

## FINDING IDENTITY AS A SECULAR FRANCISCAN

Edward M. Zablocki, SFO

*[Reprinted in modified form in **The Cord** (November, 1993, 317-320). Used with permission of the Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY]*

Unlike many Secular Franciscans, it was not St. Francis that attracted me to the Order at first. I was looking for a way of life, a way that would help me stay near to the Lord. I knew this was what I needed because I had been distant from God and away from the Church for a number of years. Through His mercy, in 1978 I had experienced the overpowering reality of His presence in my life. And I knew that Sunday Eucharist alone wouldn't be enough. I needed something to be my anchor, something that would help prevent me from drifting away again. In God's own gracious way, I was made aware of the Secular Franciscan Order at expressly that time and knew that this was the way I had been seeking.

From the above, I hope you can understand why I take the Secular Franciscan Rule seriously as a way of life. I want to understand clearly the type of Franciscan and gospel life I am being called to live by the Rule. I want to understand the Rule's origin, its elements, its direction and its dynamic. What is the unique identity of a Secular Franciscan? What is complementary with the other members of the Franciscan family and what is distinctive?

Beyond understand is necessarily appropriation. I really want to appropriate the Rule and to live out its call. But it has been a struggle. The Rule didn't reveal its dynamic that easily. It is elegant, poetic and brief. Non-prescriptive in approach. I wouldn't have it any other way. Nevertheless, I have had to wrestle with it to get a grasp of the whole, to understand the relation among its different articles, and especially, to appropriate the Rule into my life.

Different phrases from the Rule have served as my mental shorthand over the years since my profession, mantras keeping me mindful of my vocation. At first there was "from gospel to life and life to gospel." (art. 4) Then, the official commentary on the Rule offered another. The Secular Franciscan way of life is "a program for evangelization": how we ourselves are evangelized after the manner of Francis and secondly how we evangelize others." (Commentary, art. 4)

I even worked out a mnemonic that helped me to capture the essential elements of the Secular Franciscan way of life. There is **one** way of life leading to love of Christ and our sisters and brothers achieved by cultivating **two** personal dispositions (prayer and conversion), embracing **three** aspects of lifestyle (simple living, sense of fraternity, selfless service) and pursuing **four** areas of apostolic commitment (peace and justice, work, family and ecology).

Presently, the operative phrase which keeps me focused as a Secular Franciscan is "**conversion.**" I have come to understand conversion represent the alpha and omega of my life as a Secular. Recent works by Raffaele Pazzelli, TOR and Robert Steward, OFM

have made it clear to me that *conversion* means today what *penance* meant at the time of Francis. So I feel connected in a very real way with the past and the Seraphic Father's first lay followers, the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. Article 7 of the Rule now takes on special meaning:

“United by their vocation as “brothers and sisters of penance,” and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls “conversion.”

Conversion is also my future. I now understand my vocation as a Secular Franciscan as a call to on-going conversion in all aspects of my life. The new General Constitutions confirm this understanding: “Secular Franciscans...propose to live in a spirit of continual conversion.” (Art. 13) Being converted toward a more gospel-oriented, Christ-centered prayer life, to a more gospel-oriented lifestyle and a more Francis-inspired apostolate by faithfulness in living out the Rule as a way of life.” It is a daily struggle-being personally converted affectively, intellectually, morally, socio-politically and religiously in the process (to image conversion as suggested by Bernard Lonergan, SJ). As Article 7 goes on to say, “Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily.”

Since I've come to this understanding of the Rule, I've shared with others my concern about its implications. “We ought to tell people what they're getting into if they take the Rule seriously,” I would say, “this is powerful stuff.” It reminds me of a section in Nikow Kazantzakis' *Francis*.

“Never enough!” Francis shouted. “It is not enough, Brother Leo. That is what God has shouted at me during these three days and nights-‘Never enough.’ A poor man is made of clay and protests, ‘I cannot take any more,’ and God replies, ‘You can.’ And the man sighs, ‘I am going to burst.’ God replies, ‘Burst!’

So where has this openness to being converted led in the past few years? To more frequent turning to the sacrament of reconciliation for one; to a greater appreciation of Mary as a model of obedience and humility, to a more detached perspective on my material and career hopes, to a great desire to see my work life and faith life connect, to a need to be engaged in apostolic activities. Where do I most need to be converted?

