—I do not wear the long brown/grey robe (habit) as the friars do. In fact, I am a Secular Franciscan, and this Tau Cross that I am wearing is our habit.

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 everyday Catholics love the Franciscan Order and the spirituality of the Franciscan friars and nuns, and would like to live this spirituality in our own lives. However, most of us do not 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 daily work, and throughout everyday secular society. It is an Order for married people, singles, those with careers, the retired, the young and the old, from 18 years of age to 100 and beyond!

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

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 faithfully 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 workplace, and throughout 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) meets once a month (time/day), and together we pray and have a discussion, usually on Franciscan spirituality. In fraternity, we grow together and encourage one another in our spiritual lives. It is a wonderful way for each one of us to continue developing in our lifelong spiritual formation.

For more information 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 that they think of people working on construction sites, teachers in schools, doctors, or mums and dads with umpteen children. In fact, the largest portion of the Franciscan Order is made up of the laity.

The Church recognises that the spirituality of the saints is not reserved only for those who leave 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 workplace, and throughout 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 centred 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 worldwide. It is an Order precisely for those who are married, single, those with professional careers, students, the retired, young and old, from eighteen years of age right up to 100 and beyond.

You may have heard about the Secular Franciscan Order, as there is a fraternity here in your parish/area. Our fraternity meets once a month (time/day), and together we pray and have a discussion, usually on Franciscan spirituality. In fraternity, we grow together and encourage one another in our spiritual lives. It is a wonderful way for each one of us to continue developing 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 one of the best-kept secrets in the Church today. There are many Catholics who seem to know very little or nothing about it.

I am actually a Franciscan myself! You may not realise it by the way I am dressed. I do not wear the long brown 'monk's' 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, do not be concerned by the word "Secular." Some people hear this word and think, "Oh dear, 'secular'—that does not sound very holy!" "Franciscan"—yes, they are certainly authentic! How can these two words possibly go side by side? Some people even think that we are perhaps some sort of new-age Franciscan group trying to change the Church's teachings on, well, who knows what these days!

Often, when we think about Orders of the Church, there seems to be a stereotypical image of monks, friars, and nuns in their long robes, walking around medieval monasteries chanting Gregorian chant, or spending all day on their knees in silent prayer. I bet most people do not think of a Franciscan as someone working on a construction site, a teacher in a school, a doctor, or mums and dads with umpteen children.

Well, that is who we are—the latter. The Church recognises that the spirituality of the saints is not reserved only for those who leave the 'world' and join monasteries. It is 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 workplace, and throughout 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 and the spirituality of St Francis of Assisi, and would like 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 and 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, daily work, 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 the old, from 18 years of age to 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 true Franciscan, as equally Franciscan as the friars and nuns, even though we are lay people.

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 is 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 of God. In his quest to "find" God, he went beyond the boundaries 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 praise 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, one becomes another Christ. And that is precisely what St Francis became—Alter 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 the Gospel life differently from someone who is married; someone who is a career professional will live the Gospel life differently from 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 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 there are not only four Gospels, but rather five: the Gospel 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 am not giving up my wealth, my comfort, and all my fancy things!"

Well, the good news is that—NO—you do not 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 of wasting so much of our energy on things that will ultimately bring us no joy. This is especially true in today's highly consumer-driven 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 give him. Francis had to empty himself of 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 place his complete trust and dependence on God.

As Secular Franciscans, we too empty ourselves of worldly desires and refocus our desires totally on God and on spiritual things. We make it difficult 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 cannot 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 in 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 needed 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 wages 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 never to let material wealth satisfy us. We must not 'love' these things. Rather, we see them as gifts from God that have been given to help us in our work of serving God through others. Secular Franciscans are careful not to 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, and for funding the building of hospitals and other services.

There are many ways to live Gospel poverty, and each one of us needs 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 and live more simply? 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 cannot 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 filled us only with suffering and hardship. Francis realised that such trials were, in fact, stepping stones to something greater. Such hardships are a way of helping 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 how great we are, seeking praise, honour, and glory. We are also careful not to place ourselves on a pedestal, but as the Gospels call us, we seek the lowest place at the wedding feast and strive to be servants 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 of 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 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, and self-pleasure. These things destroy. The Gospel life that Jesus taught us is simplicity, poverty, purity, humility, charity, and love—these bring life.

