

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 actualized 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* (General Constitutions, Article 11), since they are *urged on by the Spirit* to reach the perfection of charity in accordance with their own secular state (*Rule*, Article 2); Profession also comes about by the working of the same Spirit. Therefore the "Preface" of the *Ritual* (2.5, page 3) states 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*, p. 23).

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* (“Preface,” 3.31, p. 5) 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*, Preface, 3.31, p. 5).

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*, Article 22; *Ritual*, p. 22). 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*, “Preface,” 1.3, p. 2).

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 fulfillment 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 “Preface” (3.31.f, p. 6) of the *Ritual*, speaking of the nature of Profession in the SFO, says 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** 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*, p. 24). 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*, p. 24).

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

1. **Profession 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*, Article 23; *Const*, Article 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 Secular Franciscan 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*, p. 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*, Article 22; cfr. *Const*, Article 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 *baptized*. 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**.

- 4.2 *The minister 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*, 3.03, pp. 3–4).

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” (3.34, p. 6).

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*, “Preface,” 3.34, p. 6). 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*, p. 24). 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 channeled through the mediation of Christ and of the Church, and is realized 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: “Through the priest and the minister, who represent the Fraternity, the *Church accepts* the commitment of the Profession of those who profess the life and the rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. By her public prayer *the Church entertains* 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,” 3.03, p. 3–4).

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. The text reasserts the need for the profession to be confirmed by the Church and, at the same time, underlines that Church is present at a profession to pray, to invoke. The Church invokes for the candidates the help and the grace of God upon them and, most of all, *imparts the blessing on those making profession*.

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**, who **consecrates and transforms those who make the promise to live the gospel life** in the Secular Franciscan Order.

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.” 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**" ("Rite of Profession," p. 19).

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" (*Rule*, Article 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 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*, page 14). 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* — Profession *calls 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.
- 7.2 *Enactment of Baptism* — Profession therefore involves a particular way of *revitalizing* the sacrament of Baptism and giving it new vigor. In fact, the *Ritual* (“Preface,” 1.1, page 2) 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” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, para. 5a). 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.

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 baptized 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 fulfillment. 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*, Article 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?*” (p. 22).

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 baptized 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 baptized and confirmed person, it is stronger and closer (*fortius etarctius*).

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*, Article 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. Consecration

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*, p. 23).

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*” (3.32.a., p. 5).

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 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.

11. The value of Profession in the SFO

Now we come to the meaning of the term *Profession* 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.

These terms 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 (*Code of Canon Law*, 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 the *promissio* 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.

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 recognized 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.

12. 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’s intention was simply to return to the *Gospel of Jesus*.

Every Franciscan vocation is therefore an *evangelical-Franciscan* vocation, not because Francis’s 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, Article 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's 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*: [*Earlier Rule*, "Prologue"]) 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*, Article 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.

13. 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," 1.1, p. 2).

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 recognizes Christ in the gospel and welcomes his words and deeds with faith.

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.

14. Christ, centre 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, by affirming: “*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*” (Article 4). This marvelous 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 conformed to him who is the object of their love. The *Rule* proposes just such a program when it states (in Article 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.”

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.

15. 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*, Article 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*, Article 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” (St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Major*, Chapter 4.6) 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 Speyer, *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*, Article 7).

16. Secularity

The *Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order* expressly speaks of “consecration that is to be lived in the world” and of “the will to live in the world and for the world” (“Preface,” 3.32.a., d, p. 5). 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*, Article 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 realize and give witness to salvation. In this sense, too, it is legitimate to speak of a “**secular state that is consecrated to God,**” because it is this very state which is dedicated to him, 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 theater 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 fulfillment" (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 evangelization.

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 realization 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*, p. 25), 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).

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