



The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans,
Assumption BVM Province

Provincial Spiritual Assistant SFO - Assumption BVM Province

May the Lord give you peace. I hope that this greeting which was revealed to St. Francis by the Lord, finds a warm and secure dwelling within your heart.

Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Roch Niemier OFM, a friar from the Assumption BVM Province. This past June I accepted the responsibility of being the Provincial Spiritual Assistant for the Secular Franciscan Fraternities bonded to our Province. I am honored with the challenge and trust that I will be able to serve you well.

Throughout my life as a Franciscan I've been at times a retreat director and formation director. For the past 30 years, however, I've worked in Italy for five or six months of the year, directing pilgrimages in Assisi, La Verna, the Rieti Valley and Rome. I may have even met some of you along the way. The past 25 years I had been director of the pilgrimage operation but at the end of 2004, I stepped down as director. I spent some time on sabbatical, and now I'm learning the ins and outs of being a Provincial Spiritual Assistant. I'm new to this ministry and eager to serve as a brother to you and to learn from you. As the future unfolds I also hope to visit the fraternities and come to know you better.

Secular Franciscans Are Unique

The Secular Franciscan Rule begins with the words: "The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi." Having said that, what differentiates you and one who is simply a friend of St. Francis, one who is fascinated by his message of joy and peace and poverty? What is the distinguishing element between a member of the Secular Franciscan Order and a lay person who simply loves St. Francis and is inspired by his spirituality?

The line of demarcation, or the distinguishing element, is PROFESSION. The Rule says: "The SFO is the unity of all the faithful who, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own Secular state, and who ... by their Profession pledge themselves to live the Gospel in the manner of St. Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church." (SFO Rule, 2)

This could sound formal and juridical, but it is helpful to note that the essential and spiritual aspects of Profession are: (1) the renewal of baptismal promises, (2) a specific vocation to live the Gospel within a Franciscan spirituality and (3) a commitment to observe the Rule approved by the Church. Much could be said about each of these. For now, however, it is important to remind ourselves that Secular Franciscan Life is a specific calling or *vocation that includes a lifelong commitment* to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the secular world.

Thus, individuals join the SFO not because of a fascination for St. Francis but because of a call and commitment to a way of life with one's heart ever focused on Jesus, the Lord.

A Reflection: Conformity to Christ - San Francesco Piccolino

St. Francis of Assisi has often been described as the person in history who more than any other resembled Jesus Christ and Gospel living. That is what *conformity* would mean, a close likeness to another in behavior, attitudes and inner spirit.

A place in Assisi that lends itself to a consideration of Francis's conformity to Jesus Christ is known as **San Francesco Piccolino**, or **La Stalletta**. It is considered by many to have been the birthplace of St. Francis. It is near the main Piazza of Assisi, a short flight of stairs off the Corso Mazzini, or just down a side street next to the Chiesa Nuova. It is a quiet, tiny chapel with a few art pieces that speak to the mystery of giving birth. The

chapel itself has become a place where local people will pray for the needs of children or for a healthy pregnancy of a family member or friend. Expectant mothers are often seen praying within. The setting for prayer is inviting.



La Stalletta: San Francesco Piccolino

Francis's birthplace, however, is known to us only through legend. No documents or old papers in archives tell us of the event. Arnaldo Fortini writes:

According to the legends, Pica, destined to become the mother of a saint, came to the end of her term. In astonishment her intimate friends and the women of the neighborhood began to count the days still passing. Yet there was no sign of the expected event. Then, a stranger came to the threshold of the blessed house and gave the young wife the mysterious message that she would not be able to give birth to her baby except in a stable, in the same way that Mary bore Jesus. So Pica was taken to the stable next to the family house. There, on the straw, the baby who would become Saint Francis first saw the light of day. (A. Fortini, **Francis of Assisi**, 85)

We focus on this place not because of an attractive legend, but because it offers the opportunity to consider Francis's overall conformity to Christ. The above legend is a gentle starting point. Francis's mother, Lady Pica, (his father, Pietro, was away on business in France) could not give birth to her son until she went into the

stable connected with the household. As Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem, so Francis would be born in a stable in Assisi. It is fitting to explore the spirituality of conformity because the whole purpose of Francis's life was to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ as closely as possible.

Apart from the above, we can ask what are the events of Francis's life that writers draw upon? The early biographers all emphasize that Francis's conformity to Christ began when he encountered Christ from the Crucifix in the church of San Damiano. Further, when Francis heard the Gospel at the Porziuncola, and asked the priest to explain it to him, he immediately acted on what he heard. Another example is the story of Francis stripping himself naked before the bishop and his father. Julian of Speyer writes: "...the naked man of God had *conformed* himself to the naked one on the cross." And the most telling event that underscores Francis's conformity to Christ is that of the stigmata. There are other experiences as well that draw our attention to this reality.

We must be careful, however, not to confuse conformity with external manifestations. It is true that Francis, with his whole heart, wanted to imitate his Lord and Master. One can easily point to outward similarities, particularly in the way he lived poverty and practiced humility. Yet what is more important is to penetrate Francis's spirit. Above all he wished to *conform his heart* to Christ, something he realized most clearly in gazing upon the Crucified Savior. In this way Francis sought to take into his heart, into his inner spirit, the poverty, humility and charity so evident in Christ. Conformity for Francis meant a lifelong process of interior transformation. Conformity for Francis meant a heart that was humble; it meant poverty of spirit; it meant a compassion that reached everyone. His constant concern for the brothers and sisters was the same. In his admonitions and exhortations Francis was always admonishing them to purity of heart in all things, to bring their inner spirit in harmony with that of the Lord. That was the only conformity worth pursuing.

What was Francis's goal in this pursuit? To make obvious to a hungry world the Kingdom of God. We have no other reason to live.

Should you enjoy the privilege of visiting Assisi, search out **La Stalletta**. Allow this place, where tradition claims Francis's birth was similar to that of Christ's, to touch your heart. Hear our Lord invite you to conform your life to His. This quiet, out of the way, place lends itself to listening well to God's gentle spirit.