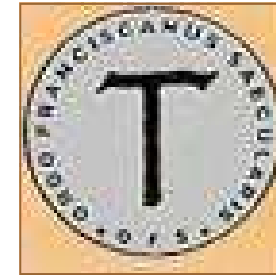


Certainly we know this already to an extent. We find the Lord active in our family life which is certainly a big part of our world. Seculars also find God's immanent presence deeply imprinted in nature. And we care for society's victims in countless ways, coming through this service to a deeper understanding of Christ's presence in the poor. Once we more fully understand and learn to accept our proper vocation and mission—callings which are intensified and focused for us as Franciscans, Seculars can become leaders among the laity for the Church in the world, "taking an active, conscientious and responsible part in the mission of the Church in this great moment in history." [*Christifideles Laici*, 2] We will come to en flesh the ideal described by Fr John Bertolucci in *The Disciplines of a Disciple*:

- You and I as disciples have a very special mission to be men and women of influence. God wants us to exert influence not only in our churches but also in our society and in our government, in the marketplace and the schools; in our place of employment and recreation; in medicine and law and other important professions. Wherever we happen to be as disciples of the Lord, we are to have influence. We are not supposed to be men and women who are letting history happen to us. We are supposed to be happening to history. God wants to equip us and lead us forth in mighty ways that will actually make history happen... We are to be aggressive, outgoing, and assertive in desiring to change things in accord with the principles we have learned in the Word of God. [p 120] **So burst!**



'FINDING IDENTITY AS A *SECULAR* FRANCISCAN'

by **Edward M Zablocki OFS**

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In 1993 Edward Zablocki was Vice Minister of Holy Name Province of the Secular Franciscan Order and an administrator at the State University of New York at Buffalo where he was also working toward a doctorate in higher education. His wife, Mary, who is also a Secular Franciscan is a registered nurse and freelance writer. They live in Buffalo, NY, with their two sons, Francis and Paul.

The operative phrase which keeps me focused as a Secular Franciscan is “conversion”. I have come to understand that conversion represents the alpha and omega of my life as a Secular. Works by Raffaele Pazzelli TOR and Robert Stewart OFM have made it clear to me that conversion means today what penance meant at the time of Francis. So I feel connected in a very real way with the Seraphic Father’s first lay followers, the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. Article 7 of the Rule now takes on special meaning:

- United by their vocation as “brothers and sisters of penance”, and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls “conversion”.

Conversion is also my future. I now understand my vocation as a Secular Franciscan as a call to on-going conversion in all aspects of my life. The new General Constitutions confirm this understanding :

- Secular Franciscans...propose to love in a spirit of continual conversion” [Article 13]

It is a daily struggle: being converted to a more Christ-centred prayer life, to a more gospel-oriented lifestyle, to a more Francis-inspired apostolate by faithfulness in living our the Rule as a way of life. It is a daily struggle: being personally converted affectively, intellectually, morally, socio-politically and religiously [to image conversion as suggested by Bernard Lonergan SJ]. But Article 7 does go on to say that “human frailty makes it

- been my most difficult task. [*Letter to the SFO Holy Name Province* on the occasion of its 1986 Congress with the theme “Secular Franciscans: Evangelisers of the Culture”]

We are called by the church to find a spirituality in a place where, in our hearts, we doubt that God can be found. If we knew and believed what the Church teaches—that we can meet the living God in places like politics, then we might more readily accept and carry out the Church’s intended mission for us: to be salt, light and leaven for the world.

What would St Francis do under these circumstances? He found God immanent in everything. Perhaps he would compose a Canticle of the Culture, helping us to see the good and godly in Brother Boeing and Sister IBM, Brother Republican and Sister Democrat, Brother Michael and Sister Madonna. It’s enough to make one want to burst. But wouldn’t it be wonderful [and eminently Franciscan] to start finding God in every aspect of our lives in the world and to stop being spiritual schizophrenics.

Secular Franciscans must grow in an understanding of the secular spirituality articulated in the documents of Vatican II and intended but implicit in the SFO Rule. We need to be converted to the vision of the Church which has been telling us that we will grow in holiness by participating in that discordant, untidy, unpredictable place we call the “world”, that it is a primary school of holiness and arena for evangelical action.

