

Make Me An Instrument Of Your Peace

by Sarah and Dan Mulholland, O.F.S.

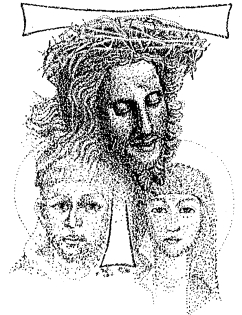
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OUR GOSPEL FOUNDATION

In order to understand what Peace and Justice means for Secular Franciscans, we must start with Christ – as Francis did. In the Gospel of Matthew (22: 34-40), Jesus gives us the Great Commandment:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they assembled in a body; and one of them, a lawyer, in an attempt to trip him up, asked him, “Teacher, which commandment of the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it; You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well.”

We firmly believe that this commandment – to love God and one another as Christ loves us – is the basis from which our call to be peacemakers comes. As the Catholic Bishops of the United States stated in their 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, “Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peace makers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus” (#333).



We are called to love one another as Christ loves us. We are called to be in harmony with one another. Article #5 of the *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* instructs us to “seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ” in all spheres of life. Article #13 of the same *Rule* challenges Secular Franciscans to “accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ.”

So, we see that we all image Christ. We are all in relationship with God and with one another. This realization brings responsibility. St. Francis called all creatures brothers and sisters because he recognized their unity of origin. He saw God in all persons and in all creation. We encounter God in love of our neighbor and we have St. Francis to show us the way.

St. Francis announced peace because he truly had peace in his heart. Through conversion, turning to the Lord, he had peace in his heart. And because he was filled with peace through conversion and love, St. Francis became a peacemaker. His inner peace flowed out in witness and service. As his followers, Secular Franciscans also are called to be peacemakers.

Because he saw God in all people, Francis became a reconciler. He maintained respect for all his brothers and sisters, not making them “enemies” but trying to move them to nonviolent reconciliation through dialogue. Like St. Francis, Secular Franciscans are called to be reconcilers. As followers of Christ, with St. Francis as guide, Secular Franciscans are called to live the gospel, to seek inner conversion and peace, to bring the gospel message, as brothers and sisters with all people, as reconcilers of injustice, and in harmony with all of God’s creation.

SECULAR FRANCISCANS AND PEACE AND JUSTICE – AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



St. Francis himself established the Third Order for lay people and secular clergy who desired to follow Jesus in a special way, but were obliged to remain “in the world.” The “Tertiaries” were to exercise their apostolates in the world as a kind of leaven, as witnesses to Christ. In 800 years, there have been only four *Rules of Life* approved by various Popes for the Secular Franciscan Order. It is interesting to see how the early *Rules* specifically address issues of Peace and Justice, and how they differ from the *Rule* by which Secular Franciscans live today.

Rule of 1221

All Candidates had to pay all debts before entering fraternity. Almsgiving and works of mercy were stressed. Fraternity members had to be reconciled with their neighbors and live in harmony with the other members. They could not sue in civil court, but had to bring disagreements to the bishop or fraternity minister to be settled. They were forbidden to take oaths of fealty and could not bear weapons. They were exempt from military service. In terms of lifestyle, the tertiaries were to wear simple clothing and to engage in fasting and prayer.

Rule of 1289

Men could now bear arms in defense of church, faith, their country, or with their minister’s permission. They could take solemn oaths “to maintain peace,” to defend the faith, or when making a contract for sale or purchase. How attitudes had changed in only 68 years!

Rule of 1883

The *Rule of Life* became streamlined and more accessible. Strict lifestyle requirements were lessened, so more people could and would join. Pope Leo XIII wanted the Order to be a means of social reform and as a result, until 1912 in Europe, members of the Franciscan Third Order Secular were very active in social, economic and political projects.

In 1912, Pope St. Pius X in a letter *Tertium Franciscalium* stressed the Third Order as a religious order. Its primary purpose was the personal sanctification of its members. The focus was on personal spiritual growth and inner peace and so peace and justice activities were de-emphasized. There were other vehicles for social action and ministry (for example, the Catholic Action movement in the United States in the 1930s). Social action was not a role of the Secular Franciscans at this time. This *Rule* of 1883 was in place up until the Second Vatican Council and is the *Rule* under which many Secular Franciscans were professed. One sometimes hears it referred to as “the old *Rule*.”

Rule of 1978

Then came Vatican II, with its emphasis on the changing role of the laity. All Orders and religious communities were called to return to their roots, to rediscover the spirit of their founders. For Secular Franciscans this meant the roots of Franciscan values and a Franciscan charism. The *O.F.S. Rule of 1978* (sometimes called the Pauline Rule in honor of Pope St. Paul VI who promulgated it) truly reflects the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is both inspirational and challenging. The model of sanctity for Secular Franciscans changed. Prayer is still primary, but now Secular Franciscans must learn to balance action and contemplation, to move from “gospel to life and life to the gospel” (article #4). We Secular Franciscans of today must continue to look to St. Francis to show us the way, as he has since 1221.

Justice

The first place the *O.F.S. Rule* addresses issues of peace and justice is in article #15, which states: “Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith.”

