

THE PROFESSION IN THE SFO

There is a widespread opinion among many Franciscan seculars and religious that the Profession of Secular Franciscans is a “second class” commitment, some kind of a “light” Profession.

Indeed, most people have foggy ideas on the value of Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order and because of this many Secular Franciscans do not live the “grace” of Profession for what it really is. A true nuptial alliance with Jesus Christ aimed at a further consecration to God and at accomplishing a closer bond to the Church to reach the perfection of love and the realization of Saint Francis mission.

The true and authentic answer is, instead, to be searched in history and in the very nature of our Order as the Sovereign Pontiffs have constantly affirmed:

*“..., (Francis) founded a **true Order**, that of the Tertiaries, not restricted by religious vows, as the two preceding (Orders), but similarly conformed to simplicity of customs and to a spirit of penitence. So, he was the first to conceive and happily carry out, with the help of God, what no founder of regulars (religious Orders) had previously contrived, to have the religious life practiced by all.” (Benedict XV, Encyclical “Sacra Propediem” January 6, 1921)*

*“...you are also an ‘Order,’ as the Pope said (Pius XII): **A Lay Order, but a Real Order;**” and after all, Benedict XV had already spoken of “Ordo veri nominis”. This ancient term – we can say medieval – “Order” means nothing more than your intimate belonging to the large Franciscan family. The word “Order” means the participation in the discipline and actual austerity of that spirituality, while remaining in the **autonomy typical of your lay and secular condition**, which, moreover, often entails sacrifices which are not lesser than those experienced in the religious and priestly life.” (John Paul II, June 14, 1988, General Chapter, SFO)*

This lesson on Profession will open the eyes to many candidates in formation as well as to many formators and professed members of the SFO in general and will undoubtedly give a new outlook to many Secular Franciscans on what they are, or ought to be, as Professed members of the SFO and on how to live their Franciscan vocation and mission.

PROFESSION IN THE SFO: GIFT AND COMMITMENT

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I. PROFESSION, A GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

The Brothers and Sisters called to the Franciscan life in the Secular Fraternity make their Profession during a specific celebration according to the Ritual proper to the SFO. This aspect is by no means insignificant, because the celebration constitutes the foundational moment of the identity of the professed, and is simultaneously the condition for a dialogue to take place in response to God's action. In fact, the consequences of the commitment a human being expresses by means of a promise derive from a prior commitment, that of God to man. The celebration of Profession testifies to all of this, because it is God's action and a saving event: it is a moment when salvation reaches the faithful, enabling them to make a promise to live the Franciscan gospel life and producing in them particular effects of grace, by which they are deputed to specific tasks within the People of God. Only a person sanctified in the liturgical action, where (s)he fully experiences the immensity and force of God's love, can be capable of a loving response. On the other hand, the celebration reflects the Church's understanding of Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order. The liturgy, in fact, is always a *confessio fidei*, since in it, i.e. in its enactment during the ritual action, the Church proclaims authentically its own faith in the mystery of salvation, which is actualised in and for the faithful.

1. The grace of Profession

Those who make profession in the SFO say: "since the Lord has given me this grace, I renew my baptismal promises and consecrate myself to the service of His kingdom" (*Formula of Profession*). Dedication to the service of the kingdom comes about because the Lord gives a person the grace to consecrate himself to the cause of the Kingdom. Profession is a grace and gift of the Spirit. Not only is *the Holy Spirit the source of the vocation of secular Franciscans* (*Const 11*), since they are *urged on by the Spirit* to reach the perfection of charity in accordance with their own secular state (*Rule 2*); Profession also comes about by the working of the same Spirit. Therefore the "Preliminary Notes" of the Ritual (cfr. n. 7) state that "The SFO Ritual ... should fittingly display the *gift of the Spirit and the evangelical life-project proper to the Secular Franciscan Order*".

The reference is first to the gift of the Spirit, and then to the gospel life-project, since the latter is neither conceivable nor possible without the forestalling inspiration of the grace of the Spirit. For the same reason, the candidates declare their intent to live the gospel life after the Holy Spirit has been invoked upon them:

"Lord, watch over these your servants. May the Spirit of your love penetrate their hearts, so that your grace will strengthen them to keep their commitment to the gospel life." (*Ritual II,30*).

2. Profession: an action of the Church

Profession comes about through God's intervention. But since God always acts through Christ, whose sacred humanity is the meeting point between God and man, and since today Christ lives and acts through the Church, it follows that Profession is simultaneously the action of Christ and of the Church, i.e. of the whole Body of Christ, Head and members. The language of the Constitutions is significant (42,1), defining Profession as a *solemn ecclesial act* (action), as is that of the Ritual ("Preliminary Notes" n. 13) which declares it as *by its nature a public and ecclesial fact*. It is both the one and the other: Profession is not only an action, it is also an event, or rather, a saving *kairòs*,

a moment of salvation.

3. Profession and Fraternity

While maintaining the truth that Profession is by nature an ecclesial fact, an action of Christ and of the Church, the question arises: who are the subjects who concretely perform that action, or rather, how and in whom is the action of Christ and the Church manifested?

By Church the Ritual understands a particular liturgical assembly, made up of the people and the community of brothers and sisters, in other words, of the local fraternity of the Secular Order. *The local fraternity makes the presence and action of the Church visible primarily in the Profession. Therefore “Profession, since it is by nature a public and ecclesial fact, must be celebrated in the presence of the fraternity” (Ritual, Preliminary Notes, n. 13).*

The ultimate reason for this norm is found in the reality of the local fraternity: *it is a visible sign of the Church*, which is a community of faith and love (cfr. *Rule 22; Ritual II, 29 d*). The local fraternity is and must be a genuine ecclesial cenacle. By the same token, “secular Franciscans, gathered in fraternity and in union of spirit with all the People of God, *celebrate the mystery of salvation* revealed and communicated to us in Christ, with prayers and thanksgiving and renewing their promises to live a new life” (*Ritual, Preliminary Notes, n. 3*).

For this reason Profession is made in the presence of the assembled fraternity, which accepts the candidates’ request, since Profession is a gift given by the Father to that fraternity by incorporating new members into it. Grateful for the gift, the Fraternity is united to the prayer of those making profession, so that the Holy Spirit may bring to fulfilment the work He has begun.

The Ritual further develops these links with the Fraternity which the Profession or promise to live the gospel life creates. Profession produces «incorporation into the Secular Franciscan Order»; it therefore implies incorporation into a family – the Franciscan family - which is life-giving, with all the consequences that derive from belonging to the same spiritual family.

At the same time, Profession determines reciprocal attitudes, sentiments, relationships, duties and rights, etc. The “Preliminary Notes” (n. 14) of the Ritual, speaking of the nature of Profession in the SFO, say that it involves “the trust of the candidate, who relies on the help of the Rule of the SFO and of the Fraternity. Indeed the candidate will feel that (s)he is guided and helped by the Rule approved by the Church, and will experience the joy of participating in the journey of the gospel life with many brothers and sisters, from whom (s)he can receive but to whom (s)he can also give something. Once incorporated into the local Fraternity, which is a cell of the Church, (s)he will make his/her contribution to the renewal of the entire Church”.

These statements in the Ritual show:

- *the liturgical foundation* both of the Fraternity, which is essentially made up of reciprocal relationships, precisely as St Francis intended;

- *the liturgical foundation* of belonging to the SFO. For this reason, in the formula of Profession we find the invocation: “May the grace of the Holy Spirit, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and of St Francis and the *fraternal communion* help me always so that I may attain the perfection of Christian charity” (*Ritual II,31*). The same need is expressed by the minister who receives the Profession: “Let us give thanks to God in *this Fraternity* of the Secular Franciscan Order. *Your incorporation into it* is a reason for hope and joy in the hearts of all the brothers and sisters” (*Ritual II, 32*).

Two key *fraternal values* of Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order emerge from the texts we have quoted.

