

Relationship of the Evangelical Counsels and the Secular Franciscan Order

Stories in the Gospels point out that Jesus touched people in ways that made them question the direction of their lives. Some refused to listen or turned away because his challenges seemed to be too hard. Many others were so moved by his mission and ministry that they were impelled to search for a more perfect way of living and being. This is exemplified in many Gospel passages like the one regarding the rich young man: “As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (Mk. 10:17) It is also manifested in the Beatitudes in which Jesus teaches that the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the clean of heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness will inherit the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt. 5:3-10).

The longing for eternal life or the “kingdom of heaven” has often been described as a desire for perfection. This is one of the motivating factors for the so-called flight to the desert and the birth of religious life in the early Church. The early ascetics found models for how to live their lives in the examples of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist, and in the temptations that Jesus faced before and during his public ministry. The message that is conveyed by these Scriptural stories implies that any serious quest for God involves a separation from the world, the taming of one’s passions and human ambitions, and a constant struggle with the forces of evil. In their desire for spiritual perfection, the ascetics believed that the only sure avenue was an intensely close following of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience and a strict following of the example of Christ himself. They accepted the challenge of total surrender to the Master through the abandonment of all worldly goods, family relations and future plans.

From the first centuries of the development of religious life the evangelical counsels became one of its defining elements. The *Rule of 1223*, which stills serves as the foundational document for all the branches of the First Order, states that “The Rule and Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity” (LR I: 1). Similar statements can be found in the opening chapters of the *Form of Life* written by St. Clare as the rule for the Second Order, and the *Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular*. The Secular Franciscan Order, as a public association of the faithful in the Church, (cf. CC.GG.1: 5) is not bound to the evangelical counsels in the same way that their religious brothers and sisters in the Franciscan family are. However, the rules and teachings that have guided the lives of Secular Franciscans throughout the Order’s long history are replete with passages urging them to embrace a life that is poor, chaste, and obedient -- lived, that is, according to the lay or secular state. This is particularly true in the *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, approved by Pope Paul VI in 1978, and in the *General Constitutions* approved in 2000.

The evangelical counsels challenge all Franciscans to live a life based on the Gospels and the example of Jesus -- who himself lived a poor, chaste, and obedient life. What better way to go “from gospel to life and life to the gospel” (O.F.S. Rule article 4)? With this in mind, and without simplifying this essential foundation too much, we can say that poverty, chastity, and obedience are constitutive elements of a Gospel-centered life. They help define our relationship to God and the way we live our lives in the world. Even though the way that they are lived out by religious and seculars is different, the understanding and spirit behind the evangelical counsels are the same for all Franciscans. Flowing from an intimate relationship with God they provide wonderful guidance for how to live our lives.

Poverty

St. Francis' embrace of poverty grew out of an all-consuming love for Jesus and an ardent desire to live in conformity to the Gospel. It was not just an external imitation of Christ, or merely a renunciation of material possessions, or even an attempt for social action and witness. St. Francis embraced poverty because Christ embraced it as a driving force behind his ministry and mission. Poverty, lived as St. Francis lived it, recognizes that one is not self-sufficient and that everything ultimately comes from God, even life itself. As Thaddeus Horgan, S.A., points out in his reflections on the *TOR Rule*, "Francis stripped himself not so much to set aside the things of this earth, but to free himself of all that is not God. Like Christ, Francis perceived the world as God's gift to help us on the way to life's fullness... As an interiorized value then, gospel poverty is an attitude of heart that proclaims hopefully and joyfully all people's need for God and that the Lord alone is God" (*Turned to the Lord*, Pittsburgh: Franciscan Federation, 1987: pp. 52-53). Poverty allows all of creation to stand on its own merit. Instead of being seen with functional or avaricious intent, people and things are seen and respected as sacraments of an encounter with God.

The ideal of Franciscan poverty is best expressed as simplicity. Guided by this virtue one becomes attuned to the presence of the Divine in all things. It in turn encourages a life lived in loving abandonment to the all good God. Every event, every person can then be seen as an epiphany of the Divine. This can be seen in a dramatic way in the life of St. Francis when he embraced the leper and was able to see him as a child of God and not simply a diseased and frightful creature. The key element behind this kind of understanding of poverty is the challenge to see all things and all people as they truly are - as God sees them - and then relating to them accordingly. When one lets go of the self as the measure against which everything must find its worth the world is set free to be itself. Wise and respectful use of the things of this life is an inevitable result.

In a wonderful way, article 11 of the *O.F.S. Rule* captures the heart of the Franciscan understanding of poverty: "Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs. Let them be mindful that according to the gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God's children. Thus, in the spirit of "the Beatitudes," and as pilgrims and strangers on their way to the home of the Father, they should strive to purify their hearts from every tendency and yearning for possession and power." Article 15 of the *General Constitutions* presents some of the practical implications of the "proper spirit of detachment" that the *Rule* requires. It starts by stating that Secular Franciscans should pledge themselves to live the spirit of the Beatitudes and, in a special way, the spirit of poverty. Evangelical poverty demonstrates confidence in the Father, creates interior freedom, and disposes them to promote a more just distribution of wealth" (CC.GG. 15: 1). The following paragraphs of article 15 are extremely challenging. They call Secular Franciscans to "provide for their own families and serve society by means of their work and material goods, have a particular manner of living evangelical poverty" (CC.GG. 15: 2). To do this they are to "reduce their own personal needs so as to be better able to share spiritual and material goods with their brothers and sisters, especially those most in need" (CC.GG. 15: 3). Further, "they should take a firm position against consumerism and against ideologies and practices which prefer riches over human and religious values and which permit the exploitation of the human person" (CC.GG. 15: 3). In a word, Secular Franciscans are challenged to "see" the world through the filter of the Gospel and to act accordingly.