As Secular Franciscans, we have a slightly different charge than our brothers and sisters of the First and Second Orders and the Third Order Regular. We are in the world. We are given a special vocation – to be leaven, to bring religious values to bear in our daily tasks, through the witness of our lives, and also through our actions.

Father Roland Faley, T.O.R., who was Minister General of the Third Order Regular at the time of the promulgation of the *Rule of 1978*, wrote: “It is this transformation of society, through personal and collective initiatives, that is central to the lay Franciscan call. One cannot help but note the balance present in the new Rule in stressing the importance of both witness and prophecy – in Article #15 ... testimony ... AND ... courageous initiatives ...”



We are called by our *Rule* to show justice ourselves, and to motivate justice in others, including in the public forum of politics, business, economics, etc. Tom Grady, a Franciscan brother, has written that “Justice is another way of living fraternal relationships.” Justice sees all creation as one. Franciscans must work for justice because we live in relationship and value all life.

When St. Francis and the early brothers left Assisi to live among and minister to lepers, they were performing corporal works of mercy. But they were doing much more. They also made a social statement because of their justice perspective. They saw lepers as brothers and sisters. The townspeople of Assisi saw lepers as outcasts, banished from their town. But the Franciscans saw the lepers as brothers and sisters. Their decision to minister to the lepers was indeed a work of mercy, but it was also a rejection of injustice and an affirmation of equal, fraternal relationships.

Secular Franciscans are charged with mirroring this approach. We must see our acts of charity stretched to become actions on behalf of justice. This means we must question the structures that create the injustice. We all must work to empower those who are victimized, oppressed or dehumanized by injustice because we live in fraternal relationship with God and one another.

For example, many of us work in soup kitchens. We need to do this; we need to feed the hungry. But we also need to figure out ways to help the hungry move out of their oppression. We need to work to change whatever it is in our society that is causing our brothers and sisters to be so much in need.

Peace

The second specific place in the *Rule* that addresses peace and justice is article #19 which states: “Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon. Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others.”

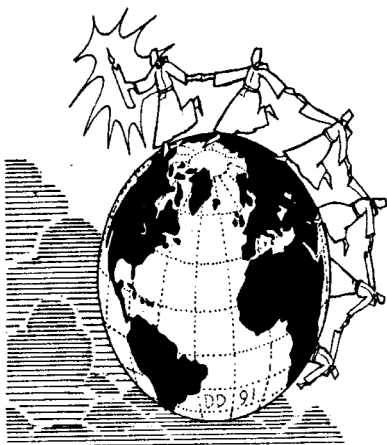
There are many other approaches that could have been taken to resolve the dilemma the townspeople of Gubbio felt when the wolf was attacking their town and eating their chickens. If this were happening in our town today, someone would probably suggest that we shoot the wolf, or that he be locked up, or shipped off to the far north where there are other wolves, in the hope that he would never come back. But it was Francis who was called to deal with the situation in Gubbio. Because he recognized the dignity of the wolf as one of God's creatures and remembered Jesus' words "love one another," Francis saw the need for dialogue, for nonviolence. Francis believed in the transforming power of love and pardon.

And it worked. Francis brought reconciliation between the wolf and the townspeople of Gubbio. There are many "wolves of Gubbio" in our world today, many polarized situations – in our personal lives and in our collective lives. It's so easy to create "us vs. them" situations.

If we listen to St. Francis, and if we listen to the *O.F.S. Rule*, we know that we cannot walk away from these situations. We must address them. Secular Franciscans must be reconcilers, (not winners, because when you are a winner, someone else is a loser). Of course it's valid to have disagreements and for people to be on the wrong track. Injustice exists. Evil exists. Sin exists. But for Franciscans, even when confronting sin and evil, the goal must be transformation, through bringing and witnessing God's love.

We must not dismiss the "other," or only see them as "the enemy," because whoever they are, they too are children of God. They are our brothers, our sisters, our neighbors – and the Gospel tells us to love them. When through love we are reconcilers, everyone wins. St. Francis always remained mindful of the dignity of "the other," even in confrontation. He didn't see an enemy, only another creature of God who hadn't been converted yet. Franciscan peacemaking flows from this concept.

WHAT CAN WE DO?



Secular Franciscans are truly gifted with the example of St. Francis and with the *O.F.S. Rule*. They both tell us strongly that peacemaking begins with prayer, both personal and collective. Fasting is important action. It helps us identify with the poor and hungry. And it is also by emptying ourselves that we give God a chance to work in us. Reading the Gospels will help us gain peace in our hearts and also learn the ways of peace.

Specifically as Secular Franciscans, our position in the world gives us opportunities to bring peace and act with justice. The Rule directs us to do so, in every aspect of our lives, in every situation in which we find ourselves.

No one can say what each Secular Franciscan should do to accomplish the work of peace and justice. We are all different, with different gifts and different things that draw us. Each of us must discern what it means to follow Christ in the manner of Francis. Each of us must decide what working for peace and justice means in our own lives. We are not all called to the same action, but we are **all** called to something. All Franciscans must reflect on injustice. All Franciscans must announce peace. And all Secular Franciscans must bring the Gospel to life and life to the Gospel.