1. It entails and produces *the entrusting of self to the Fraternity on the part of the candidate*. In Profession a covenant is established with the Brothers and Sisters, which can never be disregarded. The sacred bond of Profession, through which a perpetual commitment is established with God, (cfr. *Rule 2; Const 42,2*), has a number of fraternal sides to it which must be understood and lived

precisely in the light of that “sworn pact” one has made with God.

2. With its liturgical foundation, Profession determines incorporation into a local fraternity and through it, into the Order. Thus, we gradually come to see how the reality deriving from the celebration of Profession is not a matter of registration (“one is not enrolled into the SFO”), even though a document of profession is necessary. While it does have juridical implications, the concept and reality of incorporation goes beyond these and indicates that one becomes part of a living body, merged into a single organism, making a single reality. Incorporation entails the transformation of several realities into a single reality, through a process of absorption and assimilation.. It cannot simply be thought of as adding one thing to another (1+1); rather the fact is that the candidate is “extended” into the fraternity and vice versa, and this gives rise to a living being which is much larger and more complete. Rightly therefore does the minister turn to the new members of the Fraternity at the end of the rite of initiation and says to them: “*By your presence and communion you enrich our fraternity in numbers and virtue*” (*Ritual I,16*). Therefore the relationships established by Profession are spiritual and ecclesial in nature, since the local fraternity into which the candidate is incorporated is “the basic element of the entire Order and a visible sign of the Church, a community of love” (*Rule 22; cfr. Const 47,1*).

4. Ministries in the celebration of profession

The action of the celebrating Church-Fraternity finds specific expression in a multiplicity of ministries, exercised by persons who are called to carry out particular functions in the liturgical assembly

4.1. The candidates

The action of Christ and of the Church is expressed in the *person of the candidates*, who make the act of profession by promising to live the gospel life. They are *baptised*. Consequently Profession is a priestly action, proper to someone who by virtue of baptism, is already incorporated into the Church, a priestly Body, and is conformed to Christ, who is priest, prophet and king. The Candidates are or should (must) be *confirmed*. Consequently, Profession is a priestly action, proper to one who, having newly received the gift of the Holy Spirit in *confirmation*, has been empowered and deputed to celebrate the Eucharist and the sacraments, to live his or her life in an attitude of priestly worship and consequently to perform the priestly act of Profession.

The Ritual expressly provides that the candidates for Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order must have already received the sacrament of confirmation, using language which shows not only a temporal succession between three events (Baptism- Confirmation - Profession), but above all points to an intrinsic linking of the saving events themselves, making confirmation, as well as baptism, a basic requirement to live a professed life, for the reasons just stated: “You have been made members of the People of God by your baptism, and *strengthened in confirmation* by the *new gift of the Spirit*, in order to proclaim Christ by your life and your words.

Do you wish to bind yourself more closely to the Church?”

(*Ritual II, 29 e*).

4.2 The ministry of the Fraternity

The action of the Church is also made concretely visible in the presence of the *minister of the Fraternity*. This is clearly stated in the Constitutions and the Ritual:

“Profession is accepted by the minister of the local fraternity or by his or her delegate *in the name of the Church* and of the SFO. The rite is carried out according to the norms of the Ritual” (*Const 42,3*).

“Through the priest and the president (minister), who represents the fraternity, the Church accepts the commitment and the profession ...” (*Ritual*, n. 9).

The Church acts through the priest and through the Minister, who represents the Fraternity and the Church. The Ritual defines more clearly the role of the Minister of the Fraternity and of the presiding priest, when it states:

“The commitment to the gospel life is received by the president (minister) in the name of the Church and of the fraternity. The priest presides over this rite as the witness of the Church and of the Franciscan Family”. (n. 16).

In the celebration of the Profession the Minister of the Fraternity exercises a true and proper liturgical ministry and has the function of a “sign”: (s)he makes visible and shows forth the presence and action of the Church, while the Church and the fraternity receive the Profession through the minister.

4.3 *The presbyter*

The priest who presides at the celebration is also defined as a “witness of the Church and of the Order” (*Ritual*, Preliminary Notes, n. 17). In order to understand the kind of witness he is, we need to go beyond juridical categories, because the action or event of Profession is sacramental in nature. Consequently the testimony of the priest is not juridical, but more properly sacramental and concerned with sanctification.

Certainly in the celebration of Profession the priest’s role is to *vouch for* the validity of the event. On the occasion of decisive events involving the life of a Christian, the Church always acts with an attitude of trepidation. In liturgical and sacramental actions the nature of the Church as a *mother*, rightly anxious about the fate of her children, comes to the fore. Hence the scrutinies or questioning of the parents prior to baptism, of the candidates for confirmation, of the couple before they give consent to marriage, and of those about to make religious profession of religious vows or declare their intent to live in chastity. The same applies to those who intend to make Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order

It is the priest’s job to ask those questions and receive the replies, because it is through him that the Church wishes to be reassured with regard to the awareness the candidates have of the meaning of Profession, their intentions and their genuine desire to be part of the Secular Franciscan Order. And this is not all; as an ecclesial act and precisely as such, Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order needs to be confirmed by the Church. This confirmation, too, belongs to the priest, who, after the candidates have read the formula of Profession, says: I confirm your commitment in the name of the Church” (*Ritual* II, 33).

Consequently the priest in the celebration of Profession is a: *witness*, who attests and manifests the presence and action of the Church; *guarantor*, who reassures the Church regarding the suitability of the candidates; *one who ratifies*, or confirms the promises in the name of the Church.

5. The gift of the Spirit in the celebration of Profession

The priest’s role is not limited to this, but also and especially concerns the whole area of sanctification, which is proper to liturgical acts. Even the celebration of Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order is geared to the sanctification of those who have been called to follow Christ after the example of St Francis of Assisi while remaining in their secular state. Sanctification is always the work of the Father, but it is channelled through the mediation of Christ and of the Church, and is realised in the Holy Spirit. The mediation of Christ and of the Church is especially manifested in the action of the priest, because he alone acts *in persona Christi*.

In the light of these principles the Ritual of Profession states:

“By her public prayer *the Church entreats* the help and grace of God for them. *She imparts her blessing over them, and accompanies their commitment or profession with the Eucharistic sacrifice*” (Preface, n. 9).

The elements that derive from this statement in the Ritual are truly fundamental for any understanding not only of the Church’s function in the celebration of Profession, but also to deepen our grasp of Profession itself and of its relationship to the Eucharist. The text reasserts the need for the profession to be confirmed by the Church. Basically, the Church is present at a profession to pray, to invoke, and this is done through the efficacy of the liturgical action. In it, the *praying Church* and the efficacy of the Trinity operating at this particular historical moment come together in a single action. The liturgical action of Profession is an “invocation”, by those who are called together in the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, the Church is constituted and invokes or “calls upon” the action of the Trinity. This dynamic is reflected in the celebration of the liturgy as a whole, which has the three essential elements of: Rite, Word, Praise.

In this light we can see the significance of the help that is requested for the candidates making profession, and the invocation of God’s grace upon them. Most of all, we see the *value of the blessing that is called down by the Church on those making profession*. In truth, unlike other profession rituals, that of the SFO does not provide any blessing after the candidates have made their promise to live the evangelical life. Furthermore, the present Rite, before the act of Profession, contains a prayer formula which, while using neither the word *blessing*, has all the value of a blessing which communicates salvation and consecrates the person receiving it. In it the Church expressly invokes the gift of the Holy Spirit: “May the Spirit of your love penetrate their hearts, so that your grace will strengthen them to keep their commitment to the gospel life”. (*Ritual II*,30). This takes place in line with what we said earlier about the Minister of the Fraternity after the candidates have asked to be admitted to Profession: “The fraternity accepts your petition and is united with you in your prayer. *May the Holy Spirit confirm in you the work he has begun*” (*Ritual II*, 27).

