

SPIRITUAL REFLECTION ON VOCATION PROMOTION

*«Before you were born, I set you apart and
appointed you as my prophet to the nations»
Jeremiah 1:5*

From the dawn of creation, each one of us has been uniquely chosen and called by God to fulfil and participate in His mission. This eternal and boundless love of God assures us that our purpose is neither arbitrary nor accidental—it is deliberate and divine. Vocation promotion is a profound spiritual task that involves discerning and embracing God's call in our lives. It is about nurturing a culture of listening and openness to the Spirit's guidance. Every vocation is rooted in God's initiative, and He patiently awaits our response, whispering to our hearts the words of Isaiah: *«I have called you by your name»* (Isaiah 43:1). This is a deeply personal and specific invitation, grounded in His boundless love.

The Church, in her wisdom, teaches us that every individual carries a God-given vocation, a unique calling inscribed in their being. Through baptism, this call is elevated, drawing us into the Church's mission to proclaim and live the Gospel.¹ For those called to the Franciscan charism, the invitation is to live the Gospel according to the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. Franciscan vocation promotion is about creating a culture that encourages individuals to listen for the quiet stirrings of God's voice in their lives. St. Francis himself heard this call in a moment of profound conversion, leading him to embrace a life of radical poverty and service.

The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order opens with a declaration that reflects this divine diversity of callings: *«The Franciscan family, as one among many spiritual families raised by the Holy Spirit in the Church [...]»*². This vocation calls us to embody Gospel values uniquely, responding to God's call like the Blessed Virgin Mary, who humbly submitted to God's will with her fiat: *«Let what you have said be done to me»* (Luke 1:38).

Vocation promotion is for those who have discovered their vocation and those who are still seeking vocations. For those who have responded to the call to follow St. Francis of Assisi, it is essential to continue deepening their commitment to live in the footsteps. For those who are still searching, it is important to give themselves the time to listen and respond thoughtfully.

Those who could belong to the Secular Franciscan Order

Catholics living in Communion with the Church³:

- Laity (men and women)
- The secular Clergy (deacons, priests and bishops)

Those bound by a perpetual commitment to another religious family or institute of life cannot belong to the OFS.⁴

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Vocation

The Holy Spirit is the prime mover in the story of any vocation. The Spirit acts as the divine voice that whispers in the depth of the heart, inviting us to trust in God's plan and step into the unknown with courage and faith. The Holy Spirit is both the initiator and sustainer. It is the Spirit who stirs the first inklings of a call within us, often through moments of prayer and discernment. Through prayerful discernment, we must allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit and affirm, as St. Francis did: *«This is*

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993,

² OFS Rule 1

³ GG CC 39.2

⁴ GG CC 2.2

what I wish, this is what I seek, this is what I long to do with all my heart»⁵. Having found what one wants, one continues to «Gaze into the mirror daily, O queen bride of Jesus Christ and continually reflect your face in it»⁶. Discernment is not a one-time event but a lifelong process that aligns our will with God's plan. As we discern, the Spirit becomes our companion, illuminating the path before us and providing the wisdom and clarity needed to make decisions.

As Secular Franciscans, we are invited into a deeper union with God through our vocation. Like young Samuel, who needed Eli's guidance to say, «*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*» (1 Samuel 3:10), we too require spiritual mentors, prayer, and community to recognize and embrace our calling. This lifelong journey reminds us of Jesus' profound words: «*You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last*» (John 15:16).

Vocation through the Lens of St Francis and Other Saints

St. Francis of Assisi, upon hearing the Lord's call to «*Rebuild my Church*», initially interpreted it as a directive to repair the physical structure of San Damiano. It was only through prayer and discernment that he understood his mission was to renew the Church spiritually, inspiring countless followers to embrace lives of humility, peace, and simplicity⁷. His vocation was born out of an encounter with Christ that moved him to embrace the Gospel with simplicity and joy. Francis heard God's call to «*rebuild my Church*» and responded with unwavering trust, dedicating himself to a life of service, peace and harmony with all creation.

