

An Historic Overview of the Secular Franciscan Rule

Introduction

After Francis and his followers obtained papal permission for their Rule in 1209 there was a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm to follow Francis. This is how Thomas of Celano describes the activity. “Francis, therefore, the most valiant knight of Christ, went about the towns and villages announcing the kingdom of God, preaching peace, teaching salvation and penance unto the remission of sins. . . . He acted boldly in all things, because of the apostolic authority granted to him, using no words of flattery or seductive blandishments. . . . Men ran, women too ran, clerics hurried, and religious hastened that they might see and hear the holy man of God who seemed to all to be a man of another world. Every age and every sex hurried to see the wonderful things that the Lord was newly working in the world through his servant. It seemed at the time, whether because of the presence of St Francis or through his reputation, that a new light had been sent from heaven upon this earth, shattering the widespread darkness that had so filled almost the whole region that hardly anyone knew where to go. For so profound was the forgetfulness of God and the sleep of neglect of his commandments oppressing almost everyone that they could hardly be aroused even a little from their old and deeply rooted sins.

Francis shone forth like a brilliant star in the obscurity of the night and like the morning spread upon the darkness. And thus it happened that in a short time the face of the region was changed, and it took on a more cheerful aspect everywhere, once the former foulness had been laid aside. . . . Many of the people, both noble and ignoble, cleric, and lay, impelled by divine inspiration, began to come to St Francis, wanting to carry on the battle constantly under his discipline and under his leadership. All of these the holy man of God, like a plenteous river of heavenly grace watered with streams of gifts; he enriched the field of their hearts with flowers of virtue, for he was an excellent craftsman; and, according to his plan, rule, and teaching proclaimed before all, the Church is being renewed in both sexes, and the threefold army of those to be saved is

triumphing. To all he gave a norm of life, and he showed in truth the way of salvation in every walk of life.”¹

1210-1215 the Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance was written by St Francis and provided to the Third Order for guidance. Since 1976 this has been the Prologue to the Rule. This is the text stating that those who do penance love God and neighbor and receive the sacraments and produce good fruit in their lives; while those who do not do penance practice vice and sin and walk after evil desires.²

1st Rule

1221 is considered the founding of The Third Order. The 1st Rule is written by St Francis with the help of Cardinal Hugolino³. In 1289 this Rule is formally approved by Pope Nicholas IV a Franciscan himself. This rule was in effect for about 600 years. Nuances of this Rule dealt with how the brothers and sisters were to dress, what they could eat, fasting, vigils, communion three times per year, a will within three months of profession, to be free of heresy, to have permission from the husband or wife of the member, and their prayer life.

2nd Rule

In 1883 Pope Leo XIII approved the 2nd Rule for The Third Order. Some nuances were monthly confession and communion, a will is required; the old rules about fasting and abstinence are dropped. This Rule drew many Christians to The Third Order but was not very popular with the existing members of the Order.

¹ Habig Marion A. Omnibus of Sources vol. 1. Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1991. (pgs. 165-175)

² Armstrong, Regis, Hellman, J.A. Wayne, Short, William J.. Francis of Assisi: Early Documents vol. 1. New York: New City Press, 1999. Pgs. 41-44

³ Cardinal Hugolino later becomes Pope Gregory 9th

3rd Rule

In 1978 the 3rd Rule for The Third Order was approved by Pope Paul VI. The Order is now called the Secular Franciscan Order in part due to confusion over the Third Order Regular. The OFM, Conventuals, Capuchins, and the TORs were asked to revise the Rule and Constitution for the SFOs around 1965. A revised text for the Rule was sent out in 1968 and the first response from the SFOs around the world was negative. The next effort proposed three basic ideals; 1) The SFO and its characteristic in the world today. 2) The essential elements of Franciscan spirituality for the laity. 3) The fundamental laws of government for the Order. Several more redactions of the Rule were proposed before its final approval June 24, 1978.

Today the SFO worldwide has approximately 1.5 million members and in the USA about 16,000 professed members. The official habit for the USA Seculars is the Tau cross.

The emphasis of the new Rule is living the Gospel which includes prayer, preaching, penance, peace, justice, community, work, family, devotion to Mary, and care for creation.

The Biblical and Franciscan Understanding of Penance

The Greek word used in the New Testament for penance is “Metanoia” which means a change of heart and attitude; it also means displeasure for a previous behavior. The Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance has a good definition of this Biblical concept that St Francis taught when he said that those who do penance love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and love their neighbors as themselves. They hate their bodies with their vices and sins and receive the Body and Blood of Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance. Another way to say it is, “Flee evil, turn to God, and do good.” Some people view penance as fasting, abstaining from things, vigils, beatings, and other forms of corporal punishment. This is not the Franciscan or Biblical view of penance.

I bring this up to explain that there were many penitential groups in St Francis' time that practiced this type of penance. The thinking is that by punishing the body you bring it under control. These groups for the most part resented the clergy in the Catholic Church and therefore they were anti-clerical, many of these groups were heretical in their beliefs especially when it came to the nature of God (dualism), they believed in extreme poverty, and they continually disobeyed the Catholic Church by preaching without the Bishops permission. The Cathari, the Humiliati, the Poor Catholics, and Peter Waldo and the Waldensians were the names of some of these groups. This is an important point to take into consideration when St Francis started his group of penitents. St Francis made sure that the Pope understood his allegiance to the Catholic Church. This is an important factor for us today as we are in obedience to the Church in all its teachings and practices.

The Third Order is considered an Order because it has a Rule approved by the Apostolic See.

Famous Secular Franciscans

Popes: Gregory 9th, 10th, Innocent 12th, Pius 9-12, Martin 5th, Clement 12th, Leo 13th, Benedict 15th, John 23rd

Cardinals: Borromeo, Manning, Vaughn

Royalty: St Elizabeth of Hungary, St Elizabeth of Portugal, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain

Others: St John Vianney, St Joan of Arc, Dante, Giotto, Raphael, Michelangelo, Christopher Columbus, St Thomas More, mother of St Maria Goretti, Matt Talbot

Conclusion

As Secular Franciscans we should be motivated by love to serve Christ in the world; thankful we have a wonderful Rule which guides our daily decisions. Remember, "Everything we leave behind in this world we lose, but everything we give away we keep for eternity."