

# THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN FORMATION PROCESS

## Initial Formation Phases

### Part I: The Orientation Phase

When we look at the Secular Franciscan formation process, it is important to see it as a continuum, that is, each stage flowing into the next. Aspects that are essential in the first phase, Orientation, will still be essential in the second, Inquiry, the third, Candidacy, and into the Ongoing Formation of professed members.

During Orientation, it is essential that formation resources allow for dialogue and sharing since this is the ideal time to discern a prospective member's call to a Secular Franciscan vocation. If discernment is addressed early, it can save time and avoid heartache for both the individual and the Fraternity.

The materials used in Orientation should allow for comprehensive, yet nonintrusive, personal disclosure so as to discover the person's reasons for wanting to become a Secular Franciscan. We need to discern the extent to which their motivation is compatible with what we know the Order to be. In this way, potential "mismatching" can be handled early, avoiding much anguish for all concerned.

The formation resources used should encourage ample dialogue and sharing since this type of interaction is invaluable in assessing whether aspirants' life circumstances will allow them to commit to the Secular Franciscan lifestyle. Orientation is a favorable time to observe the whole person, physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and interpersonally.

While we're "getting to know them," we expect them to "get to know us," our roots and our charism. Therefore, some form of introduction to the lives of Saints Francis and Clare are appropriate as early as possible and throughout the entire formation process.

Especially useful during Orientation are resources that allow the Fraternity and the formators to gather knowledge about the individual's understanding of the Catholic faith. Remedial work takes time. If their knowledge is inadequate, perhaps involvement in the local church's adult religious education program or RCIA process would be appropriate BEFORE continuing with Secular Franciscan Initial Formation. Please make sure that these persons are fully initiated members of the Catholic faith.

- The Orientation phase of formation is critical. This is a time to watch for specific clues that the person before you is or is not suited for SFO life.
- It is a time for discerning whether or not the prospective member has the basic dispositions that are essential for entering into mature committed relationships such as those which membership in the SFO requires.
- The *Interview Guide for Prospective Members of the Secular Franciscan Order* is especially useful during this phase.

**Time frame:** *at least* three to four months

**Content for the Orientation phase (an OVERVIEW of):**

- an understanding of discernment and vocation (see *To Cling with All Her Heart to Him* by Fonck, page 5)
- brief review of Catholic doctrine and Christian morals
- an explanation of Franciscan prayer life and apostolic activity
- phases of Secular Franciscan formation and expectations
- introduction to the life of Saint Francis (perhaps in novel form, such as *Francis: The Saint of Assisi* by Mueller; or *Francis: The Journey and the Dream* by Bodo)
- introduction to the life of Saint Clare (perhaps in novel form, such as *Clare: A Light in the Garden* by Bodo)
- branches of the Franciscan family
- 1978 Rule and brief history of the Secular Franciscan Order
- an understanding of some of our Franciscan symbols
- a Franciscan prayer experience

**Rite:** Ceremony of Introduction and Welcoming (see *SFO Ritual*, pages 9-10)

**Bibliography:**

- Bodo OFM, Murray. (1992, revised & expanded). *Clare: A Light in the Garden*. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press.
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- Fonck OFM, Benet A. (1996). *To Cling With All Her Heart to Him: The Spirituality of St. Clare of Assisi*. Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press.
- Mueller, Joan. (2000). *Francis: The Saint of Assisi*. Allen, TX: Thomas More.

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# THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN FORMATION PROCESS

## Part II: The Inquiry Phase

When we look at the Secular Franciscan formation process, it is important to see it as a continuum, that is, each stage flowing into the next. Aspects that are essential in the first phase, Orientation, will still be essential in the second, Inquiry, the third, Candidacy, and into the Ongoing Formation of professed members.

The Inquiry phase of initial formation is a time for the most serious and prayerful discernment of the Inquirer's vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order. During this phase of initial formation, the Fraternity and the Inquirer continue to get to know each other more fully. Opportunities for dialogue and sharing continue to be important to ensure that the aspirant and the Fraternity are compatible.

During Inquiry and ***before the Rite of Admission***, certain aspects of the relationship between the Inquirer and the Fraternity must be examined. Prior to the Rite of Admission, the Fraternity needs to be confident that the Inquirer has an adequate grasp of the Catholic faith to sustain their deeper journey into the Franciscan way of life. The Inquirer's life should reflect a determination not only to know the faith intellectually, but also to live the faith in practice. The Inquirer must be a fully initiated member of the Catholic faith. The Inquirer should understand and be able to articulate the concept of vocation and, more specifically, a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order.

Note the emphasis on "before the Rite of Admission." Once this Rite is celebrated, the Inquirers officially become Candidates and are admitted into a local Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order to prepare for permanent commitment. If the discernment of vocation is incomplete or mistaken during the Orientation and Inquiry phases, it must be rectified before the Rite of Admission takes place.

- The Inquiry phase, as the first formal period of initiation, is a time of discernment and choice of the Franciscan life. During this time, the Inquirer participates in the life of the Fraternity and comes to understand our way of life. At the same time, the Fraternity comes to know the Inquirer better, so that it can discern how best to respond to the Inquirer's request to become part of the Fraternity.
- The Inquiry phase begins with the Ceremony of Welcoming. This is a simple paraliturgical service that promises the support of the Fraternity on the journey that the Inquirer is about to undertake. It does not take place as a separate ritual, but as part of the regular meeting or gathering of the Fraternity.
- During this phase, the Inquirer, with the help of the Formation Director/Team, must seek to determine honest responses to these basic questions:
  - What is a vocation, and how am I called?
  - What is Gospel life, and how am I called to live it?
  - What is a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order, and am I called to live this way of life?

