



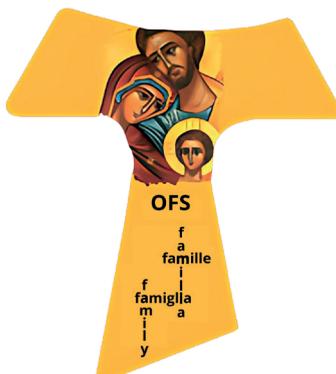
The place of members of the Secular Franciscan Order in relation to current events in the contemporary world



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I. Introduction

The contemporary world is marked by profound crises (poverty, wars, climate change, social fragmentation) as much as by rapid changes and new opportunities. The Second Vatican Council had already insisted on the Church's "solidarity with the entire human family"¹ and on the inseparable link between justice and peace. As Bishop Angelo Sodano recalled in 2005, the commitment of Christians in today's world is crucial: they are called to fight against poverty, conflicts and the tragedies of humanity, and to "promote justice and solidarity among people."² It is in this context that the Secular Franciscan vocation is situated: to live the Gospel in the manner of Saint Francis of Assisi, at the heart of society. Saint Francis himself affirmed that the Lord had given him "to live according to the form of the holy Gospel," and it is this "form of life" that he wanted for all his brothers and sisters (*First Letter to the Faithful*). Thus, the members of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) are invited to a prophetic witness in their ordinary existence. The objective of this article is to identify how, from the heritage of Saint Francis and the Holy Scriptures, Secular Franciscans can respond to current challenges, carrying a message of hope and fraternity.

II. Spiritual heritage and mission of the members of the Secular Franciscan Order

Secular Franciscans draw inspiration from the example of Saint Francis to "live the Gospel in the world."³ As his Testament shows, Francis received no imposed rules, "no one showed me what I should do," until "the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the holy Gospel."⁴ Ultimately, his "main concern was to live the Gospel, to live Christ."⁵ Secular Franciscans are therefore called to adopt this same evangelical spirit in their daily lives (family, work, social commitments), bearing witness to peace, justice and respect for creation. By their profession, they promise to follow the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order and to live "the love of evangelical poverty,"⁶ which develops trust in God and liberates interiorly.



The imperative of poverty, summed up by the formula "Receive everything, possess nothing," reflects the Franciscan ideal of detachment (as well described in the *Life of Saint Francis* by Thomas of Celano⁷). The three evangelical counsels (simple and fraternal among secular people) — poverty, chastity, and obedience — are lived "in their own secular state" (OFS Rule, art. 2) and guide their entire existence.

The fundamental values of the Franciscan charism — peace, justice, and the care of creation — come together and nourish one another. This unity is well recalled by Scripture and the Franciscan tradition. For example, the prophet Amos exhorts believers: "Let justice flow like water, and uprightness like a never-failing stream!"⁸

emphasizing that justice (including social equity) must flow continuously. In the Gospel, the seventh beatitude proclaims: "Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognised as children of God,"⁹ emphasizing the mission of Christians to reconcile people and create a climate of peace. Saint Francis, as we have seen, embodied this profound peace and trust in God (notably through his evangelical poverty). His **Canticle of the Creatures** praises God for all His creation ("Praised be you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth"¹⁰) and sees a holy brotherhood between humanity and nature.

Thus, the pillars of the Franciscan message can be summarized as follows:

- **Peace**– live and make peace reign ("peacemakers") as Jesus teaches;¹¹
- **Justice**– work for equitable justice (inspired by the Gospel and the prophets);¹²
- **Safeguarding creation**– take care of the Earth and all creatures, following the spirit of the Canticle of Creatures.¹³

In their witness, Secular Franciscans strive to manifest these values in their family, professional, and social lives. Through the concrete witness of their daily lives (hospitality, solidarity, honest work), they seek to make the Gospel visible. Their local fraternities live as a community of prayer and mutual aid, also drawing inspiration from the examples of Franciscan saints and the teachings of the Church.

III. The challenges of the contemporary world

Today's world presents numerous challenges to Franciscan evangelical values. Heightened individualism and materialism foster isolation and a loss of spiritual meaning. Economic inequality creates poverty and social exclusion, particularly affecting vulnerable families and children. Wars and conflicts (sometimes overlooked by the media) challenge the universal peace to which Christ calls us. Finally, the ecological crisis — global warming, loss of biodiversity, pollution — urgently demands an ethical conversion, consistent with the respect for creation advocated by Francis.

In this context, the most vulnerable (single-parent families, the unemployed, refugees) are often left behind, and many young people are desperately searching for meaning in their lives. New forms of exclusion (migrants, the mentally ill, social minorities, the poorly housed, etc.) are testing social cohesion. Members of the Secular Franciscan Order observe these realities of the world that "cry out to God" (cf. Psalm 34:17), and they are called to integrate them into the motivations of their commitment. The Catholic Church herself, through documents such as *Gaudium et Spes* or *Evangelii Gaudium*, reminds us that the crises of our time are "signs of the times"¹⁴ that require analysis and a credible response, notably through the formation of a responsible and supportive citizenship.

