

Franciscan Spirituality And Work

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Article #16 of *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* tells us we need to “esteem work both as a gift and as a sharing in the creation, redemption, and service of the human community.” In the *Rule* of 1223 written for the First Order friars, Saint Francis describes work as a grace and warns the brothers against idleness.



As you read this, you can begin to get the idea that to follow this Article one has to be countercultural in much of U.S. society. Many people see work as something one does to have money to keep food on the table, a roof overhead, and to do other things. People may not see their work as a grace or contribution they are making, as stewards of God’s world, to its continual functioning. To “esteem work as a gift” is a real stretch for many folks. The last thought on their mind would be, “Thank God it’s Monday so I can return to creating, redeeming, and serving the human community by the use of my talents in whatever job God has provided me at this time.”

Francis saw work as a grace and gift from God. We must be receptive to the grace and nurture the gift through prayer and openness to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Franciscan spirituality is based in Scripture. St. Francis’ *Rule* was promulgated to help all Franciscans, Secular and Religious, live the Gospel. Just as Saint Paul admonished the Christians of Thessalonica (see 2 Thessalonians 3:8-10) that those who refused to work shouldn’t eat, so Francis dismissed a brother because he wouldn’t work. In the early days of the Franciscan Movement, the Brothers often worked as day laborers. Francis noted that this brother who refused to work always ate more than his share at mealtime. As he dismissed this lazy brother from the Order, Francis said to him, “Go on your way, Brother Fly, because you want to feed on the sweat of your brothers but wish to be idle in the work of God. You are just like Brother Drone who wants to be first to eat the honey without doing the work of the bees” (Celano’s *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* [Second Life of Saint Francis], as found in Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2000, page 297).

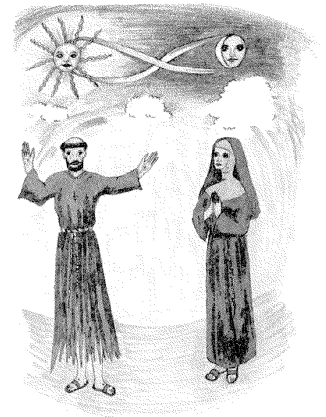
Francis’ idea of poverty was to depend totally on God and his own ability to work. Therefore, it was part of the fraternal work of the members to work regularly, and beg only when necessary for enough to keep the members fed and to carry out their work with the poor, especially lepers.

We are here to do God’s work with Christ and Francis as our human role models. You will see most Secular Franciscans wearing the plain Tau cross as a symbol of their profession. Others wear the Tau cross with a hand on each side of the cross. One hand symbolizes Christ’s hand; the other symbolizes the hand of St. Francis. Before he died, he also received the Stigmata, the wounds of Christ in his own body. This can be a reminder to us that we are Christ’s hands in the world now and it is up to us to do his work to make his world function and to bring his presence to others.



How do we figure out what God's plan is? Franciscans do this through prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit working in our fraternities. Both of these can be very hard because we take a risk that God, through the Holy Spirit, will ask us to do work we don't feel qualified or capable of doing. God will provide the strength if we are willing.

People often ask members of the Secular Franciscan Order (O.F.S.) what is the difference between Franciscans and the other secular orders in the Church. The O.F.S. is a (mostly) autonomous Franciscan Order of secular people [i.e., lay men and women and diocesan clergy] living a simple Christian life, following the original charism of St. Francis himself. As such, we live and work with dependence on God and NOT on material things, trusting that God will provide us with whatever we need. The O.F.S. has its own formation and governmental structure, all independent and interdependent with the Religious Franciscan Orders (we call this interdependence "vital reciprocity"). The spirituality of Francis about the role that work and prayer should have in our lives impacts all of us greatly. Francis spent much time in prayer. He would go off for days into seclusion with only one companion to meet his needs. Francis had a special reverence for the Eucharist, praying more and more to be like Christ in all possible ways. He had an Order of Lesser Brothers to run. Once Clare committed to his way of life and brought followers, Francis was also a founder of the Ladies of San Damiano, writing letters advising and helping Clare discern the *Rule* to govern their Order. All during his life, after his initial conversion experience, Francis would go off to pray to make sure his actions were directed by the Holy Spirit. He could have been like some people today who can't wait to get into supervisory positions so they can tell others how to do the grassroots work and no longer get their own hands dirty. He could have been but, no, that wasn't Francis' management style. He was a hands on, participatory manager. One of his early biographers, Brother Thomas of Celano, wrote, "From the time in which this man gave up transitory things and began to cling to the Lord, he allowed hardly a second of time to be wasted. ... He thought it a grave offense not to be doing something good, and he considered not going forward going backward" (*The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* [Second Life of Saint Francis], as found in Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2000, page 350). When he was not in solitary prayer, he was doing work right along side the other Lesser Brothers, all of them making their work their prayer. He worked with and alongside the poor, dressed the wounds of lepers, and begged for alms when necessary just as he expected everyone in the Order to do. What I hope I'm conveying to you is that Francis had a balance to his prayer and work life. He didn't just pray and he didn't just work. He prayed to be directed in his work and to become a more perfect person as he carried out the actions he felt the Lord called him to do.



WORK, FRATERNITY, AND PERSONAL LIFE

Secular Franciscans are not called to be just like Francis. Rather, they follow the original charism of Francis himself along whatever paths they are called, but they are not striving to be clones of Francis. There is only one St. Francis of Assisi. We are called to be ourselves and to share our spiritual journey in fraternity with brothers and sisters who have chosen this same path. For some of us, being ourselves means we are inspired by the Holy Spirit to pursue the formation process and become professed. Others may not sense they have a call to become professed Secular Franciscans.