In the liturgical action of Profession in the SFO the Holy Spirit is invoked, just as He is in the Eucharist and the other sacraments, in religious Profession, in the Consecration of Virgins, etc. The celebration of Profession is therefore structured as an epiclesis, precisely in virtue of the prayer of invocation performed by the Church asking for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on those called to follow in the footsteps of Christ in the Franciscan evangelical life.

In every liturgical celebration, and therefore also in the celebration of Profession, the Spirit comes when invoked, makes Himself present, acts and transforms. Therefore Profession takes on the form of a Pentecost, an effective epiphany of the Spirit, which consecrates and transforms those who make the promise to live the gospel life in the Secular Franciscan Order.

The value of the blessing over those making profession, connected with the gift of the Spirit, makes the role of the presbyter in the celebration of Profession even more evident. His function above all is to sanctify, and his work is linked to God’s work of blessing. The presbyter, therefore, is the servant of the blessing, the one who channels and transmits it to those making profession.

Also, in the person of the presbyter the reality of the Head and members, conformed to Him through participation in the one spiritual priesthood, converges. Christ, who is the source and origin of priesthood, always activates this convergence, but it is the presbyter who, in making Christ the Head sacramentally visible, confers on the ecclesial Body the capacity to externalise in an active way the priestly nature that properly belongs to it. For this reason, while Profession is the action of a particular ecclesial community, constituted above all by the local fraternity celebrating the mystery of salvation, one must recognise in the presiding presbyter the one who activates the baptismal-confirmational priesthood of the celebrating community: it is he who confers upon it the possibility of expressing its proper priestly service.

Those making profession are the privileged beneficiaries of this presiding function of the presbyter. As we have already shown, the act of Profession is the making explicit of a specific liturgical ministry, it is a priestly action proper to a baptised and confirmed person, but one which is brought into being by the active presence and action of the presbyter.

6. Profession and Eucharist

Through the presbyter the *Church associates the promise or Profession with the Eucharistic Sacrifice*. The Ritual gives special attention to this aspect, prescribing that the “Rite of the Promise to live the gospel life, or Profession” is “to be celebrated during Mass”: no other form of celebration is envisaged.

To celebrate Profession within the Eucharist expresses the *sacrificial dimension of self-giving* inherent in the Profession of the gospel life in the Secular Franciscan Order. In Profession, manifested in the presence of the Fraternity and the Church, the true nature of the candidates as priests and victims is made manifest. They, by promising to live the gospel life, make themselves entirely available to God and place their own bodies (persons) on the altar of Christ’s sacrifice as a holy victim pleasing to God.

In this the close relationship between Profession and the Eucharist is made evident: in it, both the sacrifice of Christ the priest, and that of the newly-professed, offering their lives to the Father, are simultaneously made present. What we say of the celebration of Profession also applies to the life that flows from the same ritual action, because this is the foundation of Christian life: it is inherently liturgical, geared towards the permanent glorification of God. Profession, in fact, is not an instantaneous act, an isolated action in the course of one’s life; rather it is a commitment *of* life and *for* life. The act of Profession, while limited in time, determines a new existential situation, places a person in the “state” of being professed, and this is a permanent condition, which must be lived in the light of the foundational action of the celebration, with its intrinsic link to the Eucharist. Consequently, the relationship between Profession and Eucharist is a life-long project; a life is fully authentic if and when it is marked by the rhythm of the Eucharist (*from the Eucharist to the Eucharist*). For this reason, in the introduction to the celebration of the promise or Profession of gospel life, a secular brother or sister, or the celebrant himself, admonishes those present in these or similar words:

«In the thanksgiving (Eucharist) to the Father through Christ, today we have an extra reason for gratitude... *Called to follow Christ*, who offered Himself to the Father as a living sacrifice for the life of the world, *we are insistently invited*, particularly today, *to join our offering to that of Christ*” (*Ritual of Profession*)

Perpetual oblation, expressed at the moment of Profession, has to be manifested sacramentally in the Eucharist; and from the Eucharist the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice must flow into the lives of the professed. This sacrifice confirms and seals the commitment to live the gospel life, which is constantly re-proposed, so that the life of the Secular Franciscan is ever more progressively renewed in the light of the initial event of the Profession.

7. Baptism and Profession

As an action of the Church, the Profession of the gospel life in the Secular Franciscan Order produces ecclesial effects. This is explicitly stated by the Rule in one of its most densely packed theological sections:

“They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words” (n.6).

The primary element emerging from this fundamental statement in the Rule, is the relationship between Baptism and Profession, from which flow the relationships of the Secular Franciscan with the Church. Both the Constitutions and the Ritual insist on this Baptism-Profession relationship.

The Constitutions, in n. 42,1, state:

“Profession is the solemn ecclesial act by which the candidate, remembering the call received from Christ, *renews the baptismal promises* and publicly affirms his or her personal commitment to live the Gospel in the world according to the example of Francis and following the Rule of the SFO”.

In the Ritual, where the Baptism-Profession link is frequently found, we read:

- « Many men and women, married and single, and many members of the diocesan clergy are called by God to follow the way of perfection of the gospel life after the example and manner of Francis of Assisi, to share his charism, and to make it present in the world. They promise to follow Jesus Christ and to live the gospel in fraternity by entering the Secular Franciscan Order. In this way they manifest the priceless gift of baptism and realise it in a fuller and more fruitful way”. (Introduction,1);
- “The nature of commitment to the gospel life is: *the renewal of one’s consecration and promises made at baptism and confirmation*” (14 a);
- We here present ask to enter this fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order, so that we may live more intensely and faithfully the grace and dedication of our baptism by following Jesus Christ according to the teachings and example of St. Francis of Assisi.”- (*Ritual I*, 12);
 - “You have been made members of the People of God by your baptism, and strengthened in confirmation by the new gift of the Spirit, in order to proclaim Christ by your life and your words. Do you wish to bind yourself more closely to the Church and to work intently to rebuild the ecclesial community and fulfil its mission among all people?” (*Ritual II*, 29 c);
 - “I, N.N., by the grace of God, renew my baptismal promises and consecrate myself to the service of his kingdom” (*Ritual II*, 31)

It is clear that the legislative and liturgical texts of the Secular Franciscan Order recall the reality of baptism to the hearts and minds of secular Franciscans. It is both a grace and an *inestimable gift*, which:

- produces a *consecration*;
- *sacramentally configures a person to the paschal mystery of Christ who died, was buried and rose again*;
- *making him/her a living member of the Church-People of God*.

Membership and profession in the Secular Franciscan Order aim to help a person “live their baptismal grace and consecration with greater intensity of commitment and diligence” (*Ritual I*,12). By insisting on this the Ritual highlights a moral dimension, which, while maintaining all its value, nevertheless does not best express the intrinsic relationship that exists between Baptism and Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order. Commitment to live out one’s baptism, in principle required of all Christians, arises for secular Franciscans after profession as a result of a liturgical action and a saving event, which have an impact upon baptism itself.

It seems to me therefore possible to say that although baptism is “one” and that Profession is not to be seen as a “new” Baptism, it is also true that Profession produces particular effects on the supernatural organism of a Christian, generated by Baptism. The Ritual highlights the specific action of Profession on Baptism, by the use of the verbs *renew, manifest, activate*.

7.1 The Memorial of Baptism

Indeed, we say that Profession is by nature the “*renovation* of the consecration and promises of baptism” and in the very act of making it, the candidate declares that (s)he intends to *renew his/her own baptismal promises*. It is as if they wanted to affirm that through Profession they intend to *call to mind* the consecration and promises of Baptism. For this reason, with absolute precision, Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order has been defined as the “Memorial of Baptism”.

But the term “memorial” should not be understood in the usual sense of “remembering” something in the past, but rather as a movement from the past to the present by which that which happened in the past is now made present and efficacious through the power of the Holy Spirit. Here lies all the significance of the biblical “memorial”, and it is in this light that we must understand Profession as a *living memorial of Baptism*. In this sense, to “call to mind” does mean going back to Baptism, but it also means enabling the Sacrament from which the new life draws its origin to renew one’s life in the present. To “call to mind” implies a rediscovery of the reality and meaning of Baptism, owning it once more, bringing it back into the heart and mind (the origin of the word “*remind*”), in other words, to the centre of one’s vital interests.