Where to begin? Certainly in my attitude toward creation. I can talk the talk but I don't walk the walk very well. Stumble is more like it. I do recycle paper at the office. My wife, Mary, has to constantly remind me not to throw out recyclables at home (Save that yogurt container!) Contemplative prayer is another. I realize how important and sustaining it is. Even wrote an article about contemplative prayer. Practice it? On occasion, but that's about all, I'm embarrassed to say.

Right now, the most important area of conversion for me personally is conversion to a “secular spirituality.” Understanding and appropriating a **secular spirituality**. I believe it holds the key to helping us fully live out the Secular Franciscan way of life intended by the Rule. It is the key to living the kind of committed Christian life that the Church is

implores us to embrace as post-Vatican II lay Catholics. Because I believe that this is a critical area of conversion not just personally but for all Secular Franciscans, I will devote the remainder of this reflection to exploring the meaning of a secular spirituality and why I believe that without conversion in this regard Secular Franciscans will be sacrificing a fundamental aspect of our identity.

What is a secular spirituality? It is the appreciation and incarnation of the reality that lay Catholics fulfill both their vocation and their mission (apostolate) **in and through their participation in the world.**

The vocation of the layperson is the same as other members of the Body of Christ—a call to grow in holiness, to become “fully mature with the fullness of Christ.” (*Eph 4:13*) “All in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness.” (*Lumen Gentium*, 36) Note well what follows:

**The “world” [is] the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation.** (*Christefidelis Laici*, 36)

Where do I grow in holiness? In the world! By what means do I grow in holiness? Through participation in the world!

Whew! Wait a minute. This really got me in the gut. I (and I imagine most lay Catholics including Secular Franciscans) tend to see the “world” as the chief source of temptation and potential downfall in our lives. Yes, the world has some redeeming qualities to be sure but **not** as my primary means to grow in holiness. Prayer. Check. The sacraments. Check. Community. Check. The world. You must be kidding! **Now this takes conversion.**

I began searching for more about this call to holiness in the world. I like this excerpt from the US Bishops pastoral “*Economic Justice for All*”;

“Holiness is not limited to the sanctuary or to moments of private prayer; it is a call to direct our whole heart and life toward God and according to God’s plan for the world...Holiness is achieved in the midst of the world, in family, in community, in friendships, in work.”

Having established the secular orientation of the laity’s vocation, let’s move on to consider the laity’s mission or apostolate. I learned that the laity’s vocation and mission are inseparably intertwined. “In fact, the Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well.” (*Apostolicum Actuositatem*, 2) And that both lead to **deepening engagement with the world:**

“At the same time the vocation to holiness is intimately connected to mission and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful...which is to ‘seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and order them according to the plan of God.’” (*Christefidelis Laici*, 17)

As the “*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*” emphasizes:

“Laymen ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task this renewal of the temporal order.” (*Apostolicum Actuositatem*, 7)

In his book, “*De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam: The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation*,” Fr. Robert M. Stewart, OFM provides the fascinating account of the 12 year long process that finally led to the 1978 Rule. What is striking about this process is the expressed desire from then Third Order members the world over to have the new rule embody the “secular character” so beautifully enunciated in the documents of Vatican II. When a first draft was circulated worldwide in 1968 it “the vast majority of the responses to the “First Draft” expressed negative views ranging from disappointment to complete rejection of the project” based, in part, on its lack of a secular orientation. (Stewart, 247) A similar fate awaited a later draft. “The members of the International Commission most strongly criticized the 1974 Basic Text for its failure to present adequately a specifically ‘secular’ spirituality.” (Ibid, 257)

To address is lack, the 1975 redacted draft read:

Like all members of the Franciscan Family, we are sent to the entire world. As seculars, we have our own vocation, living in the midst of the world, engaged in various duties and works of the world, it is our duty to enlighten and to direct all temporal realities to which we are closely united, in such a way that they may work and prosper constantly according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer. Also, as members of secular society, we will know how, according to the gifts given by the Lord to take our share of responsibility, bringing to this management of temporal things the spirit of the Beatitudes. By our witness and our action, joined with that of other men and women, we will work in these different sectors toward the realization of the plan of God for the world. It is first of all in our family that we will live the Franciscan spirit, striving to make it a sign of the world already renewed in Christ. We will make our work a participation in the development of creation, in the redemption of men and women, and a service to the whole human community. Finally, aware that it belongs to the whole Church to make people capable of building the temporal order well and of orienting it toward Christ, with a clear distinction of the rights and duties of ecclesial communities, the Secular Fraternities will assume their apostolic and social responsibilities and commit themselves to concrete evangelical choices (ibid., 257-258)

Many will recognize this paragraph became the basis for several articles in the 1978 Rule concerning the apostolates. The secular character of our way of life was more fully developed in the 1990 General Constitutions.

