

## What is a Public Association of the Faithful?

“The OFS is a public association in the Church” (article 1.5, *General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order*). What does being a public association of the faithful mean for members of the Order?

### Associations of the faithful

“The Church recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit among the faithful, inspiring various joint efforts to promote the Christian life, in general, and to promote specific aspects of our life in Christ, for example, the Sacred Liturgy, Catholic education, works of charity and Christian witness in the various fields of human activity and endeavor. An association of the faithful, by definition, always shows respect for Church authority and works to promote the unity and strength of Church life. It also means that the members of the association respect those who are members of other Church associations and seek harmony among all those working for the Church. By definition, the members of an association of the faithful join the association freely.

### Private or public associations

“What is the difference between a private association of the faithful and a public association of the faithful? A private association exists in virtue of a private agreement among its members. A private association may or may not be recognized by the local Church authority, according to the wishes of the members. If the association wishes to be recognized as a private association of the faithful, then it must submit its statutes for review by the competent Church authority (canon 299, §§1-3).

“A public association of the faithful is established by the competent Church authority. Some associations of the faithful must be public because of the nature of their apostolate, namely the handing on of Christian doctrine ‘in the name of the Church’ or the promotion of the Sacred Liturgy or ‘purposes whose pursuit is of its nature reserved’ to Church authority (canon 301, §1).” The Secular Franciscan Order is a public association.

“Who is the competent Church authority? For associations which are universal and international, it is the Holy See.” This applies to the Secular Franciscan Order. “If the association is national in scope, it is the conference of bishops of the nation. If the association is diocesan, it is the diocesan bishop (canon 312, §§1-3).



### Rights and responsibilities

“All associations of the faithful, public and private, must have ‘their own statutes which define the purpose or social objective of the association, its seat, government, and conditions required for membership and which determine the manner of its acting’ (canon 304, §1). The statutes protect both the nature of the association and the rights of those who join. Without statutes, the association can be wrongly used for purposes other than those for which it was erected or can be operated without respect for all the members.

“Because they are in the Church, associations of the faithful are ‘subject to the vigilance of competent ecclesiastical authority which is to take care that the integrity of faith and morals is preserved in them and is to watch so that abuse does not creep into ecclesiastical discipline’ (canons 305, §1; and 323, §§1-2). The vigilance of Church authority over associations of the faithful does not, in any way, diminish their freedom to pursue their stated purposes but guarantees that their activities are carried out in the communion of the Church. A public association of the faithful becomes a juridic person in the Church and receives a mission from the Church to achieve ‘the purposes it proposes to pursue in the name of the Church (canon 313). As a result, the competent Church authority approves the statutes and any revision of the statutes of a public association (canon 315), ... The complete Church discipline regarding associations of the faithful is found in canons 298-329 of the *Code of Canon Law*.” [Excerpts from Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, D.D., J.C.D.’s article published in *The Tilma* newsletter of the Marian Catechist Apostolate, Summer 2007; New April 2024]