

FRANCISCAN LIVING

REMEMBRANCES OF THE “THIRD ORDER SECULAR”

By Francine Gikow, OFS

When I attended my first fraternity meeting, the Rule of 1978 had been only approved for less than five years. This Rule, written and promulgated with the blessings by the Holy See, was in response to the call by Vatican II for a renewal of all religious orders to return to “the spirit and aims of their founders.”¹ It superseded the Leonine Rule of 1883, but at that time, little did I know of the cataclysmic change I would experience as a professed Secular Franciscan. All I knew then was that I was attracted to the Order because of the members’ holiness, simplicity, humility, and care for others.

I was in one of the first initial formation groups begun under the “New Rule” with the white “Catechism”² written by Fr. Zachary Grant, OFM Cap. and taught by Secular Franciscans rather than a Friar Spiritual Assistant. Remnants of formation under the Leonine Rule remained for awhile—I was in “postulancy,” (not Orientation and Inquiry) and “novitiate,” (not Candidacy.) We still recited the “Monthly Pledge of the Third Order Franciscan,” which included rules from the Leonine Rule of monthly confession, recitation of the Office of the Twelve Our Fathers, and other traditions. I also took a religious name in the Order and was admitted with the scapular and cord with many members still wearing brown “habits.” I was professed in 1984 after six months in postulancy and a year and a day in novitiate — and if you missed even one lesson, you had to start over until you attended 12 consecutive months of lessons. Even our name changed: instead of being the “Third Order of St. Francis, Secular,” we became the Secular Franciscan Order!

When I remember the Order I initially joined in 1982, it is now a different Order from the one to which I still belong. The Third Order was very devotional in style at the time, with many public and private devotions, prayers, and practices that were reflective of the era. It also had the characteristics of an “Associate”- or “Affiliate”- type relationship with the first Order.³ Like a religious order’s “Associate” program, most fraternities were attached to a specific parish, monastery, seminary or Franciscan presence in the community, and were seen as “helpers” to the Friars. It provided much of the manpower for the First Orders’ apostolates, as well as financial support. The Third Order member’s identity was also often linked with the “Father” Spiritual Assistant, who determined everything in the Order, from providing initial and ongoing formation, council management, finances, and apostolates: in other words, Father ran the fraternity. Because of this direction, some fraternities were so invested with “their” Friar that attendance and involvement in fraternity life

suffered when that friar was transferred or a new Spiritual Assistant was appointed. In addition, the same geographic area or city might have many unrelated fraternities established by different provinces of the First Order and Third Order Regular Friars. All were Third Order Secular Franciscans, but they never interacted together, never knew each other, and had differing traditions and fraternity life.

As the Rule of 1978 was being implemented, however, the Order began changing. No longer was “Father” in charge — management of the fraternity, was turned over to the Secular Council, which, at times, was poorly equipped to take the reins. (One fraternity, I knew, had most of its Council resign because they did not know how to cope with the changes nor lead the fraternity!)

Members grieved over the loss of traditions: changes in the name of the Order itself; not wearing the “brown habit;” self governance; and finally, due to the reduced number of First Order and Third Order Regular Religious available, that frequent contact and sharing with the sponsoring province were decreasing and even disappearing. Their identity as a Secular Franciscan was challenged.

As the national fraternity began regionalizing (or uniting the local fraternities under many different friar provinces into regional fraternities), many members perceived this as an undermining of their links with “their” friar provinces, but in reality, many provinces withdrew from certain geographic areas or had very limited presence in some locations. The shortage of Franciscan religious has had a huge impact on the Order.

Some members, so upset with the changes, did not continue in the Order without their beloved Friars present. Active membership numbers in the Order fell as the newly-renewed Secular Franciscans sought to discover new ways to bring Christ to others. From the ashes, however, a core of well-formed, committed Secular Franciscans remained dedicated to the Order. The remaining members studied the “new Rule,” allowing transformation to occur, and sincerely tried to apply the Rule in their lives.

Watching these changes, I truly believe that God holds our Order very close to his heart. We are important to Him! I have seen His “touch” in many ways, influencing our Order and its direction. I *still* see Him in the brothers and sisters with their holiness, simplicity, humility and care for others. This is truly a blessed place. This is my home.

¹ Vatican II: *Perfectae Caritatis* (Renewal of Religious Life) II.12a

² Zachary Grant, OFM Cap. *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order with a Catechism and Instructions*. Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago: 1981.

³ Many active religious have Associate or Affiliate programs, which have women, and men “assist” the vowed religious with shared prayer, fundraising and community support.