

FRANCISCAN LIVING

“Witnesses of the Church’s Mission”

By Francine Gikow, OFS

“Do you wish to bind yourself more closely to the Church and to work more intently to rebuild the ecclesial community and fulfill its mission among all people?”

This question is asked at the time of our permanent profession. We respond, “Yes, this is what I want.” It unites us more closely to the Catholic Church as we voluntarily offer to bear witness to the Church’s mission. But what does it really mean to bind myself more closely to the Church? What are my responsibilities as a witness to the Church’s mission? What difference does it make?

Since this is a two-pronged promise, let’s take a look at the first issue: how we bind ourselves more closely to the Church.

When we are professed, we promise to voluntarily become closer to the Church, our Mother. As you know, in order to be accepted into the Order, we must first be “a member in good standing” in the Catholic Church. That means that we must be *fully initiated* into the life of the Church (having received the sacraments of Baptism, Holy Eucharist and Confirmation) and be able to *participate fully* in the sacramental life of the Church. Any condition that impedes our full participation in the church (such as being in a second marriage without the benefit of annulment) would prohibit admission into the Order.

Francis insisted on always having a close relationship to the Church. Although he was aware of major problems in the church of his time, Francis knew that Jesus’ promise to Peter was still valid: “...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”(Matt. 16:18). Remember how Francis went to Rome to obtain the blessing of the Church for his small community? The humble Francis wanted his Order to always cleave to God and His Church. He saw the Mother Church as his larger fraternity even with her faults!

Francis also knew that the Church is our lifeblood! We are nourished in the sacraments in order to bear witness! Those who cannot fully participate in the sacraments cannot bind themselves more closely to

the Church and ultimately bear witness for the Church.

The second issue is this:

We are professed, not for ourselves, but for others. We are called (and we accept with our promises) to rebuild the ecclesial community. By our profession and by binding ourselves closer to the Church and ecclesial community, we voluntarily promise to live to a higher standard of conduct than other Catholics. We promise to be a role model in Catholic life. In other words, we “must walk the walk,” if we “talk the talk.”

Yes, what we do, matters! When we call ourselves “Secular Franciscans” and are members of an Order within the Church, people look at us and how we live. In fact, isn’t this what we are charged to do? We preach the gospel at all times through our lives. If our lives are not consistent with what we profess, then we are tearing down the Church, rather than building it up. We are committing scandal.

Since we are all sinners, sometimes Secular Franciscans fall short of the promises we make. Perhaps there is a re-marriage without annulment. Perhaps there is a lifestyle of living with a partner without a Church marriage. Perhaps there is a political pro-choice stand. The fraternity council must address these issues for the benefit of the fraternity and the Church community as a whole. For if a Secular Franciscan witnesses to a lifestyle counter to the laws of the Church without discussion, then it may seem right for others to do likewise. The fraternity’s and Church’s witness is impaired, and we fail in our promises of profession. Ultimately, we fail in our promise to God.

These thoughts of living to a higher standard, of being a role model, convict us whenever our behavior does not reflect Francis’ and gospel values. Yes, we are held to a higher standard because we said: “this is what I want!” It was a voluntary promise, one that no one coerced us into making.

Remembering our promises in profession, we do not want to disappoint our God. We want to continue my “yes” to God for the rest of our life and become living witnesses to the Church and to God.

¹ Rite of Profession or Permanent Commitment to the Gospel Life Within the Mass, as found in The Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1985, p. 22.