IV. The Franciscan response: attitudes, commitments and testimonies

Secular Franciscans provide a Christian response to contemporary challenges by cultivating **simplicity and fraternity** in a complex world. Their sober lifestyle, inspired by evangelical poverty, is a counter-model to excessive consumerism. As the OFS Rule (Article 11) and the General Constitutions (Article 15, 1) remind us, "Evangelical poverty demonstrates confidence in the Father, creates interior freedom, and disposes them to



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promote a more just distribution of wealth."¹⁵ Likewise, evangelical humility and charity (seeing Christ in others) are cultivated. Their fraternities live in conviviality and sharing, sometimes organizing fraternal meals, times of prayer or actions of solidarity for the poor.

They are particularly committed to **welcoming, accompanying, forgiving, and rebuilding**. Following the example of Francis (who loved to be a brother to lepers and sinners), they welcome the excluded and console the afflicted. They practice forgiveness, conscious of the call of the Gospel: as Saint Francis said in the *Canticle of Creatures*, "Blessed are those who endure in peace, for by you, Most High, they will be crowned." They reject violence (cf. GG CC 22,3), but "The renunciation of the use of violence... does not mean the renunciation of action,"¹⁶ and they seek to resolve conflicts through mediation and prayer.

Concrete examples: Many fraternities organize concrete initiatives: food aid for the poorest, support for families in difficulty (childcare, visits to the sick), environmental protection (cleaning green spaces, eco-responsible parish), or participation in peace demonstrations. Through fraternal life, they experiment with alternative models of society (solidarity economy, participatory democracy). Thus, by way of illustration, in July 2023, OFS volunteers participated in youth camps focused on social justice and ecology in several French-speaking countries. Their modesty and consistency – "instruments of peace" – are already in themselves a precious testimony. They also refer to the prayer attributed to Saint Francis: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace... Where there is hatred, let me put love, where there is doubt, let me put faith, where there is despair, let me put hope."

V. Members of the OFS in the human and ecclesial family

The Secular Franciscans want to be the "**leaven in the dough**" of society (cf. Mt 13:33), embodying the Christian message in all environments. As St. John Paul II asked, their Order must be "a model of organic, structural and charismatic union... presenting itself to the world as "a community of love".¹⁷ In every situation (family life, work, civic commitments), they try to build "a more fraternal and evangelical world"¹⁸ through the strength of their testimony. Their presence is attested all over the world, from the cities of Europe to the villages of Africa or Latin America: each local fraternity represents the "unity in diversity" desired by Saint Francis.

They cooperate closely with other spiritual movements and charitable initiatives. OFS members often network with youth movements (such as the Franciscan Youth, or YouFra for which the OFS is particularly responsible (GG CC art. 96)), social works (Restos du Cœur, Secours Catholique, Caritas), and popular education movements. As St. John Paul II emphasized in his address to the OFS in 2002, they are called to "hasten the coming of a civilization in which the dignity of the human person, co-responsibility and love may be living realities," deepening everywhere the "foundations of universal fraternity."¹⁹ They also cooperate with other Franciscan Families (the First Order, Third Regular Order) and local cultures, sharing interfaith and ecumenical projects. The youth dimension is represented by YouFra (Franciscan Youth), which allows adolescents to live a Franciscan commitment from an early age. Finally, the family is considered "the privileged milieu"²⁰ of the charism: secular spouses strive to transfigure their married and family life according to the Gospel, taking care to raise children in the Franciscan faith (teaching the faith, family prayers, works of charity with them).



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VI. Calls, action pathways, and commitments to renew

To remain relevant in the face of current challenges, Secular Franciscans must constantly renew their commitment. At the pastoral level, it is necessary to animate local fraternities through adapted training (Bible studies, spiritual retreats, workshops on social issues), in connection with the "signs of the times." Groups could be encouraged to pray more for world peace and for creation (for example, by spreading the prayer of the Cantic of Creatures or parish environmental care actions). It would also be useful to develop partnerships between secular fraternities and Church structures (parishes, dioceses) for inter-parochial solidarity projects.

On the civic level, members of the OFS are called to concrete engagement: in their respective countries, they can exercise their right to vote and participate in public life. They are called to permeate society with Gospel values, for example by promoting just laws or defending human dignity. They are invited to civic actions (climate demonstrations, peace initiatives, anti-poverty campaigns) always carried out with spiritual coherence and without violence. Ongoing formation is crucial: by studying the writings of St. Francis, the popes—including, for example, *Laudato Si'*, *Fratelli Tutti* by Pope Francis, and the Church's social encyclicals, they can refine their understanding of contemporary challenges. It is about discerning with the help of the Holy Spirit and prayer how to act concretely, uniting prayer and action.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Secular Franciscans are called to exercise a prophetic role, embodying the Gospel in the realities of daily life.

Faithful to their Rule, they can bear witness to the Gospel of fraternity and become in the world "a sign of hope." In a world often marked by violence and despair, their vocation is to be "an instrument of peace," according to the beautiful prayer attributed to Saint Francis: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace... Where there is despair, let me bring hope..."

May this prayer guide their words and actions, so that in every situation they make visible the mercy and love of Christ. For, as St. John Paul II concludes at that same meeting in 2002, "you are truly driven by the Spirit to reach the perfection of charity in your secular state, 'it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity.' It is necessary to commit oneself with conviction to this 'high degree of ordinary Christian life,'"²¹ which is holiness. By carrying the Gospel through their fraternal life, their humble service, and their trusting prayer, the members of the OFS can be a "presence of hope" in the transforming world, in joyful anticipation of the Kingdom of God.

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