



ORDO FRANCISCANUS SAECULARIS
- Initial Formation for Candidates -

Module 5: "The Nature of the OFS"
sheet 2

2. Franciscan Trilogy

The 1st and 2nd *'pivotal factors'* already referred to [sheet 1] may be expressed in the following way:


Fourth Lateran Council (1215): the apostolic [Franciscan] religion [religious institution] was added



Franciscanism began with the experience of a man, Francis, who, praying before the crucifix in the church of San Damiano in Assisi, received a call to conversion of life with the mandate: Repair my church! Francis did not intend to found an order, let alone three! But as others were drawn to share his new way of life he sought approval of the pope in Rome. We do not have the original rule [it was probably little more than a few passages from Scripture describing Christian discipleship rooted in total poverty]. And though Francis founded three Orders [the Franciscan Trilogy] - the first to do this, he gave them essentially only one rule: **a more perfect observance of the Gospel, according to their state of life**. But the commitment of a permanent conversion to the Gospel, bringing about conversion, [facere poenitentiam], must permeate the life of all three Orders. In view of their preordained apostolic mission, the three Franciscan Orders are not related among themselves hierarchically, but from the institutional point of view, they are on an equal level of importance, **in the need of recognising their spiritual interdependence and their mutual assistance**. Francis' establishing of three Orders was governed by ecclesiastical law at the time, that is a First, a Second, a Third Order—all sharing equally the Franciscan charism and mission, but by their very nature **three autonomous Orders**. Anyone who enters any one of these Orders belongs to a single 'entity' - to repair the Church - **where each part is in an intimate communion with the others**.


to the three already existing basic forms of eremetical [hermits], canonical [canons: priests living in community under a rule], and monastic religious life [religions]. The Council also indicated the way for the re-organisation of the communities of the Order of Penitents. Later, in the bull *Supra Montem* (1289), pope Nicholas IV provided a 'common legislative structure' to all the fraternities of Franciscan penitents. Thus, the three Franciscan Orders are institutionally autonomous and independent, while their spiritual vitality nevertheless needs their mutual support—rejecting the illusion of an easy self-sufficiency.

The 3rd 'pivotal factor' : the will of the Church expressed in its law and Magisterium:



What's an 'Order'?
And, What on earth
is a 'Third Order'?

Three distinct *orders* [states of life] goes back to pope Gregory in 6th Century: lay Christians, secular clergy, monks & nuns—arranged in a hierarchy from lowest to highest level of commitment. Innocent III—reversed the hierarchy from maximum to minimum: clerics & nuns, lay brothers & cloistered sisters, lay Christians in the world—free to marry, have possessions etc.

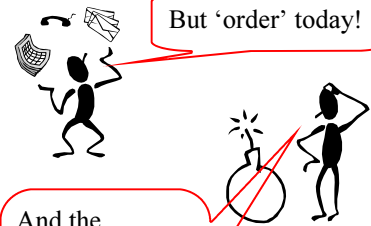


Okay. But...

That's not all. Franciscan terminology is inspired by this pattern, but with variations: religious & clerics, consecrated nuns, men & women [married & single] in secular life—but members of an 'Order' just the same. And that's the difference—this is what makes OFS, Secular Franciscans, unique!

The name of the movement of Franciscan Penitents itself did not start off as 'third order' but as **BROTHERS & SISTERS OF THE ORDER OF PENANCE OF ST FRANCIS** and similar. The name 'Third Order' began to be used more—and not without some opposition from penitents—from the end of the 13th Century.

I know. This is a problem in that we think either of something like 'taking orders', or 'order' as contrasted with chaos; or else we think of something very hierarchical—like Orders of Knights. Actually, the use of the word 'Order' in Church terms is a mark of privilege: only religious institutions that have their origin in or before Mediaeval times use it. More recent foundations are called 'Society' [Jesuits, 'Society of Jesus' (1540)] or 'Congregation', 'Institute', 'Missionaries' etc. By calling ourselves an Order we are witnessing to our origin and glorious history, rooted and grounded in a period when Christian faith was at the heart of European life and culture. But this must never be a matter of spiritual pride. Rather, it should be a constant reminder of the way God has used Franciscan life—of which we are an integral part—to spread the Gospel empowered by the Holy Spirit.



And the 'others'. I mean, what does the Church think about them?

Associations whose members lead an apostolic life and strive for Christian perfection while living in the world and who share the spirit of some religious institute under the higher direction of that same institute are called third orders or some other appropriate name. [CIC, 303]

Let us not forget that there are other groups of lay faithful, committed apostolically, which don't go back as far as us or do not have either origins or structures like ours, also boasting the name of third 'Order' - Dominican, Carmelite, Augustinian and so on. So the Code of Canon Law (1983) reserves a canon specially for 'third orders' as specific associations which differ from simple public or private Associations of the Christian faithful. We will, however, see how they differ from us—for, you see, we have 'Rule', 'Constitutions', and autonomy—as was said earlier. Secular Franciscans: a **unique** Order.