

OUR O.F.S. ROOTS

Have on hand: O.F.S. Rule

How did we come to be? How did St. Francis group us together and start us up?



Niccolò Antonio Colantonio: Delivery of the Franciscan Rule, ca. 1440-1470

Someone should first read from our *Rule*, Article #1.

Bonaventure wrote: “For set on fire by the fervor of his preaching, a great number of people bound themselves by new laws of penance according to the rule which they received from the man of God. Christ’s servant decided to name this way of life the Order of the Brothers of Penance. As the road of penance is common to all who are striving toward heaven, so this way of life admits clerics and lay, virgins and married of both sexes. How meritorious it is before God is clear from the numerous miracles performed by some of its members.”¹

Among the almost countless number of men and women who have professed to follow in the footsteps of St. Francis for over 800 years, our Church offers us more than 200 canonized Saints (at least 71 are O.F.S.s) and more than 202 Blesseds (at least 114 are O.F.S.s) for our edification, encouragement, and assurance that this is an effective way of salvation.

In *Lauds of The Divine Office of Saint Francis*, Julian of Speyer and others wrote: “He wandered round about to preach and, by no human teacher taught, left the learned struck with awe. Of valor were the words he spoke, so that a fresh militia came to follow their new captain. Three were the Orders he arrayed: the Friars Minor he called the first; and the Poor Ladies were next, becoming the middle order; then thirdly came the Penitents, comprising men and women.”²

The *Prologue* to our *Rule* is recognized as St. Francis’ written guidance to those wanting to follow his way, as he addresses his letter to the “Brothers and Sisters of Penance.” [Please re-read it now.]

Thomas of Celano writes: “Many people, well-born and lowly, cleric and lay, driven by divine inspiration, began to come to Saint Francis, for they desired to serve under his constant training and leadership. All of these the holy one of God, like a fertile stream of heavenly grace, watered with showers of gifts and he adorned the field of their hearts with the flowers of perfection. He is without question an outstanding craftsman, for through his spreading message, the Church of Christ is being renewed in both sexes according to his form, rule and teaching, and there is victory for the triple army of those being saved.”³

Celano stated: “On account of these things [proclaiming peace, repentance and God’s word], many people who had previously hated both peace and salvation, with the Lord’s cooperation, came to embrace peace with all their heart; they became themselves children of peace and ardent seekers of eternal salvation.”⁴

Julian of Speyer records: “Then, comforted in the Lord, Saint Francis began to speak out more boldly owing to the apostolic authority he had been granted, and going around through cities, towns and villages, he steadfastly preached penance. He was particularly careful to show himself blameless in all things, lest he be thought to gloss over the truth with flattering words. Educated men marveled at the power of the words of him who had not been taught by man, and seeing the noble and lowborn, rich and poor crowd around him in bands, they astutely made their way to him



Benozzo Gozzoli: Scene 5 from the Life of St. Francis, 1452

as though to a new star rising in the darkness. In fact, he provided a plan of salvation to persons of every state and condition, age and sex, giving them all a rule of life. Today, the church rejoices that his felicitous leadership of both sexes has brought about a threefold army of those who are to be saved.

“As we mentioned above, he founded three Orders, the first of which he prized above all others by profession and habit, and which, as he had written in its Rule, he called the Order of Lesser Brothers. The Second Order, the Order of the Poor Ladies and virgins of the Lord, also mentioned above, likewise took its fruitful origin from him. The Third, also an order of considerable perfection, is called the Order of Penitents, which profitably brings together clerics and laity, virgins, unmarried, and married persons of both sexes.”⁵

According to *The Legend of the Three Companions*: “Similarly, both married men and women given in marriage, unable to separate because of the law of matrimony, committed themselves to more severe penance in their own homes on the wholesome advice of the brothers. And thus, through blessed Francis, a perfect worshipper of the Holy Trinity, the Church of God was renewed in three orders, just as the earlier repair of the three churches foreshadowed. Each one of these orders was in its time approved by the Supreme Pontiff.”⁶

Reviewing the life-sequence of St. Francis (1182 – 1226), what date is attributed to the start of the O.F.S.? We know Francis went with his 11 companions to Rome for approval as Penitents of Assisi in 1209; Clare began her new form of life in 1212. Many think that 1210 is the likely start of this movement among clerics and laypeople which evolved into the O.F.S.

Q1. What were the expressed reasons for people forming a “third order” around St. Francis?

Q2. Who are often named among the first O.F.S. members?

Q3. How did the O.F.S. fit into the picture of the Church then? And now?

Q4. What are MY reasons for being a member of the Secular Franciscan Order and Fraternity?

Q5. What might I do to improve the purpose and effect of the O.F.S. in my life?

Unfortunately, we do not find many identified O.F.S. persons mentioned in the writings about Francis in those early years. Blessed Luchesio and his wife Buonadonna Modestini are often listed as the first members. [An internet search will provide background information.]

Check the material on the role of the laity supplied in the *Catechism*, especially §897 – §913 and §940 – §943.

¹ FA:ED, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, 1260-1263, Vol. II, p. 553, Chapter Four, v. 6

² FA:ED, *Lauds of The Divine Office of Saint Francis*, 1228-1232, Vol. I, p. 338, #18: II-III

³ FA:ED, *The Life of Saint Francis, First Book*, 1228-1229, Vol. I, p. 216, Chapter XV, v. 37

⁴ FA:ED, *The Legend for Use in the Choir*, 1230-1232, Vol. I, p. 320, II, v. 4

⁵ FA:ED, *The Life of Saint Francis*, 1232-1235, Vol. I, p. 385, Chapter IV, v. 23

⁶ FA:ED, *The Legend of the Three Companions*, 1241-1247, Vol. II, p. 103, Chapter XIV, v. 60