Chastity

Apart from the mention of the vow in the first chapter of the *Rule* for the First Order, St. Francis does not mention chastity in his other writings. Rather, he focuses on the need for the brothers to seek for the kingdom of God and to have a pure mind and spirit. In several of his exhortations he stresses that God seeks, or desires, people who, with pure heart and mind, are willing to serve, love, honor, and adore him. In the *Rule of 1221* he writes: “I beg all my brothers, both the ministers and the others, after overcoming every impediment and putting aside every care and anxiety, to serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God with a pure heart and a pure mind in whatever they are best able to do, for that is what He wants above all things... And let us adore Him with a pure heart” (ER XXII: 26, 29).

St. Francis repeats this challenge in the *Second Letter to the Faithful*, a document addressed to the tertiaries and most likely written during the time that the Saint was writing the *Early Rule* for the friars. He states, “Let us love God, therefore, and adore Him with a pure heart and a pure mind, because He Who seeks this above all things has said: *True adorers adore the Father in Spirit and Truth*” (2LiF: 19). According to Francis, the only appropriate response to God is adoration, love, and a focusing of one’s attention on the Divine will. In Admonition XVI, after quoting from Matthew 5: 8, “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God,” he writes: “The truly clean of heart are those who look down upon earthly things, seek those of heaven, and, with a clean heart and spirit, never cease adoring and seeing the Lord God living and true” (Adm XVI: 2).

For St. Francis, every relationship should be based on a love and adoration of God and guided by a pure mind and spirit. This is basis for a life of chastity, a life that should make one more loving. Following the Saint’s lead, the *Rule of the O.F.S.* does not specifically deal with chastity. It does, however, echo his exhortation to the friars and to penitents to love and adore God and to allow that love to flow out to others. Article 12 states, “Witnessing to the good yet to come and obliged to acquire purity of heart because of the vocation they have embraced, they should set themselves free to love God and their brothers and sisters.” As Article 17 points out, the first place this love should take root is in the family. It states that, “In their family they should cultivate the Franciscan spirit of peace, fidelity, and respect for life, striving to make of it a sign of a world already renewed in Christ. By living the grace of matrimony, husbands and wives in particular should bear witness in the world to the love of Christ for his Church. They should joyfully accompany their children on their human and spiritual journey by providing a simple and open Christian education and being attentive to the vocation of each child.”

The *General Constitutions* are even more specific. They point out that Secular Franciscans “should love and practice purity of heart, the source of true fraternity” (CC.GG. 15: 4). And, in their families they “should concern themselves with respect for all life in every situation from conception until death. Married couples find in the Rule of the SFO an effective aid in their own journey of Christian life, aware that, in the sacrament of matrimony, their love shares in the love that Christ has for his Church. The way spouses love each other and affirm the value of fidelity is a profound witness for their own family, the Church, and the world” (CC.GG. 24: 1). Both the *Rule* and the *Constitutions* challenge Secular Franciscans to love -- love God, love their spouse if they are married, love the brothers and sisters in their fraternities, love the Church and its ministers, love all people, and love all creation. This is basically a challenge to love as God loves, with a pure heart and mind. What a tremendous challenge!

Obedience

Through an often difficult and painful conversion experience, St. Francis discovered that life had meaning only when he listened attentively to the voice of God and followed His will. This attentive listening desire to follow the will of God in concrete and practical ways is what Franciscan obedience is all about. In his *Testament* St. Francis reflected on the effects this kind of obedience had in his own life. It is clear that the Saint experienced God as an active presence and guide that led him beyond his own narrow view of the world to something newer and greater. He writes that, “The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance... the Lord Himself led me among them (the lepers)... the Lord gave me faith in churches... the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests... the Lord gave me some brothers... the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel... the Lord revealed a greeting to me... the Lord has given me to speak and write the Rule...” St. Francis reports that it was always the Lord who showed him what to do in the most important and decisive moments of life. The Saint responded to this Divine action with obedient collaboration.

The foundation of Franciscan obedience goes beyond adherence to our rules of life or to the constitutions and statutes that guide our Orders. It flows from an intimate and loving following of Jesus, is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and leads to an intimate relationship with the Father. It is only with this in mind that the practical dimensions of obedience can be understood. For St. Francis, one of the primary places where obedience is lived out is in the fraternity. The Franciscan fraternity is not just a group of people who have agreed to live together or share life. It is a reality born out of obedience to divine inspiration and an attentive listening to the Gospel. It is only then that it can become the “privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members” (*O.F.S. Rule*, article 22). It is important to emphasize the profound evangelical character of Franciscan obedience. Both for individual Franciscans and for the fraternity as a whole, it requires a constant search for the will of God and a willingness to embrace that will and follow it, even when it is difficult and requires sacrifice. Obedience is nothing more than listening attentively and devotedly to the will of God as it is mediated to us through a variety of channels and a willingness to follow it. Foremost among these are, of course, the Sacred Scriptures, the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church, the rules and constitutions of our respective Orders, the ministers of our fraternities, the brothers and sisters in our fraternities, and the spouses and families for our married brothers and sisters.

Once again, the *Rule of the O.F.S.* captures the spirit of St. Francis in its presentation of obedience. “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” (*O.F.S. Rule*, article 10). This article of the *Rule* is expanded in a wonderful way in the *General Constitutions*: “‘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” (CC.GG. 10). These documents are clear in stating that Jesus, who was always attentive to the Father’s will, is the exemplar of Franciscan obedience. He is the “book” that directs and guides the lives of Franciscans, seculars and religious alike.