**Time frame:** *at least* six months

### **Suggested content for the Inquiry phase:**

- a deeper understanding of discernment and vocation specifically to the SFO
- awareness of the agents of formation (see *Guidelines for Initial Formation*)
- a more in-depth study of the life of Saint Francis (a more scholarly version, such as *St. Francis of Assisi: A Biography* by Englebert)
- a more in-depth study of the life of Saint Clare (a more scholarly version, such as *Clare of Assisi* by Bartoli; or *Clare: Her Light and Her Song* by Karper)
- first-hand exposure to the writings of Saints Francis and Clare (as contained in, for example, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life* by Armstrong; *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* by Armstrong & Brady; and *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* by Armstrong)
- history of the Secular Franciscan Order, including the evolution of its Rules
- overview of the organizational structure of the Secular Franciscan Order
- introduction to the *SFO Rule, General Constitutions of the SFO* and the *SFO Ritual*
- introduction to Sacred Scripture and how it impacts the life of a Secular Franciscan (the practice of *Lectio Divina* as contained in, for example, *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* by Hall)
- the Catholic Church in light of the Second Vatican Council (especially the documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*)
- the *SFO Rule* in light of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*
- an understanding of spirituality which is both secular and (for most aspirants) lay
  - the family (*SFO Rule*, article 17; *Constitutions*, article 24)
  - work (*SFO Rule*, article 16; *Constitutions*, article 21.1-2)
  - social and political involvement (*SFO Rule*, article 14; *Constitutions*, article 22)
- introduction to praying the *Liturgy of the Hours*
- other Franciscan prayer experiences

**Rite:** Rite of Admission (see *SFO Ritual*, pages 11-17)

### **Bibliography:**

- Armstrong OFM Cap., Regis J. (1993, revised & expanded). *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications.
- Armstrong OFM Cap., Regis J. (1994). *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life*. NY: Crossroad.
- Armstrong OFM Cap., Regis J. & Brady OFM, Ignatius C. (1982). *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Bartoli, Marco. (1993). *Clare of Assisi*. Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press.
- Englebert, Omer. (1965). *St. Francis of Assisi: A Biography*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books.
- Guidelines for Initial Formation in the Secular Order in the United States*. (1985). Lindsborg, KS: Barbo-Carlson Enterprises.
- Hall RC, Thelma. (1988). *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
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# THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN FORMATION PROCESS

## Part III: The Candidacy Phase

When we look at the Secular Franciscan formation process, it is important to see it as a continuum, that is, each stage flowing into the next. Aspects that are essential in the first phase, Orientation, will still be essential in the second, Inquiry, the third, Candidacy, and into the Ongoing Formation of professed members.

The time between the Rite of Admission and the Rite of Profession or Permanent Commitment to the Gospel is the Candidacy phase of formation. This is a time for assisting and promoting the growth of the Candidate as a human person, as a Christian person, and as a Franciscan person. All three dimensions are interrelated and, if the vocation is true, will blend into one harmonious human being.

As in all phases of formation, it is essential that resources allow for dialogue and sharing between the Candidates and the Fraternity as well as among the Candidates themselves. This is a time for the Formation Director/Team to encourage the Candidates' growth in Franciscan spirituality and the practice of Gospel values. It is the time for the Candidates to take on a gradually more active role in the Fraternity and in society, especially by means of participation in Franciscan apostolates.

During Candidacy the Secular Franciscan Rule supplies the path, the approach, and the guide. Therefore, considerable emphasis is placed on reading, understanding, digesting and incarnating the Rule. The living out of the Rule is crucial in preparing for Profession since it provides the structure for growing in the spirit of penance and ongoing conversion within the context of the local Fraternity.

- Candidacy is the most important stage in the Initial Formation process since its purpose is to prepare the Candidate for a life-long commitment to live the *SFO Rule*, a mature and enduring decision to participate as fully as possible in the Church's life and mission according to the manner of Saint Francis.
- This period of formation begins with the Rite of Admission into the Secular Franciscan Order, the public acceptance by the Order of the Candidate's request and intention to live the Gospel life in the manner of Saint Francis as contained in the *SFO Rule* which has been approved by the Church.
- During Candidacy, the entire Fraternity participates in and nurtures the growth and development of the Candidate's evangelical living out of the *SFO Rule*.
- It is important that the Candidate be given opportunities to experience, interiorize, integrate and live out the Gospel values presented in the *SFO Rule*.
- **Time frame:** an extended period, ***lasting a minimum of eighteen months and up to a maximum of three years***. In particular circumstances, it may be prudent to extend the actual time of Candidacy beyond these norms to broaden and deepen the Candidate's formation experience.

**Suggested content for the Candidacy phase:**

- the *Prologue to the SFO Rule (the Volterra Letter)*
- a thorough study of the 1978 *SFO Rule*
- Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, and the opportunity to experience, interiorize and integrate Gospel values
- Franciscan spirituality
- Secular Franciscan apostolic life
- a detailed study of the *SFO General Constitutions*
- lives of Secular Franciscan saints and other Franciscans
- Franciscan traditions and stories (such as the Franciscan crown rosary, Stations of the Cross, Greccio, Gubbio, etc.)
- writings of Francis and Clare
- introduction to Franciscan sources, including an understanding of the purpose of a medieval legend
- continued experience in praying and leading the *Liturgy of the Hours*
- other Franciscan prayer experiences (for example, the Transitus)
- a detailed study of the *SFO Ritual*, especially the Rites of Profession
- A retreat may serve as a fitting formation experience prior to making Profession

**Rite:** Rite of Profession or Permanent Commitment (see *SFO Ritual*, pages 18-26) or  
Rite of Temporary Commitment (see *SFO Ritual*, pages 27-29)

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