Secular Franciscans are at the forefront of rebuilding 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 them as their way of life. As we know, the Church throughout the 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 their own spouses and children.

We also rebuild the Church through works of apostolate. Many of our members devote much of their time to charitable works, 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 apostolate; he loved to serve the lepers, the poor, and the 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 plays 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 in 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 Christians and Muslims. It is recorded that the 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 regions 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 such peace upon the country that wars became few and far between as the people refused to fight.

As Secular Franciscans today, we try to find peaceful resolutions in all difficult situations and never resort to violence or harmful words. We especially strive to refrain 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 would it not? If all faithful Catholics professed to live the Gospel life, unattached to the desires of wealth, greed, and power, but rather concerned with living simply, humbly, peacefully, and charitably—this would bring 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 backyard!" Well, that is 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 worm, every blade of grass, leaf, mountain, fire, water, wind, the sun, moon, and stars, and of course, us—the human person. All of creation filled Francis with joy and moved him 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 possesses an element of holiness. It is only right that we constantly praise God and care for this holy gift He has given 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 people, 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 do not know that Franciscans are also lay people, including those with families and jobs.

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

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 teaching, then we have no place in the Order. If we support things such as abortion, contraception, married clergy, women priests, or same-sex marriage, then we are not in line with the teachings of the Church. If someone supports any of these positions, then the Secular Franciscan Order may not be the appropriate vocation for them. We are called to be fully united with the teachings and beliefs of the Church.

We believe in the Magisterium of the Church. We believe that it is the Holy Spirit who guides the teaching of the Church. To think that the Church has its teachings wrong is not to 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 Catholics who do not believe in many articles of faith. This must not be so among the Franciscans. Our task is to rebuild the Church, and we can only do this when we believe and trust wholeheartedly in the teachings of Holy Church.

St Francis, even though he was radical, was also deeply orthodox. He worked together with 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 to work with them in bringing 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 in accordance with the teachings of 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 detach themselves from 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 one sin that we prefer to hold on to, then the Order may not be

the right vocation for us. We must 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 in our thoughts—all the time. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, He should be at 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 in our quest to know and love Jesus. Members must be prepared to spend at least a few minutes 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 strongly recommended that our members regularly pray 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 put, if we do not have a love for Mary, then we simply cannot 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 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 is 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. No amount of suffering 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' day saw that when you live the Gospel way of life faithfully, one can only be filled with an incredible joy. Such joy should be the natural disposition of

every Christian. Even though sadness does come our way, there is no sadness or suffering that cannot be overcome through our love and faith in God.

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 Secular Franciscans live with our families—not with other Secular Franciscan members.

That is 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 do not be concerned by the word "Rule". A rule is not something that restricts our lifestyle; rather, it is liberating. Following the Rule guides us to live the Gospel life more faithfully. 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, one sees 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 or set of guidelines that places 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 a fellowship group. It is not the RSL, where as long as you pay your membership fees, you remain a member. It is an Order of the Church for the laity. Once you are professed, the only way out is in a coffin. It is a bit like a marriage—if you cannot commit for life, then do not undertake it.

And just like any couple, you do not 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 between a man and a woman and brings their bond into a closer union with God.

It is the same as living the Franciscan spirituality. You do not 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 professed Franciscans 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 love for creation.

The Gospel life is a life of perfection, and that is what we seek—perfection—we do not ask for much! Simply joining the Franciscan Order does not make one holy. Simply wearing our Tau Cross does not make us holy. There are many paths to holiness which many non-Franciscan saints have also walked. However, the path to holiness that God showed us through St Francis is a very powerful one. This is evident in the sheer number of Franciscan saints and blesseds who have walked this spiritual path. In fact, there are more saints and blesseds among the Secular Franciscans than there are 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 we are transformed into—another Christ. St Francis is our guide and inspiration in becoming Christ-like.

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

If you are looking for a path to holiness that so many others have walked, perhaps 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.