Similarly, St. Clare of Assisi exemplified the Franciscan spirit with her radical poverty and trust in God's providence. She walked alongside Francis as a beacon of light, proving that vocation is not about seeking glory but about embracing Christ's humility. Another inspiring example is St. Elizabeth of Hungary, a patroness of the Secular Franciscan Order, who lived out her vocation as a queen by dedicating her life to serving the poor and the sick.

In modern times, St. Marianne Cope exemplified the Franciscan charism by courageously tending to lepers in Molokai, Hawaii. Her life was a testament to selfless love, mirroring Christ's compassion for the marginalised⁸. These saints remind us that every vocation, though unique, is united in its ultimate goal: to bring Christ to the world.

The vocation of another secular Franciscan saint, Gianna Beretta Molla (1922-1962), shone brightly through her devoted fulfilment of the daily responsibilities of a wife, mother, and doctor. Her heartfelt desire was to form a truly Christian family. Gianna became renowned for the sanctity of her life and her extraordinary final act of love, choosing to sacrifice her own life for that of her baby.

The common thread among these saints is their willingness to say Yes to God in the face of uncertainty, trusting that their lives would bear fruit for the Kingdom. Their stories encourage us to discern our vocations with patience and prayer, knowing that God's call is tailored to our unique identity and purpose.

Understanding Our Vocation

As the General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order state: «*The vocation to the OFS is a specific vocation that gives form to the life and apostolic activity of its members*»⁹. The specificity of our vocation is in the intensity of how we live and serve. Our vocation is unique in that it embraces the spirit of St. Francis while remaining fully immersed in the world as laypersons or secular clergy. There

⁵ LM, 3.1

⁶ St. Clare, 4th letter to Agnes of Prague, 15

⁷ Sabatier, P. (2000). *The Life of St Francis of Assisi*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

⁸ Giles, J. (2010). *St Marianne of Molokai: Servant of the Lepers*. New York: Orbis Books.

⁹ GG CC 2.1

are five aspects that are vital in understanding our vocation: Living the Gospel, Fraternity, Witnessing to Peace and Justice, Prayer and Contemplation, and Faithful Presence in the World.

However, many members often struggle to articulate the distinctiveness of their vocation. This is sometimes reduced to a list of pious practices or retellings of St Francis's life, leaving our vocation vague to others. To counter this, we must deeply understand and live out the defining characteristics of our Franciscan vocation, allowing it to become a compelling witness to the world.

Secularity: Living the Gospel in the World

As Franciscans, our vocation is anchored in secularity. The General Constitutions affirm: «*The secular state characterises the spirituality and the apostolic life of those belonging to the OFS*»¹⁰. This means we are called to build God's Kingdom through our everyday lives, working in the world while striving for perfect charity. Secularity enables us to bridge the gap between the sacred and the ordinary, infusing Gospel values into every aspect of life¹¹. The Secular Franciscans should constantly ask the Lord «What do you want me to do?»¹².

Pope Francis deepens the sense of our mission in his address: «*May your secularity be full of closeness, compassion and tenderness. And may you be men and women of hope, committed to living it and also to organising it, translating it into real everyday situations, in human relations, in social and political engagement; nurturing hope in tomorrow by alleviating the pain of today*».¹³ The Minister General of the Secular Franciscan Order Tibor Kauser further explains the characteristics of the secular Franciscan vocation echoing the words of the Holy Father, «*Secular Franciscans are free to do good; they're inventive and talented; they're sensitive for justice; they're respectful of creation; they're seeking peace; they're seeking simple solutions; they seek minimum instruments but maximum compassion and solidarity; and they have courageous meekness and tender determination*».¹⁴ This shows a maturation in the vocation a following of Christ wherever he goes.