7.2 Enactment of Baptism

Profession therefore involves a particular way of *revitalising* the sacrament of Baptism and giving it new vigour. In fact the Ritual (Preface, n. 1) speaks of the “inestimable gift of Baptism” which “*is manifested in them and activated in an ever fuller and more fruitful way*”. The language used is very similar to that of Vatican II and the post-conciliar documents when they speak of the Profession of religious: it is “a special consecration which is profoundly rooted in baptismal consecration, and more perfectly expresses it” (PC 5 a).

Expression of Baptism and *manifestation of Baptism* are similar statements connected with the idea of *revelation*. Consequently the Profession both of religious and of Secular Franciscans should be considered as an epiphany or manifestation of Baptism. Not only that, but also a *fuller and more fruitful implementation* or *more perfect expression* of it. In fact the Council, again speaking of religious in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, says that “through Baptism a person dies to sin and is consecrated to God. However, in order that he may be capable of deriving more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace, he intends, by the profession of the evangelical counsels in the Church, to free himself from those obstacles, which might draw him away from the fervour of charity and the perfection of divine worship. By his profession of the evangelical counsels, then, he is more intimately consecrated to divine service (44 a).

We can see, then, how Profession makes Baptism *more fruitful, stronger and richer*. In the celebration of Profession the specific secular Franciscan vocation, sealed by the strengthening action of the Spirit, *enriches* the baptised person and confers on him/her a fullness of being by which to bear witness to Christ and for the building up of the body of the Church. Hence, through Profession the implicit potential of Baptism is made explicit and brought to fulfilment. Profession acts upon Baptism, impacts upon it, seals and develops it, founds a new entity and produces a new outpouring of the Spirit.

8. Relationship with the Church

The Christian’s fundamental relationship with the Church is established by Baptism, since Baptism incorporates into the People of God, which is the Body of Christ, the sons and daughters engendered by water and the Holy Spirit. Profession gives rise to a new relationship with the Church, or rather, the basic baptismal relationship, renewed and perfected in confirmation, is made “stronger” and “closer”. As is said in the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order:

“They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been *united more intimately with the Church* by profession...” (Rule 6).

The Ritual echoes this when it asks of those making profession: “You have been made members of the People of God by your baptism, and strengthened in confirmation by the new gift of the Spirit, in order to proclaim Christ by your life and your words. Do you wish to bind yourself more closely to the Church?” (II, 29).

The texts we have just quoted do not say that profession establishes a new relationship with the Church, but simply that profession in the Secular Franciscan Order develops and intensifies that relationship in the person who is baptised and confirmed. But the vigorous language used points to the depth of relationship enjoyed by the professed Secular Franciscan with the Church. While no different from that of any baptised and confirmed person, it is stronger and closer. (*fortius et arctius*). In fact, Profession does not remain inert compared to Baptism; as we have already said, it acts upon it and produces ecclesial effects. However, the Rule, Constitutions and Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order give no indications about these effects.

9. Witnesses and instruments of the Church’s mission

Instead, the documents are more concerned to associate the stronger ecclesial bond arising out of profession with the ecclesial mission of Secular Franciscans. Indeed:

“They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as *witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words*.

Called like Saint Francis to rebuild the Church and inspired by his example, let them devote themselves energetically to living in full communion with the pope, bishops, and priests, fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity”. (Rule 6)

This section of the Rule, is developed in the Constitutions and in the Ritual. These documents as a whole bring out the essential features of the mission of Secular Franciscans, which is intrinsically geared to *building up the Church*. The frequent use of the terms *build* and *building* is particularly significant, because it immediately evokes the mission entrusted to Francis by the Crucified of San Damiano and is typical of Franciscans, as their specific way of being present in the Church. Francis and his sons and daughters have received from the Lord the gift of inserting themselves into the living fabric of the people of God, so that it may arise in the world and live in it as a “universal sacrament of salvation”.

However, the mission of secular Franciscans cannot be defined on the basis of particular activities or tasks, but rather in terms of their being. “Fidelity to their own charism, Franciscan and secular, and the witness of building fraternity sincerely and openly are their principal services to the Church, which is the community of love. *They should be recognized in it by their "being", from which their mission springs*”. (Const 100,3).

Consequently the concern of the Rule, the Constitutions and the Ritual is to highlight the need to *live as authentic members of the Church*, in line with the stronger and closer bond established with the Church by Profession. This is above all a *bond of communion*; and this is the fundamental element in the Church, which has to be affirmed in actual everyday life. The duty to give *witness*, to which Secular Franciscans are destined first by baptism and then by profession, flows precisely from the innermost essence of the Church, which is a communion of faith and love.

This insistence on witness in the Rule and Constitutions should alert the brothers and sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order more and more to the fact that their existence in the Church is justified only by the authenticity of their lives. The brothers and sisters of penance are asked to offer, constantly and in all the circumstances of their lives, the supreme proof of their fidelity to God, to give an account to the world of the hope that is in them, to witness in an unmistakable way their faithfulness to the covenant established with the Church and the fraternity from the moment of their profession.

Therefore, all the admonitions contained in the Rule, the Constitutions and the Ritual about the importance of personal witness must be welcomed and put into practice with full awareness that this is the “fundamental duty of the Lord’s disciples”.

II. THE COMMITMENT OF PROFESSION

10. The formula of Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order reads:

“I, N.N., by the grace of God, renew my baptismal promises and consecrate myself to the service of his kingdom” (*Ritual* II,31). Prior to that, the Preface to the Ritual states:

“The nature of commitment to the gospel life is: the renewal of one’s consecration and promises made at baptism and confirmation. This means *dedicating oneself to God* through his People with all the consequences flowing from it, up to the present moment, in order to live in union with God and to hold firm to his plan of salvation, *by means of a consecration that is to be lived in the world*” (14a).

With reference to the texts just quoted, we should note that the concept of *consecration* has many meanings, of which the *Ritual* of the Secular Franciscan Order has chosen one, intending to highlight most of all the human effort to dedicate *oneself to God*. The Ritual uses the verb *to consecrate*, giving it the meaning of *to devote*, in other words to dedicate, reserve and destine a thing or a person for God and His exclusive service. It goes without saying that in the specific context of the Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order it is persons who are involved; consequently, they are the ones who must offer themselves to God with full freedom and awareness.

From this point of view profession is the act by which a person places him/herself into the hands (*mancipare = manus capere*) of God, enabling God to take hold of him, with the result that from the precise moment of profession, the person no longer belongs to him/herself, but is considered as totally “expropriated” and at God’s entire disposal. By virtue of profession, the person becomes God’s property, and therefore “sacred”

In reality however, the verb *consecrate* and its corresponding noun *consecration*, properly indicate the act by which God takes possession of the person (who is enabled to give him/herself totally by the gift of the Spirit who draws him/her), placing His seal upon the person and making him/her His own exclusive property.

In itself the value of consecration lies in its descending dimension: the person *is consecrated*, *receives consecration from God*, who draws him/her to Himself and transforms him inwardly so that he/she is able to live the demands of a superior world.

In the Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order this aspect is hardly absent (we met it in part I when we spoke of Profession as a gift of the Spirit), but, using the words *consecrate* and *consecration* in the sense of “to devote”, the Ritual wants to underline the fact that Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order means to *consecrate oneself* (reflexive) to a particular task or project, allowing oneself to be totally absorbed by it. .

Obviously, the project to which one dedicates oneself totally by profession in the Secular Franciscan Order, is God's project, and the consequences deriving from consecration are precisely concerned with union with God, adhering to His saving plan and serving the Kingdom by living in and for the world.

These proposals which the Ritual puts forward naturally fit into the life project outlined in the Rule and Constitutions, which in their turn make it a part of the life-long effort to live the Gospel after the manner of St Francis, while remaining within one's secular calling..