1990 General Constitutions, Secular Franciscans are still becoming acquainted with this new document.]

As a consequence, there is resistance to embracing aspects of the 1978 Rule which are grounded in a secular spirituality, for example, the apostolates. On the one hand, we have the apostolic ideal as described by Fr John Vaughan OFM while he was serving as Minister General:

- What a contrast between your previous Third Order spirituality and the modern Church's expectations of you as Secular Franciscans! You are now expected to find God in modern culture, politics and economics, and to delight in his presence there. You have been thrust into the front line as leaders in public life and transformers of secular culture. [*Letter to the Holy Name SFO Province* on the occasion of its 1986 Congress with the theme "Secular Franciscans: Evangelisers of the Culture"]

But on the other hand, we are at times confronted with a reality which differs from this ideal, as conveyed by Fr Carl Schaefer OFM, Spiritual Assistant to the International SFO:

- I find that it is difficult to guide many Secular Franciscans into an active apostolic way of life. They want prayer, even active participation in the liturgy; they want spiritual assistance from the friars. But to convince them that living the gospel necessarily involves being sent out to the world, and to form them to be publicly apostolic has

makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily."

Since I've come to this understanding of the rule, I've shared with others my concern about its implications. "We ought to tell people what they are getting into if they take the Rule seriously", I would say, "This is powerful stuff." It reminds me of a section in Nikas Kazantzakis' *Saint Francis*:

- "Never enough", Francis shouted. "It is not enough, Brother Leo." That is what God has shouted at me during these three days and nights— "Never enough." A poor man is made of clay and protests. I cannot take any more. God replies, "You can." And the man sighs, "I am going to burst." [p 119]

Of all the areas of my life in need of conversion, the most important for me personally at this time is conversion to a "**secular spirituality**". I believe it holds the key to helping us fully live out the Secular Franciscan way of life intended by the Rule. It is the key to living the kind of committed Christian life which the Church is imploring us to embrace as post-Vatican II lay Catholics.

What is a secular spirituality? It is the appreciation and incarnation of the reality that lay Catholics fulfil, both their vocation and their mission [apostolate] *in and through their participation in the world.*

The vocation of the lay person is the same as that of

other members of the Body of Christ—a call to grow in holiness, to become “fully mature in the fullness of Christ.” [Eph 4.13] The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states that “all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness.” [*Lumen Gentium*, 36] Pope John Paul II in his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [*Christifideles Laici*, 36] on the vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the church and in the World, says that the “world [is] the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfil their Christian vocation.”

Where do I grow in holiness? In the world! By what means do I grow in holiness? Through participation in the world!

But we cannot speak about the secular orientation of the laity’s vocation without also speaking about the laity’s mission [= apostolate]; the laity’s vocation and mission are inseparably intertwined. As the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity states: “In fact, the Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well.” [*Apostolicum Actuositatem*, 2] And both lead to deepening engagement with the world:

- The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their *involvement in temporal affairs* and in their *participation in earthly activities*...At the same time the vocation to holiness is intimately connected to mission and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the world.....

- Confident and steadfast through the power of God’s grace, these [lay people] are the humble yet great builders of the kingdom of God in history...Upon all the lay faithful, then, rests the exalted duty of working to assure that each day the divine plan of salvation is further extended to every person, of every era, in every part of the earth. [*Christifideles Laici*, 17]

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity stresses that lay people “ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task this renewal of the temporal order.” [*Apostolicum Actuositatem*, 7]

Efforts to develop a new Rule for the Secular Franciscans attempted, from the beginning, to be faithful to the secular spirituality enunciated by the Second Vatican Council [the first ground breaking efforts in the history of the Church formally to address the question of the distinctive spirituality of the persons in the lay state]. In his book, *De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam* [The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation], Fr Robert M Stewart OFM provides the fascinating account of the twelve year process resulting in the 1978 Rule. What is striking about this process is the expressed desire from the then—Third Order—members of the world over to give the new Rule a secular orientation.

But explicit references to the secular vocation and mission are notably absent from the 1978 Rule. [While, a secular spirituality is captured, to a degree, in the