Those deciding to begin the formation process follow it through at least 18 months of learning and growing, culminating in a permanent profession of the O.F.S. *Rule of Life*. They recognize that they are on a lifelong journey of formation and growth that will only end when Sister Death visits them. Companions on this journey are sister and brother Franciscans from throughout the world. Of course, the ones with whom these new travelers will most intimately share their lives will be those in their local fraternities. There is no such thing as an “isolated Franciscan.” Francis always had at least one brother with him. When a person walks the Franciscan path, one of the greatest blessings is having brothers and sisters who are on that same path walking beside you, supporting and guiding you. Secular Franciscans come together to be in continual formation at all levels, to learn what is going on in the lives of their sisters and brothers, to pray very specifically for the needs of one another, and to learn how to help everyone grow closer to Christ in the ways of Francis. Active fraternal life is an essential part of the life of every Secular Franciscan. Only each member contributing his/her time and talents to make this happen can foster fraternal life. One aspect of being a Secular Franciscan is being a productive member of the local fraternity, allowing oneself to be nominated for office, volunteering to help with projects or responsibilities that foster fraternal life, and helping with initial and ongoing formation at all stages of this process. As they become more familiar with the structure of the regional and national O.F.S. Councils, they can make themselves available to help at those levels, too.

Active participation in improving the world, seeking equality for voiceless people, volunteering to tutor at the local high school, helping people who have no car to go shopping, helping supervisors above you consider the impact on workers of some major corporate decision, speaking warmly to the cleaning staff and letting them know you appreciate their efforts, volunteering at the local AIDS ministry, etc. (whether at home or away, whether paid or not) is an expectation for all Secular Franciscans. From the beginning of the Franciscan story, bringing Christ to the poor and marginalized of the world has been the work of the Franciscans. Was that an easy thing for these men and women, some of whom had been wealthy socialites? That’s doubtful. However, they listened to the Holy Spirit and went. Francis certainly stepped outside his comfort zone when, despite previous revulsion at the sight of a leper, he leaped off his horse and kissed the leper on the road. Was his next step to go home and just pray for these societal outcasts? He probably did that, but he also went into their communities being the hands of Christ meeting their needs for care and evangelization to show them they were his sisters and brothers.

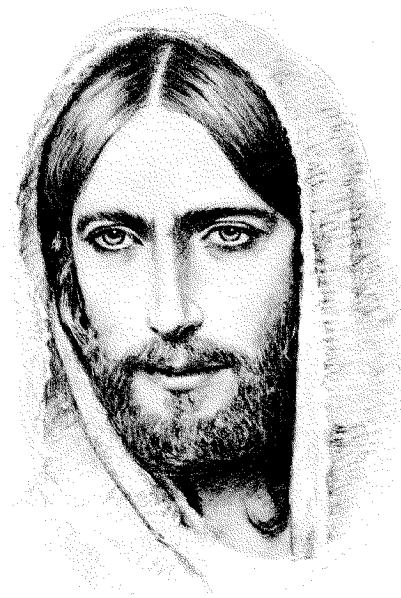


We are asked, “Do I have to give away all my money?” The answer is “No!” Each of us functions and brings Christ to others in the economic strata we have attained. However, earning more money should not be a primary reason for using your talents unless you are living at a poverty level now. Some questions to ask yourself during the formation process would include the following: “Would I deliberately sabotage a co-worker’s chance to get a promotion so I could get it instead?”; “Is having a managerial position with status something to strive for at my job? If so, why?”; “Do I tithe each year for church and charities?”; “In addition to tithing, am I generous to those less fortunate?”; “Could I purchase a less expensive home or car in order to have more free time to spend with my family, help build houses for people with none, donate my time to help at the food bank, etc.?”

WORK FROM A FRANCISCAN AND CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

How does one apply all this to the person in the workplace today? How does a person bring Christ into the workplace when one is working 2 – 3 jobs, has no benefits, and makes only minimum wage? How does one step out in faith to allow oneself to be nominated for office on the Council of the local fraternity? Each circumstance will be different. We should seek information regarding the teaching of the Catholic Church about work, finding sources that break this down into words that all can understand. All levels of formation need ongoing information about how to think about work from a Franciscan perspective. Some of our fraternities are comprised solely of members who are retired. They wonder why they even need information about work. These same people may be very active in doing all kinds of volunteer work, inside and outside their home, often influencing younger people without even knowing it. One of the countercultural ideas that comes from Franciscanism is that as long as people are using their time and talents for the betterment of God's world in whatever they feel called to do, volunteer work is considered God's work. That is just one of the messages we try to spread throughout society as we encounter people in our daily lives. Helping people think about esteeming (i.e., respecting and appreciating) work as a gift that contributes their share to the proper functioning of God's world and making that relevant to their lives today is our main purpose.

Have you ever known persons who, no matter what life is handing them, see God in their lives? They know they are supposed to be touching the lives of those encountered during this time; there is a quiet confidence about them. They live a Christ-centered life. Others around them may be talking and doing all kinds of crazy things but this person remains centered on the Lord. Despite ridicule, these people know they are on the right track. Others in the workplace begin to notice that this person doesn't discriminate, that this person treats all people and their ideas with respect and dignity. This worker recognizes the contributions of everyone else toward each part of the process that leads toward the whole. Perhaps **you** have been this Christ-centered person. Perhaps this would be a major change in your perspective and behavior at work. Is this an understanding you could adapt? You'll never know until you try. You could step out of that comfort zone of the old ways of acting if you haven't fostered community in your life and put on new ways. As Francis was dying, he said to his followers, "I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours!" (Celano's *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* [Second Life of Saint Francis], as found in Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2000, page 386).



REFERENCE

Armstrong, Regis J.; Hellmann, J. A. Wayne; & Short, William J. (Eds.). (2000). *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents II: The Founder*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press.