11. Profession, Purpose, Promise

Now we come to the meaning of the terms *profession* and *purpose*, or *intention*, and of the expression *promise to live the gospel life*, found in the Rule, the Constitutions and the Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order. They indicate the effort and commitment Secular Franciscan take on when they make profession.

11.1 Profession

In Italian, the term *Profession* is a noun corresponding to the Latin *professio* which in turn derives from the verb *profiteor*, composed of *pro* and *fateor*.

The intrinsic meaning of *profiteor* is "to speak out loud", publicly, to proclaim, to make a declaration, but it also means to promise, to commit or oblige oneself to another person.

The connotation of something official and public is also inherent in the word, so that Profession means, first of all, a public declaration of something, especially an idea, an opinion, a sentiment, or the fact that one belongs to a religion or an ideological current, or something similar.

In particular, the Profession of Faith is a declaration, mostly in an obligatory formula (e.g. the *Credo* or Apostles' Creed) that a person or a community belongs to a particular religion, and, by extension, an avowal of moral, political or artistic convictions, etc

The second meaning of *Profession* refers to an intellectual or manual activity, exercised for profit. Broadly, a profession indicates any habitual employment, although more strictly it refers to an intellectual activity for which a degree or particular skill is required.

In the religious sphere, *Profession* normally indicates the act by which a baptised person publicly and in a stable manner embraces a state of perfection in conformity with the evangelical counsels, which he or she commits him/herself to follow by pronouncing the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience (*profession of vows*), and becomes an effective member of a religious Order or Congregation. In ancient monastic usage, the term *professio* was also applied to the various "states of life" and to various categories of Christians, whether they were or not consecrated in a special way. Finally, the term *professio* was applied to the "status of public penitents", which is not without significance with reference to the Order of Penance.

11.2 Purpose

Literally it means "that which is laid before me». In fact the Latin verb *pro-ponere*, from which it is derived, means "to place in front of, to put before".

Purpose commonly means *the* deliberate will to do something, to behave in a certain way. In a more general sense a *purpose* or *proposal* means an intention, a plan. or project. In the Latin versions of the bible, *propositum* even indicates the plan (design or project) of salvation..

In primitive monasticism, *propositum* meant a firm decision to adopt a particular style of life and persevere in it. In the middle ages, expressions such as *regulare propositum*, *propositum sacrae religionis*, *propositum monachorum*, etc., were used, indicating a will to dedicate oneself to a

religious style of life. It is found in many documents concerned with the Order of Penance. In summary, the noun *propositum* stresses the decision of human freedom, but without eliminating the aspect of a vocation, gratuitously given by God.

11.3 *Promise*

The Latin verb *promittere* basically means to send out. Later it acquired the meaning of “to make a thing go, to move it forward, to pour out, and then, to let go.” In a figurative sense it is the equivalent of “to raise hopes”, and hence derives its usual meaning of “to promise”, to commit oneself to, to ensure, to guarantee, to promise by vow etc.

Sacred Scripture often speaks of *promises*; but it more often means divine promises, which are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, rather than human ones. In biblical usage, the word promise underlines the total sovereignty of God in deciding to choose His own people, to justify human beings through faith in Jesus Christ, to destine them for life, to give them the Spirit, etc., in contrast to all those who believe they can achieve these things by means of the works of the law. The ministry of Jesus was precisely the fulfilment of God’s promises.

In the history of religious life also, the term promise is often used to indicate a person’s commitment to assume monastic and religious obligations. Thus for example in the Benedictine Rule, the word “promise”, both as noun and verb designates a monk’s definitive commitment, which today we call “profession” and “perpetual vows”.

Both Francis and Clare attribute the same value to the verb “to promise”. In the writings of Francis the term “profession” is not found, neither is the noun “promise”. However, he does link the verb “to promise” with obedience, with the gospel, the Rule, poverty, in the sense that these are what is promised. The same is true of St Clare, although she does speak of “profession”.

Today, we attribute a different value to promises. We distinguish between a vow and a promise, even when the latter means the same as a vow to observe the gospel counsels. A promise, in this view, is less significant than a vow, it is understood as being made more to the Institute than to God, and as such does not produce consecration. Its binding force comes from the virtue of *fidelity*, not from the virtue of *religion*.

Obviously not everyone agrees with this kind of interpretation, even if, as far as its juridical value is concerned, the distinction between a vow and a promise is generally accepted. Indeed, what significance can promises have that are not made to God, but to human beings, especially when those promises concern the gospel counsels? , Chastity, poverty and obedience are not promises that concern human interests, they are always directed to God, made *for* God, and therefore are always “religious”; their observance is always required not only out of fidelity to human beings, but to God. Hence, it is always a case of *religious fidelity*.

For this reason Vatican II preferred to bring in a change of terminology. *Lumen Gentium* in fact speaks of “vows or other sacred bonds, similar in nature to vows” (LG 44), including under the term “sacred bonds” the promises made in secular institutes.

12. The value of Profession in the SFO

Let us repeat once more that *promise*, *purpose* and, most of all, *profession* are commonly used to indicate the commitment of those *members of Christ’s faithful* who oblige themselves before God and the Church with vows of obedience, poverty and chastity, normally taken in an Institute of consecrated life, canonically erected by the competent authority of the Church (CIC, can. 573,1-2). Therefore the significance they assume in the context of the religious life is closest to that which the same terms have in the current canonical and liturgical sources of the Secular Franciscan Order.

In the SFO Rule, Constitutions and Ritual the same terms indicate the commitment, similarly assumed before God and the Church, to observe the gospel after the manner of St Francis, expressed

by lay people (married and unmarried) and members of the secular clergy, who are normally not bound by vows of obedience, poverty and chastity, nor do they take on these obligations, but intend to live in the normal conditions of secular life.

The language of the Rule, Constitutions and Ritual and the realities expressed by it do not constitute anything new, because the legislation of the Secular Franciscan Order and all the relevant sources have always used the terms *promise, purpose, profession*. The *Memoriale Propositi* repeatedly speaks of *promissio, promittere*. In the title of chapter two of the *Supra Montem* the term Profession is present, but the text of the same chapter returns to the terminology of the *Memoriale Propositi*. However, in both texts it is considered as a true and proper profession, which concluded the time of initiation into the Order along with the examination, the clothing and the probationary year. The four elements of the initiation period, here listed, are indicated in the *Memoriale*, at least as from 1228, and are found in all the thirteenth-century Rules for Franciscan Penitents, albeit with circumstantial variations. This procedure used with candidates to the life of the fraternity was not exclusive to the Franciscan penitents; in fact, it faithfully reflects both the mentality of the time and the ecclesiastical legislation which then applied to all “religious”.

After completion of the probationary year, the promise constituted canonical entry into the fraternity, which it was then no longer possible to leave except in order to enter an approved “religious” Order. This prescription is found in all religious legislation at the time, and indicates esteem not only for the Rule of any particular Institute but also for the life lived there with the support of the Rule. The commitments of profession/promise, in fact, are life-long and can only change in the direction of greater intensity.

What we have now shown in the primitive legislation of the Franciscan movement enables us to list the constitutive elements of the profession of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. It involves: *a*) an obligation contracted before God; *b*) the commitment to observe a form of life or Rule; *c*) definitive incorporation into the Order.

The same elements are also constitutive of religious profession, and this leads us to maintain that the *propositum vitae* or promise of the Secular Franciscan Penitents are equivalent to a religious profession. From this we deduce that, while we are not dealing with a religious Order in the strict sense, the title “Order” is eminently fitting for the Secular Franciscan Fraternity. If on the one hand it is not required to have either common life or vows, it is true that the same “Order of Penance” has a Rule approved by the Apostolic See, a novitiate and an irreversible profession: it is in other words a “religious Order” *in the wide sense*, or a *Secular Order*. Consequently the original Franciscan Penitents were not “laymen” or ordinary faithful; they were instead “secular religious”, and as such belonged to the ecclesiastical state. In fact the “lay person” is the counterpart of a “cleric”, while “secular” is the opposite of “regular”. A “secular” is someone who lives in the *saeculum* (world), whether he is a layman, a cleric and/or a religious. A “regular” on the other hand is one who lives in a monastery or convent or at any rate in some community attached to a church; a regular, in turn, can be a *religious* only or he may also be a *cleric*.