Most Seculars are not aware that they are called to this secular spirituality. (This is, of course, true of most laypersons). It is highly ironic that the reason why we are now called **Secular** Franciscans and not the Third Order is not yet clear to us for the most part.

As a consequence, there is resistance to embracing aspects of the 1978 Rule, which are grounded in a secular spirituality, e.g., the apostolates. On one hand we have the apostolic ideal as described by John Vaughan, OFM while he was service as Minister General:

What a contrast between your previous Third Order spirituality and the modern Church's expectations of you as Secular Franciscans! You are now expected to find God in modern culture, politics and economics, and to delight in his presence there. You have been thrust into the front line as leaders in public life and transformers of secular culture. (Letter to Holy Name SFO Province on the occasion of its 1986 Congress with the theme "Secular Franciscans: Evangelizers of the Culture")

The, the reality, as conveyed by Fr. Carl Schaefer, OFM International OFM Assistant to the SFO:

I find that it is difficult to guide many Secular Franciscans into an active apostolic way of life. They want prayer, even active participation in the liturgy, they want spiritual assistance of the friars. But to convince them that living the Gospel necessarily involves being sent out to the world, and to form them to be publicly apostolic has been my most difficult task. (Letter to SFO Holy Name Province on the occasion of their 1986 Congress with the theme "Secular Franciscans Evangelizers of the Culture.")

Surely, this difficulty encountered by Fr. Schaefer would ease if Seculars knew and believed that Jesus can be found in human society. Forming Secular Franciscans to understand the secular spirituality that was an essential element in the development of the SFO Rule must be where we begin. We need to be converted to the vision of the Church which has been telling us that we will grow in holiness by participating in that discordant, untidy, unpredictable place we call the "world." That it is a primary school for holiness.

We know that God can be found in our family life and many Secular Franciscans have developed a sensitivity to God's presence, immanent in Creation. But we also need to believe that we *can* find God in the marketplace. As theologian Joe Holland points out American Catholic laity, in particular, suffer from a "privatized spirituality" "where...the Divine is not perceived within institutional, technological, or public dimensions of life-only within the personal and interpersonal dimension." (Holland, *Beyond a Privatized Spirituality?*, New Catholic World, July/August, 1988, 177)

If we knew and believed what the Church teaches-that we can meet the living God in places like politics and business, then we might more readily accept and carry out the Church's intended mission for us: to be salt, light and leaven to the *saeculum*, "affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Work of God and the plan of salvation" (Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World*)

We are called to find the presence of God by our Church in some places where, in our hearts, we doubt that God can be found in the workplace, in science and politics. Before we can fully embrace and embody the implications of our secular vocation and mission we need the Church's help. Take work. Many of us struggle to find God and to bring the gospel to bear in our work. Little guidance is available. As John C. Jaughey, SJ remarks in *Converting 9 to 5*, "theological reflection on the subject of work is virtually unknown in both formal theology and pastoral practice." (129)

What would Francis do under these circumstances? Would he compose a new Canticle of the Culture, helping us to see the good and godly in Brother Boeing and Sister IBM, Brother Republican and Sister Democrat? It's enough to make one want to burst. But wouldn't it be wonderful to start finding God in every aspect of our lives in the world and to stop being spiritual schizophrenics.

If Secular Franciscans can be formed in the secular spirituality intended but implicit in our Rule, we will become leaders among the Catholic laity in fulfilling our proper vocation and mission, "taking an active, conscientious and responsible part in the mission of the Church in this great moment in history" by resisting what Pope John Paul II calls "two temptations [the laity] have not always know how to avoid":

the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social cultural and political world, and

The temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world. (*Christefidelis Laici*, 2)

So burst!