By secularity we mean that our mission is a call to integrate faith and action in daily life; our mission is woven into the drapery of everyday experiences. Every moment becomes an opportunity to reflect the values of the Gospel. Thus, rather than preaching with words, our mission equally involves living in a way that inspires others to seek God. It is a conviction that living the Gospel means actively engaging with the world's challenges.

Promoting Vocations

Promoting vocations involves creating awareness and inspiring individuals to consider this unique calling to live the Gospel in the world. It is about sharing the beauty, joy and mission of the Franciscan Charism as it applies to our life. Experiences and statistics have demonstrated that promotion of vocations is both a privilege and a responsibility for every Franciscan. Article 45 of the General Constitution states: «*The promotion of vocations to the Order is a duty of all the brothers and sisters and is a sign of the vitality of the fraternities themselves*»¹⁵.

Research highlights the effectiveness of various initiatives such as «Come and See» experiences, discernment retreats, and mission opportunities in encouraging vocations. Modern tools like social

¹⁰ GG CC 3.1

¹¹ OFS Rule 2

¹² 2 Celano 6

¹³ Pope Francis, Address of his holiness Pope Francis to the participants in the General Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order, 15 November 2021.

¹⁴ Secular Franciscans USA. (2015, October 15). General Minister Tibor Kauser, OFS, of Hungary described some characteristics of the Secular Franciscan vocation Friday to some 80 ministers, delegates and observers. [Image attached]. Facebook.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=933523126702152&set=a.129336213787518>

¹⁵ GG CC 45.1

media also play a pivotal role in reaching potential candidates¹⁶ Yet, the most impactful invitation remains the lived witness of fraternity members. As one report notes, «*It was the experience of members and the way they are living religious life that was most influential in the decision to enter their institute*»¹⁷.

Authentic vocation promotion demands a sincere, prayerful and intentional approach that respects the uniqueness of each individual's calling. Thus, it requires determination, consistency, and patience. This process is often compared to the work of the Sower in Jesus' parable. As we remember well from the parable, the result of sowing depended on the soil on which the grain fell. For us, this can mean how faithfully we called like Francis to rebuild the Church. Also, inspired by his example, we live our Secular Franciscan vocation to be «*witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words*»¹⁸. For us, vocation promotion must reflect the charisms of simplicity, humility and fraternity. Living and sharing these values authentically demonstrates the richness of our Franciscan way of life. Thus, it must stem from a deep love for Christ and for the Church, a genuine desire to help others find their path and a commitment to walking the journey with them.

Those who feel the voice of the Lord calling them to the Secular Franciscan Order

Should listen to God's voice, pray and seek guidance.

They have to go through a process of Formation. Formation is done in stages from the time one feels drawn to join the Secular Franciscan Order to the time of solemn profession which is not the end of the vocation journey but a new beginning to live in the fullness of life in Christ following the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi. Our true vocation is tried through how we live after making the permanent profession.

Conclusion

Our vocation as Secular Franciscans is a sacred gift and a profound responsibility to live the Gospel in the world with simplicity, humility and joy, following the example of St. Francis. By living authentically and joyfully, we not only honour God but also inspire others to consider the Franciscan way of life. Our calling challenges us to be living witnesses of Christ's love, transforming ordinary experiences into opportunities to reflect God's presence. Let us pray for the grace to deepen our commitment to our vocation and to be instruments of peace, love, and hope in the world. By embracing our Rule of Life, we fulfil a unique mission to «*rebuild the Church*» and contribute to the unfolding of God's Kingdom in our secular context.

May we, like St Francis, continually seek to rebuild the Church—not with bricks and mortar but through lives transformed by the Gospel. Every day one has to remember the purpose, and always look to the beginning, holding what you holding, doing what you are now doing and not to cease.

¹⁶ Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate (2009). Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference. Washington, DC: Georgetown University.

¹⁷ Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate (2009). Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference. Washington, DC: Georgetown University, p. 11.

¹⁸ OFS Rule 6