In the course of the centuries, the Secular Franciscan Order has not only kept the terminology (*promissio, promittere*) of the primitive legislation, but progressively preferred the use of *Profession* to indicate the commitment to live a gospel life according to the approved Rule.

We can deduce from this that the strong conviction of earliest times, namely that the promise of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance constitutes a true and proper profession, was a constant part of the awareness of the Secular Franciscan Order. The same clear awareness not only remains unchanged but is brought out even more strongly and clearly in the Rule of Paul VI and in the Constitutions subsequently approved by the Congregation for Consecrated Life, as well as in the Ritual, itself approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship.

Consequently, I think we are entitled to conclude that the meaning of the term *Profession* cannot be understood in one sense only as if it referred exclusively to religious profession. Still less should the concept of profession be understood analogically, in relation to religious profession as the

principal analogy and other professions, including that of the SFO, as secondary analogies. Actually, one thing is evident in the history of this terminology and of the lay movements such as the Secular Franciscans, and that is that the specific element of profession is not the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. There is no such thing as profession in its pure state, only profession in a specific religious institution, whether this is religious in the strict sense (an Institute of consecrated life) or a secular and/or lay institute. Thus, profession in the Secular Franciscan Order has the dignity of a *solemn and religious* commitment entered into with God and the Church, and it cannot be considered inferior to that of “religious” – although it remains true that the two professions differ in content, and this difference is due to the multiple action of divine grace in a diversity of charisms.

On the other hand, the Church, by approving with its apostolic authority the basic legislation of the Franciscan Third Order throughout the centuries, has always recognised and validated the Order’s sense concerning the value of profession in the Secular Franciscan Order. The SFO is “a lay Order, a true Order” constituting “a school of integral Christian perfection”, exactly like any Religious Institute. In this “true Order” a “true Profession” is made, which, while different in content (the vows) from that made in the religious Institutes strictly so called, has a dignity equal to theirs.

13. The promise to live the gospel life

Our discussion of the meaning of the terminology up to this point brings out the personal aspect: Profession is an action involving the whole person and every human faculty. The immediate reference is necessarily to the human will, because the profession or promise implies determination, a firm decision and commitment. Therefore a first definition of Profession might be this: it is a personal *commitment*. The Rule, Constitutions and Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order are full of references to this commitment.

From the beginning the Rule states that the Secular Franciscan Order “is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful. In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of St. Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church”. (Rule, 2)

Later on, the Rule and then the Constitutions restate the same concept several times, teaching that the commitment assumed by profession is a *commitment of one’s life*, it is existential, concrete, encompassing the whole of a person’s being and activity; it is not limited to a particular moment, because what is involved is a *life that is wholly committed to and for the gospel*. Therefore, from the moment of profession onwards, it is the gospel which inwardly specifies the life of the Secular Franciscan and commits him/her to the observance of the gospel: profession implies “the will to live the gospel” (*Ritual* 14b).

14. After the manner of St Francis

The second element that distinguishes Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order is its necessary reference to St Francis. What is promised is to live the gospel after the manner of St Francis, following in his footsteps and according to his example and the instructions given by him, which today are gathered together in the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order.

The constant concern to underline the fact that Secular Franciscans intend to live the gospel *after the manner of St Francis* and by means of *this Rule* authenticated by the Church (*Rule* 2; *Const* 1,3; 8,1), is by no means fortuitous.

Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order therefore has this essential structure: the life of

Secular Franciscans depends on the gospel, mediated by the inspiration and experience of Francis of Assisi, who from the beginning of his conversion took it as his rule of life and action.

However, we still need to make the point that Francis' intention was simply to return to the *Gospel of Jesus*. Every Franciscan vocation is therefore an *evangelical-Franciscan* vocation, not because Francis' experience is intended as a substitute for the gospel, but because the gospel is rendered transparent through the mediation of Francis. So, for Franciscans it is a question of learning from Francis and, like him, of knowing no other rule or life except that of the gospel of Jesus. This mediation by Francis lies at the origin of our vocation.

The Franciscan mediation of the gospel extends to the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, to "this Rule" (and to no other), as "authenticated by the Church". Through its approval at the highest level, the Church takes "ownership" of the SFO Rule (the Rule belongs to the Church) and by its authority proposes it to the Secular Franciscans. In this way the Church simply transmits to Secular Franciscans the gospel message of salvation, which is spirit and life for all believers.

Therefore, for those who make profession in the Secular Franciscan Order in order to "attain the perfection of charity in their secular state" (*Rule 2*), the reference to Francis, the Rule and the Constitutions is not an optional matter: it sets the standard, it is the norm. Obviously everything depends on how one understands and lives the Franciscan vocation. A true vocation is one that takes hold of a person's whole being, becomes the very substance of one's being as a person, to such an extent that the individual is unable to think of or define himself except as one who is called to the evangelical-Franciscan life. Rule and Constitutions, are not extrinsic realities to the life of a Secular Franciscan, but are themselves his/her life, on the basis of the gospel. In fact, we ought to speak of a "life" rather than a Rule, thus accepting all the fullness of St Francis' concept. For him, life was to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. He never intended to issue rules for his companions or followers, whether religious or secular; he simply put forward a style of life, one that flowed from the gospel.. Consequently, in his writings, Francis speaks more of "life" than of a Rule ("This is the *life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, which Brother Francis asked the Lord Pope Innocent to grant and confirm for him": *Rnb*) and when he says Rule, he sometimes puts Rule and life together (cfr *Rb*). For Francis the Rule is only the gospel, to be lived and observed literally and in its entirety. The saying of the SFO Rule derives from this: "The Rule and *life* of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, following the example of Francis of Assisi» (*Rule 4*).

In conclusion, Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order, as a promise to live the gospel in the manner of St Francis, aims to put before us the radical, light-filled and joyful style in which Francis listens to the gospel and commits himself to live it.

15. Gospel life for discipleship or "following Christ"

The Preface of the SFO Ritual opens with the following statement:

"Many men and women, married and single, and many members of the diocesan clergy are called by God to follow the way of perfection of the gospel life after the example and manner of Francis of Assisi, to share his charism, and to make it present in the world. *They promise to follow Jesus Christ* and to live the gospel in fraternity by entering the Secular Franciscan Order". (Preface, n. 1).

The Ritual combines the *following of Christ* with the gospel life, because the purpose of observing the gospel is precisely in order to follow Christ. This in fact is the charismatic insight of St Francis: for him, *to follow Christ* depends on the observance of the gospel. Indeed, it was through the gospel that Francis came to know Christ personally, in the same way the Church does when, guided by the Holy Spirit, she recognises Christ in the gospel and welcomes His words and

deeds with faith.

Therefore the gospel, too, is a *mediation*, in fact it is a *sacramental mediation*, because it gives us the presence of Christ. Anticipating by a few centuries the teaching of Vatican Council II, Francis sensed in the gospel the presence of Jesus Christ. He had a most lively awareness that the Lord spoke to him directly, beyond the limits of space and time, through the biblical word. In that word he saw as it were an extension of the Incarnation of the Word, who manifested to him the divine will and truth. Consequently for Francis, gospel truth is not something to be known, but *a living person to be followed*, a life to be lived in the company of that person, who is Christ. For this very reason Francis, when he instituted his brotherhood, absolutely refused to follow any previous Rule. In accepting the gospel, Francis welcomed the very person of Christ, who spoke to him and invited him to follow Him in all things.. For Francis, what it meant to follow Christ became something extremely concrete: it meant following *Christ's poverty*, following Christ's *humility*; following the life *of Christ*; following the *precepts of Christ*; following the doctrine *of Christ*; following the will *of Christ*; following the goodness *of Christ*; following the spirit *of the scriptures*; following the Good *Shepherd*; following in the *footsteps of Christ*. This last expression had a particular importance for Francis. He found it in the First Letter of St. Peter, but took from the Apostle the urgency of *following in the footsteps of Christ*, since “ Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example for you *to follow in his footsteps*”. The significance of discipleship is therefore centered upon the arrival on the scene of Christ's life: the suffering and death of the Servant of the Lord, unjustly undergone for the world's salvation. . As for Peter, so also for Francis, *to follow Christ* did not mean repeating the events and gestures of the Lord's earthly life, but rather to structure the whole of one's life on the set of evangelical demands, sharing in and imitating the action of God, who emptied Himself to the point of dying on the cross for the salvation of the world.

