

## IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PAULINE RULE CURRENT CHALLENGES

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### 1. Acceptance of the Rule

The Rule was approved on June 24, 1978 and is the last, or one of the last documents approved by the beloved Saint Paul VI.

By delivering the Rule to us, the Pope expressed the hope and confidence that the Rule would be an effective instrument for recognising the presence and the vitality of the Franciscan charism through the essential contribution of the Secular Franciscans:

*«We are happy that the "Franciscan charism" today is still a force for the good of the Church and the human community ...*

*We nurture the hope that the form of life preached by that admirable Man of Assisi will gain a new impetus and will flourish vigorously, ... we approve and confirm with our Apostolic authority and sanction the Rule of the **Secular Franciscan Order**."...*

The official communication of its approval was notified by the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in a letter dated September 20, 1978 to Fr. Vitale Bommarco, General Minister OFM Conv., in which we read: "*We formulate fervent vows so that solemn pontifical approval is to encourage all members of the Secular Franciscan Order to observe the new Rule with generous commitment...*" (1).

The Rule was delivered on October 4, 1978 to the International OFS Council in the chapel of Corpus Christi monastery of the Capuchin Poor Clare sisters of Garbatella, by P. Pasquale Ryvalski, OFM Cap., on the behalf of the Conference of General Ministers of the First Order and TOR. On that same day Manuela Mattioli wrote to the whole Order:

*«... With the promulgation of the new Rule, the renewal of the Secular Fraternity knows a strong and decisive moment..., it is necessary for this post-conciliar updating work to continue, to be visible and rooted in all the face and spirit of the Secular Franciscan Order which appears from the renewed Rule. For this reason, as we thank the General Ministers for having solemnly surrendered us, we invite all the brothers and sisters to love it, read it and above all live it today to be able to "die with it" (see Il Celandom ibidem)»*

The Rule was welcomed with enthusiasm and great expectation throughout the Order and also in the rest of the Franciscan Family, as a true gift by the Church, a precious synthesis of the Franciscan spirituality and a very valid tool for renewing the life of the whole Order.

## **2. The Rule is divided into four sections:**

Prologue: Exhortation of St. Francis to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance	
Chapter I: The Secular Franciscan Order (OFS),	articles 1-3
Chapter II: The Form of Life,	articles 4-19
Chapter III: Life in Fraternity	articles 20-26

The Exhortation of St. Francis is not put by chance as a prologue to our Rule: it was an initiative of the General Ministers, when they tried to produce a text as a prologue, and included us in the original spirituality that St. Francis himself transmitted to his penitents, as underlined by the General Ministers in the delivery letter of the Rule: *«The hope of renewal hinges upon returning to the origins and to the spiritual experience of Francis of Assisi and of the brothers and sisters of penance who received from him their inspiration and guidance. It is this that accounts for the inclusion of the Letter to the Faithful (recensio prior) as a prologue, as well as the constant references to the teaching and example of St. Francis».*

It is in the light and through the lens of this writing that as Secular Franciscans we must interpret and live the new Rule. This is a topic on which the leaders of the OFS will have to strongly insist, both in initial and ongoing formation, because the Prologue does not always receive the attention it should have.

Chapter I (articles 1 to 3) deals with great clarity and incisiveness what is the nature of the Order and its place in the Franciscan Family and in the Church.

1. The definition of the Franciscan Family is particularly significant. For the first time this is defined and recognized in an official document of the Church. This is followed by the affirmation of the vital reciprocal communion of all the Franciscans: lay people, religious and priests of the three Orders. These statements have the authority of a magisterial confirmation, as the Rule is a document approved by the Pope. In this article we define, finally, the specific vocation to which all the Franciscans are called: following Christ in the footsteps of Saint Francis.
2. The unity of the Order is sanctioned and the specific fundamental objectives of Secular Franciscans are defined:
  - striving for perfect charity, as the path to holiness (a common goal to all Christians);
  - living the Gospel in the manner of St. Francis;
  - observing the Rule.
3. The new Rule is in perfect continuity with the previous rules and under the direct protection of the Holy See.

In perfect adherence to the spirit of authentic Christian conversion lived and transmitted by St. Francis, Chapter II guides the Secular Franciscans to direct their efforts to achieve a profound conversion of their "being" in a process of conformation to Christ, in an actual Trinitarian perspective.

Articles 4-10 trace, in crescendo, a demanding program of experiencing conformation to Jesus Christ and full communion with the Church in union and imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

1. Making Christ the center of our life, and through Him follow the way to the Father, in the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, to live our life abundantly in the womb of the Trinity. It is Christ who fully reveals the Father to us (CG 12).
2. Seeking to encounter the living and active person of Christ first of all in our brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church, in liturgical activities, and above all in the bodily concreteness of His most holy Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

I want to stop for a moment on what I consider one of the strong points of our Christian and Franciscan vocation, according to my way of seeing and the experience lived in my years of service: being brothers, discovering the Christian and charismatic value of the fraternity par excellence, because there is one Father: God our father.

Francis once again expresses the conviction that it was God who promoted his life in fraternity:

*And after the Lord gave me brothers, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel" (Test 14).*

When Francis of Assisi discovers his brother, the eyes of his soul open up, his heart widens, which was oppressed by the desire to have and to possess, he feels seduced; only then did Francisco discover that what he was looking for already lived in the center of his life, only then did he realize the meeting with the One he has adored without knowing him.

3. Full Union with Christ through Baptism, in communion with his mystical Body and with the Pastors of the Church.
4. Assuming the thinking and acting of Christ. Permanent conversion. Pope Francis, in the Exhortation "Gaudete and Exultate" (23), tells us that conversion "... consists in joining the death and resurrection of the Lord in a unique and personal way, in dying and continually rising with Him. And always supported by the grace of the reconciliation sacrament.

