Conference of National Spiritual Assistants

Secular Franciscan Order

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A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER 2026

The Cross in the Life of the Secular Franciscans

For the Secular Franciscan, the Cross is not a private devotion added onto an otherwise ordinary life. It is the shape that life itself is meant to take. From its opening articles, the *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* sets Christ, and not simply a code of conduct, as the centre of the Secular Franciscans' vocation (Rule, Art. 4). They are called by the Rule to follow "the poor and crucified Christ."

A Rule Written Toward the Cross

> *Uniting themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed his will into the Father's hands, let them faithfully fulfill the duties proper to their various circumstances of life. Let them also follow the poor and crucified Christ, witness to him even in difficulties and persecutions.*
>
> *The OFS Rule*. Article 10.

The crucified life is deliberately located *within* secular life, not apart from it — within marriage, work, sickness, ageing, and the small failures and injustices of an ordinary week. The Rule does not ask Secular Franciscans to withdraw from the world to find the Cross of Christ. It asks them to recognise and accept the Cross that they already carry, and to carry them, as Francis did, in faith rather than resignation. In taking up our Cross and following Christ we are called to acknowledge the reality of pain and suffering in our lives and the world.

Taking up the Cross to Learn

The *General Constitutions* Article 10 states that the crucified and risen Christ is the "book" from which the brothers and sisters, learn how to live, love, and suffer. It is Christ who shows us how we are to carry our Cross: how we are to respond to the difficult circumstances of life. Through consciously carrying our Cross we are being taught to respond not with anger or despair but compassion and mercy. This is the "contradiction" of the Cross: in experiencing the pain and hurt of the Cross, we heighten our desire to work for Christ's peace and salvation. Consciously knowing that we are carrying the Cross helps us to see more clearly, and respond more graciously, rather than just reacting to the difficulties of the world.

A Rule and Life based on experience

The Franciscan movement did not begin with a well worked out plan. It began with a troubled young man kneeling before a crucifix. Whether it was the Cross in the ruined church of San Damiano, as portrayed by Thomas of Celano, or in the encounter with the leper (*The Testament*), "the image of Christ crucified spoke" to Francis leading to his ongoing conversion. As stated in his *Testament* he would then stop and adore Christ Crucified at every church and wayside cross he passed: "*because by Thy Holy Cross Thou hast redeemed the world*."

Francis returned in repeatedly to the Cross in his own writings:

In the *Admonition V*, he invites us to boast in nothing except our "*weakness and carrying each day the holy Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*." In *Admonition VI* he asks us to contemplate on *"the Good Shepherd who bore the suffering of the cross to save his sheep"* inviting us not to just retell the Gospel story but live it. It is those who follow the Good Shepherd in "tribulation, persecution, in shame and hunger, in weakness and temptation" who will receive eternal life.

In the Early Rule of the Friars, he holds up Christ, who returned mercy and friendship to his betrayers and gave himself willingly into the hands of his executioners on the Cross, as the pattern Franciscans are called to

imitate, even toward those who wrong them (*Earlier Rule*, XXII). In Francis' re-writing of the psalms, the *Office of the Passion*, he exhorts us to

> *"Take up our bodies and carry his holy cross*
> *and follow his most holy commands even to the end"*
> *Office of the Passion*, Psalm. XV.

The climax of Francis' lifelong following the Crucified Christ comes to a head in September 1224, when, as both Celano and Bonaventure record, Francis received the stigmata on Mount La Verna.

> *"the wounds of the Crucified impressed upon his own flesh"*
> Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of St Francis of Assisi*, XIII

Carrying the Cross in Secular Life

Francis did not write for a life in a cloister. Francis's first brothers and sisters of penance were married couples, tradespeople, and townsfolk of thirteenth-century Italy, encouraged to carry the Cross within households, trades, and civic life — and the modern Rule inherits that same insight.

To *"follow the poor and crucified Christ*" as a Secular Franciscan is to let ordinary hardship — illness, grief, misunderstanding, the cost of honesty, solidarity with the poor and the suffering — become a place of union with Christ, rather than an obstacle to holiness. It is a life of penance understood not as punishment but as continual conversion (*OFS Rule,* Art. 7), lived out one difficulty, one relationship, one act of patience at a time.

Conclusion

For the Secular Franciscan the Cross is neither ornament nor abstraction. It is the Rule and Constitution concretely translated into daily obedience to Christ. To take one's place within a family, a parish, a workplace and a fraternity, quietly and conscientiously carrying the Cross everyday — is what, according to the Rule, it means to follow the poor and crucified Christ.

The Franciscan Feast of the Stigmata of St Francis on September 17th commemorates the mystical events that occurred on Mount Alvernia in 1224. It marks Francis' intimate conformity to the life proposed by Jesus Christ to all his disciples: "take up your cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, and Luke 9:23)

> *May I never boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ! Through it the world has been crucified to me and I to the world… I bear the brand marks of Jesus in my body.* (Galatians 6: 14, 17)

Further Reading

Armstrong, Regis J., J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, eds. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*. 3 vols. New York: New City Press, 1999–2001

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