16. Discipleship: to be moulded by Christ

In taking as his model the life of the Lord Jesus, seeing himself always in the mirror of Christ, Francis made such progress that he appeared to all as a “new Adam”; the people acclaimed him as “ a new man, come from another world” (*1Cel* 36).

St Francis' first biographers frequently use terms that refer to the *forma* that was to be acquired through imitating Christ, the likeness or shape which Francis wished to imprint on himself and wished to see imprinted on his brothers. Thus we find the terms *transformed*, *conformed*, *reform*, *form*, in the sense of to mould (oneself), educate (oneself). But the most frequently used term is *conformity* to Christ “in all things” (*Fioretti* XIII), especially in the Passion.

Francis had one dominant thought, one unquenchable desire, one constant intention: *to become totally conformed* to Christ. Discipleship in love has no other purpose except to “christify” the whole person. It is entirely geared towards *transforming the lover into an image of the beloved* (*LM* XIII, 2). Francis was “indeed always occupied with Jesus: Jesus he bore in hi heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, Jesus in the rest of his members. How often, when he sat down to eat, hearing or speaking or thinking of Jesus, he forgot bodily food” (*1Cel* 115).

It was thus that Francis achieved full conformity with Christ. He himself became fully aware of the fact, so that one day he declared to a group of his companions who exhorted him to read the scriptures: “As for me, I have already made so much of scripture my own that I have more than enough to meditate on and revolve in my mind. I need no more, *I know Christ, the poor crucified one*” (*2Cel* 105).

This was a knowledge of the mystery of Christ by experience, an intimate, mutual merging in love which reached its highpoint in the culminating experience of La Verna, following which “in truth there appeared in him a true image of the cross and of the passion of the Lamb without blemish, who washed away the sins of the world, for he seemed as though he had recently been

taken down from the cross, his hands and feet were pierced as though by nails and his side wounded as though by a lance” (*ICel* 112).

17. Christ. The Book of life

In the light of the foregoing considerations we can understand the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, when it says that St Francis of Assisi “made Christ the inspiration and the centre of his life with God and with people”. This is an implicit exhortation to those who make profession in the Secular Franciscan Order, so that they may do the same.

But the Rule also offers a wonderful Christological proclamation, which casts light on the lives of all those who commit themselves by profession to observe the Holy Gospel in order to follow Jesus and remain in permanent, life-giving communion with Christ, who without complaint, freely gave Himself up to death and after His sufferings entered into the glory of the Father. In fact, “Christ, gift of the Father’s love, is the way to Him, is the truth into which we are guided by the Holy Spirit, and the life which He came to give in abundance” (73),

This marvellous statement, placed right at the beginning of the Rule, ought to rouse the secular brothers and sisters to contemplate lovingly the “gift of the Father’s love”, constantly directing their gaze towards Jesus. It should also encourage them to assess their lives constantly against the standard of Him who is the way, the truth and the life.

As for Francis, so for Secular Franciscans, Christian discipleship is born of love for Him, a love so total and radical that they are brought to imitate the person of the beloved, and to a union with Him whereby they are con-formed to Him who is the object of their love. The Rule proposes just such a programme when it states (in n. 10):

“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 Rule is echoed by the Constitutions, which take up the Bonaventurian theme of “Christ as the “Book” of life. Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order commits a person to study in the school of Christ, who is “the book of Wisdom, written from within the heart of the Father, since He is the art of almighty God; it was written externally, when it became flesh” (St. Bonaventure). Indeed:

"Christ, poor and crucified", victor over death and risen, the greatest manifestation of the love of God for humanity, is the "book" in which the brothers and sisters, in imitation of Francis, learn the purpose and the way of living, loving, and suffering. They discover in Him the value of contradictions for the sake of justice and the meaning of the difficulties and the crosses of daily life. With Him they can accept the will of the Father even under the most difficult circumstances and live the Franciscan spirit of peace, rejecting every doctrine contrary to human dignity” (Const. 10).

In conclusion, for Secular Franciscans, to follow Christ is to be conformed to Him; it means to carry out the commitment involved in the profession to observe the gospel in the manner of St Francis by living all the demands of the gospel to its very depths, to the very end, including death, and thus to open oneself to receive the promises proclaimed by the gospel itself.

18. Profession in the SFO and the evangelical counsels

We have already considered how the terms *Profession*, *Purpose* and *Promise* normally refer to

religious, who by profession publicly and in a stable form embrace the state of perfection in conformity with the evangelical counsels, which they commit themselves to follow by observing the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Secular Franciscans do not take vows, but the life-project of the Secular Franciscans enshrined in the Rule and Constitutions propose for them a kind of ascetical way by which they can live according to the form, or mould, of the holy Gospel: the way of the “evangelical counsels”, so that they may be obedient, poor and docile to love.

The fundamental legislation of the Secular Franciscan Order refers to the magisterium of Vatican II regarding the ways and means by which the faithful may achieve sanctity:

“The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the Gospel by Our Lord to His disciples.” (LG 42c).

The Council speaks of a multiplicity of counsels, which cannot therefore be restricted to the three counsels which religious profess by vow. In fact, all the Lord’s disciples are called to the perfection of charity; all must welcome the commandment of love. The evangelical counsels find their natural context within that commandment, within the unlimited spheres in which love can be exercised, so that love takes on the character of a need or requirement. The gospel counsels serve to express a more intense thrust of love, which translates into concrete choices in everyday life that go far beyond the limits of a precept: “no-one could fulfil the precept of charity if (s)he did not wish to love God more than (s)he does” (St Thomas).

However, here we cannot fail to point out how the teaching of the Rule and Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order about the evangelical counsels is structured around the classic triad of obedience, poverty and purity of heart (cfr. Rule 10-12; Const 10; 12,2; 15). In the logic of the universal call to holiness, the practice of these three counsels is also open to all the Lord’s disciples: all, in fact, within the specific condition that is proper to each, are called to the *following of Christ*, to have his very sentiments and walk in his footsteps in very concrete ways.

Consequently, the Rule and Constitutions do not start with abstract considerations about obedience, poverty and purity of heart, but flow from an attentive, loving gaze that is fixed on Christ.

Therefore, like their Father and Founder, Secular Franciscans, too, are called to imprint Christ on their hearts and to be inwardly conformed to Him.

The legislation of the Secular Franciscan Order is profoundly in harmony with the experience of Francis and depends upon it, because the vocation of the Secular Franciscans depends on the vocation of Francis.

Hence we can see how the three counsels are founded upon the gospel beatitude of poverty, and why the Poverello characteristically uses a certain terminology, because all is *expropriation*, all is to do with living a poor men and women. Poverty leads to freedom, and this makes us available and open to a love that is ever more vast and profound. And it is precisely on the foundation of *total availability* that the demand to *live the evangelical counsels* is rooted, even in the secular Christian life. Availability, understood as an interior attitude, includes the spirit and profound content of virginity, poverty and obedience. It presupposes that one loves Christ more than oneself, and above all other goods and persons, always, at every moment, without any possible reservations; there is no room for dispensations or discounts. In this total availability there are no degrees, because faith in Christ means being open to everything, taking on a commitment of absolute seriousness.