We are in the time of Lent, a favorable time for a strong commitment to conversion. The Pope invites us: "try to do it, listening to God in prayer and recognizing the signs that He offers you" ...

5. Seeking contemplative union with Christ in constant prayer. With the grace of the sacrament of the Eucharist and liturgical prayer. Prayer is always a moment of discernment ... "Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects of you in every moment of your existence and in every choice you have to make, to discern the place that this occupies in your mission" (GE 23) We really need to pray in order to "recognize what that word is

*"Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you must make, so as to discern its place in the mission you have received." (GE 23)*

*We really need to pray because "May you come to realize what that word is, the message of Jesus that God wants to speak to the world by your life." (GE24)*

6. The Virgin Mary is our model of sequela and union with Christ, mother and protector. Imitating her complete self-giving and by praying earnestly and confidently
7. Uniting themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed his will into the Father's hands, and following Christ, witness to him even in the secular activities.

Then, articles 11-19 outline the "doing" that must come from "being", in one's own human, family, religious and social activities, oriented towards peace and respect for creation and justice, in the spirit of human fraternity and universal.

11-12. Lowly stewards of the goods they have received for the benefit of God's children. Seeking a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs. they should strive to purify their hearts from every tendency and yearning for possession and power. give what they have received from God back, and set themselves free to love God and their brothers and sisters.

13-14. Fraternity in action: all God's children, all in the image of Christ, all brothers, placing themselves on an equal basis, all serving each other to realize a more fraternal and evangelical world through our responsibilities and together with all people of good will.

15-16. Promoting justice and public life by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Esteeming work both as a gift and as a sharing in the creation, and service of the human community.

17. Family-Marriage-Children: example of fidelity, peace, respect for life. Bearing witness to the love of Christ for his Church.

18. Respect and care for all creatures, animate and inanimate, which "bear the imprint of the Most High". Universal brotherhood.

19. Careful bearers of peace, unity and fraternal understanding. Messengers of perfect joy, harmony and hope in all circumstances. With faith in the Resurrection of Christ and in the Redeeming Love of God, we serenely await Sister Death.

This is the actual conversion we are asked to do first of all as Christians, and do it like Francis did to be Franciscans.

This essential priority of **being** by doing was then strongly reaffirmed in Article 100.3 of the General Constitutions, which followed the Rule 12 years later and are its necessary and admirable complement:

*"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."*

Thus these articles of Chapter II of the Rule guide us in the mission that we must carry out as a person and as a Fraternity.

Chapter III describes the basic rules for the organization and government of the Order and the bond of communion with religious brothers for the spiritual and pastoral assistance in the name of the Church.

According to my experience, I would like to stress that we were faster in developing this chapter in the actual life of the Order rather than deepening the Second Chapter, where the path of being and acting is traced, and this should make us worried.

From this chapter, I want to recall an article that must be highlighted in celebrating these 40 years of our Rule. It is the Art. 21 in which we are shown that service is also a question of love: love for one's vocation, for one's own fraternity and for brothers. The willingness to serve, of which this article speaks, is a consequence of love, and not the exercise of authority. It is a matter of plurality and in a very special way of respect. The Constitutions, which apply and develop the Rule, clearly indicate this in the art. 32.2 and 33.

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE BASIS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THESE 40 YEARS OF THE RULE.**

From the realization of the fact that many times we have focused more on doing than on being, the need arises to exhort our brothers and sisters to a more demanding commitment towards a radical permanent conversion (Reg. 7), so that the "doing" originates from being and not seen as the greatest commitment of Secular Franciscans.

To be Christians, and Franciscan Christians, it is necessary to:

- let ourselves be transformed by the grace of God to conform completely to Jesus, entrusting ourselves docilely and entirely to the action of the Spirit, like Francis.
  - Learn to live in fraternal relationship with our brothers and sisters, with the world through Jesus, the firstborn of many brothers.
  - Learn to pray from the bottom of the heart and feel it in your heart, in all situations and always.
  - Commit to carry out a permanent radical conversion to assume a profound awareness of our lowly being (humility).
  - Embed in a complete existential trust in the Love of God.
  - Always seek the last places.
  - Have the spirit of the Lord, decentralize to put Jesus at the center of ourselves (expropriate: without anything of our own).
  - To give back to God ourselves and the goods received, in praise, thanksgiving, generosity and service to others.
  - Learn to live contemplation as a search for union with God deep within ourselves.
- Take the following phrase very seriously: *...driven by the Spirit to reach the perfection of charity in one's own secular state...* The perfection of charity is communion with God, it is holiness. It is up to us *to want it* and the Spirit, who pushes us, will allow us to reach the goal. From my personal experience, I know that if I do not reach my goal, it is only because there is a lack of will in me. And this will only be possible through a profound intimacy with the Gospel.

*Passing from the Gospel to life* and verifying our life by comparing it with the Gospel. Giving everything back to God. The Rule is nothing more than an exhortation to live the Gospel in its purest state, like Francis.

#### **4. Challenge for the future**

I firmly believe that, based on the experience of the first 40 years, the future of formation in the Order must be oriented towards **being**. Only by **doing**, without **being**, the Order will not mature, and gradually regress to a simple and tired routine

Dear brothers and sisters, the Rule is, for those who have professed it, the code and the key to finding the right answer, fruit of the secular Franciscan experience, to the many interpellations to citizens and Christians in daily life. Now we must reaffirm that it is necessary to embody the Rule in one's life and make it the life of our Fraternities and, therefore, respond to the needs and expectations of the Church, which is a community of love.

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