19. The original penitential identity

The gospel message opens with a call to conversion: “The time has come, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the Good News” (Mk 1,15). The penitential dimension is at the heart of the Gospel and is essential to the evangelical life. For this reason Secular Franciscans, promising to live the gospel, in virtue of their original charism commit themselves to live a penitential life. As

we have already stressed, they promise to live the gospel *in the manner of St Francis* and by means of *this Rule* authenticated by the Church (*Rule 2; Const 1,3; 8,1*).

But “The present rule, succeeding *Memoriale Propositi* (1221) and the rules approved by the Supreme Pontiffs Nicholas IV and Leo XIII, adapts the Secular Franciscan Order to the needs and expectations of the Holy Church in the conditions of changing times”. (*Rule 3*). This text expresses the link between the present Rule and the previous legislation of the SFO: the Rule is part of that fruitful history of the secular Franciscan movement over many centuries, going back to its original inspiration, expressed in the “new laws of penitence” (*LM 6*) given by Francis. Most probably these “new laws” coincide in whole or in part with the *Letter to the Faithful*. It was precisely thanks to these “new laws” that the Penitents, too, rose to a state of “not mediocre perfection” (Julian of Spire, *Life of St Francis*). This is why the *recensio prior* (first version) of the *Letter to the Faithful* has been inserted as a Prologue to the new Rule, under the title of an “Exhortation of St Francis to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance”, rightly considered to be the source and inspiration of the entire tradition and spirituality of the SFO. In both versions (*prior* and *posterior*) of the *Letter*, insistently and as the most natural thing in the world, Francis asks of lay people who wish to follow him a radical form of Christian life, striving to obtain from them a renewed life *according to the form of the holy Gospel*. Rarely has the Franciscan form of life, which had to unite the Lesser Brothers, the “Poor Ladies” and the “Brothers and Sisters of Penance”, been presented in such a clear, broad and profound way as in this *Letter*. By the working of the Spirit of the Lord, here the values of a purely natural human life – the earthly life led by nearly all Christians, despite the Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount - are radically changed. Francis uncompromisingly requires of those who follow him that which in Christianity is most radical and “against nature”. With a surprising naturalness, instead of the “spirit of the flesh” – the selfish, authoritarian, self-exalting human ego - he places “the Spirit of the Lord”, in other words, thinking, wishing, willing, living and acting in accordance with the authentic gospel. This way of living is “Metanoia”, it is “to do penance” as Francis intended it! This is the wellspring of penance understood in the Franciscan sense. Therefore Secular Franciscans:

“United by their vocation as *brothers and sisters of penance*, and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, (should) conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls *conversion*. Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily.” (*Rule 7*).

19. Secularity

The perspective of the evangelical counsels, as shown by the Rule and Constitutions, and the consecration highlighted by the Ritual, cannot lead one to the conclusion that tertiaries are religious living in the world. Secular Franciscans, in fact, do not oblige themselves by vow to live the evangelical counsels.

We must however repeat that the programme of radical gospel living is for everyone, for all Christians, while religious are called to structure that life in a permanent and visible way, by renouncing some human values in order to concentrate on the values that lie at the origin of the Christian life itself. These originating values are basically those to which the Church must constantly return in order to understand herself and to keep faith with her own mystery.

The irreplaceable role of religious in the Church lies at the level of their essential “sign value”, while religious vows are essentially at the service of the entire Christian life, which should be considered precisely as a “state of the evangelical counsel”.

In any case, in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding, the Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order expressly speaks of “consecration that is lived in the world, and of “the will to live in the world and for the world” (Preface, 14a,d). Furthermore, the Rule from the beginning is

concerned to specify the sphere in which the Brothers and sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order, impelled by the Spirit, intend to achieve the perfection of charity: *in their own secular state* (Rule 2).

Secular state or *Secularity* and *world* are therefore two co-ordinates that are essential for an understanding of the specific identity of Secular Franciscans and their particular mission which flows from profession.

Secularity, first of all, indicates an existential and sociological condition: it is being in the world as human creatures and as communities of men and women. As such it is one of the dimensions of being human, including the relationships, geographical, cultural, and social, in which one is born and lives. Secularity is given from birth, independently of an individual's free choice. *You do not become secular, you are born so.*

But there is also a theological dimension to secularity. In that sense it is the conscious assumption of one's native condition in order to make it the specific "sign" and "place", the qualifying dimension of one's own vocation, an acceptance of the "already" and the "not yet" of the *eschaton* of Christ and the Church. From this point of view, secularity flows from the acceptance of God's intervention in human history and of His "becoming", and is expressed as recognition of a world (*saeculum*) in which the Spirit is at work to "recapitulate" all things in Christ. At this level secularity is no longer just a fact of birth, but indicates the free choice of those who, in faith, intend to place their whole lives at the service of the Kingdom of God. The existential and sociological condition thus assumes a theological significance: it becomes a specific way in which to realise and give witness to salvation. In this sense, too, it is legitimate to speak of a "secular state that is consecrated to God", placed into His hands as a tool which can be used to affirm salvation in the world.

The world itself in its turn assumes theological significance. In the light of *Gaudium et Spes*, the world is "the whole human family along with the sum of those realities in the midst of which it lives; that world which is the theatre of man's history, and the heir of his energies, his tragedies and his triumphs; that world which the Christian sees as created and sustained by its Maker's love, fallen indeed into the bondage of sin, yet emancipated now by Christ, Who was crucified and rose again to break the strangle hold of personified evil, so that the world might be fashioned anew according to God's design and reach its fulfilment". (GS 2).

The being and action of the laity and of Secular Franciscans take place in this context of "the world". Living in the world, they are geared towards the perfection of charity and commit themselves to the sanctification of the world, working within the world.

Secular Franciscans, together with all the lay faithful, are called to live their lives in the ordinary situations of the world, and within the specifically "worldly" sphere they share in the Church's mission of evangelisation.

Starting from these premises, which are founded on the mystery of the Incarnation and on the intrinsically "worldly" character of the entire people of God, we can understand the specific mission of the laity and of Secular Franciscans. "What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature...But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer". (LG 31).

"What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature....to seek the kingdom of God by

dealing with temporal things and directing them in accordance with God's plan": this is the specific mission of the laity. Consecrated in the world and for the world, the Franciscan lay faithful have the task of *consecrating the world* by immersing themselves fully in it.

"To belong to Christ does not mean to deny the world. The price the Christian pays for his discipleship is not the negation or despising of the world, but rather a particular responsibility for the world, an availability to give oneself, entrust oneself to the world" (J. B. Metz). This presupposes an attitude of joyful optimism and sincere appreciation of worldly realities, which draw their origin from the Incarnation of the Word. The Incarnation is God's "yes" to the world: irrevocable, indestructible, with no going back.

The Christian's love for the world therefore arises from a desire to enter more deeply into God's love for the world, and thus to share personally in the realisation of the love which the Father has revealed by sending His Son into the world. Consequently the world becomes the "place" where discipleship is lived and where one becomes holy, not in spite of, but precisely because of and by means of, being in the world (*in saeculo et ex saeculo*).

However, the Incarnation, while testifying to God's love for the world, is the mystery which reveals how the world itself must be ordered according to God and changed from within.

The Incarnation happened through a hidden *kenosis*, when the Son of God emptied Himself and was humbled to the point of death on a cross. Anyone who wants to be a disciple of Christ must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Him, must be crucified to the world. The world, in fact, can only be changed by the asceticism of discipleship, because it is the new man, redeemed by Christ and constantly purified by penance, who builds the new society; it is the new man who ushers in a new way of being at the service of humanity, not against it.

Professing a form of evangelical life, living their consecration to God in the world and for the world, and "transmitting into world affairs the genuine spirit of the gospel" (*Ritual*, III. 46), Secular Franciscans bear witness that the sanctification of the world necessarily occurs through the sanctification of people, because this world cannot be transformed without the spirit of the beatitudes (cfr. *LG* 31).
