The Historical Roots and the Nature of the Secular Franciscan Order

Section One

The Penitential Tradition

In *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, André Vauchez observed:

As impressive as the figure of the saint might have been, the form of life he was going to propose would not have been nearly as successful if it had not been connected by a straight line to previous religious experiences, whether to pick up from them some of their most worthwhile elements or to avoid the excesses and failures they had sometimes led to.¹

The religious experiences to which Vauchez refers are well documented. From the eleventh century, the laity became part of a broad movement throughout the Church, that can be summarised as seeking a return to the gospel values of the early Christians portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles, especially living in poverty. This was witnessed in: itinerant preachers, hermits, a new monasticism, canons regular, women in monasteries or as beguines, laity who were interested in developing a deeper spiritual life through gaining access to scripture and church teaching. Underlying this movement was a concern that the clergy appeared to enjoy riches, sought power and lived lives removed from evangelical perfection, caring little for the poor, including those who suffered from changing social and economic conditions.

The penitential movement was very broad. Charitable initiatives flourished, care for people with various needs, however they came to be in need; growth in the numbers of pilgrims and work to improve amenities for them which were accessible and affordable; studies that led to following Christ more faithfully and deepened spirituality; challenges to the preaching and teaching of the church, based on increased learning, spurred by a growing consciousness that the church had strayed from the early Christian days; growth in the numbers of pilgrims; meeting with others with a shared desire for spiritual growth; lay people serving religious institutions.²


² Some examples: St Allucio in Tuscany who built a hospice for pilgrims on the way to Rome and a bridge over the River Arno to avoid the existing extortionate cost of crossing; the Patarini, from Lombardy: more political, critical of moral state of clergy, poor teaching, simony, increasing power of the bishops; Peter Waldo, from Lyons, having provided for his family began to follow the lifestyle of the apostles, giving his possessions to the poor and preaching penance.
Characteristics of the life of an individual penitent had been established for several centuries:

The wearing of penitential clothing, a simple tunic, a staff, a satchel, sandals or poor footwear, if any; engagement in charitable works such as leprosaria, the restoration of churches, building hospices for pilgrims; living a life of prayer; for the single, a commitment to complete continence, periodic continence for married penitents; fasting; avoidance of popular festivals, dances, banquets; refusal of public office; refusal of a military career or the carrying of weapons and participation in war; abstention from commercial activity; avoidance of travel by horse or donkey.

Before referring to Franciscan sources documenting Francis of Assisi as a penitent, I observe that there is a wealth of material upon which to draw concerning the conversion of Francis of Bernardone and the early Franciscan movement. Among these are the legends, dating from 1240 – 1263, compiled in the second volume of Francis of Assisi: Early Documents; liturgical texts dating from 1230; The Life of Francis, by Thomas of Celano, the biography required for the canonisation process being the earliest life, 1228-9; The Canonisation document, Mira Circa nos, dated 1228.

Most of the writings of Francis himself date from the later years of his life, 1219 – 1224, although some of his writings, notably, the Earlier Rule, dated 1221, were compiled over a period of years: this text arose out of the experience of Francis and the brothers as they explored the way of life that they might live. The Admonitions were composed over time, out of the experience of living as part of the early Franciscan brotherhood. Prayers similarly evolved over time, examined by many scholars resulting in their availability today in many languages and as different compilations.

For decades after his death, followers of Francis continued to use anecdotes, episodes, memories of Francis that were passed on from one generation to the next, a well-known example is The Little Flowers of St Francis. This is a later, popular edition of The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions, 1328 – 1337. This tradition, together with the popular image of Francis as an animal lover, still leads to great devotion to the saint which Franciscans have to demythologise.

Interest in Francis of Assisi continued with a later flourishing, dating from the late 19th century. This century saw many studies about Francis and the Franciscan movement. The life of Francis by Paul Sabatier led to another spate of studies, not least because the Roman Catholic Church condemned it. There were many subsequent “new” lives of Francis. The Vatican Council II call to members of religious orders to find out more about their founders gave another, later impetus.

The result is that today we have the benefit of detailed scrutiny of all this work recorded in sources such as Greyfriars Review; numerous texts with a focus on a single subject or aspect; many books, some general, some biographical, some with their own peculiar focus.

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Introduction page xiii “Both Catholics and Protestants admired the work, but the official Roman Catholic response was to condemn it. Historical and textual criticism was not looked favourably at the close of the nineteenth century.”
such as *Francis and the Feminine*, a translation of the study by Jacques Dalarun on Francis and the feminine, *François d’Assise Un Passage*.

The range and diversity of Franciscan sources are evidence of the lasting interest in Francis of Assisi who remains an inspirational figure, with relevance for many different epochs, including our world of today. They also reflect the many different lenses through which this little poor man of Assisi has been seen, from the very earliest years of the Franciscan movement. There have always been different threads and strands within the Franciscan movement. Equally there has been reform after reform, each new reform wanting to live more authentically the Francis they seek to follow, whose memory seemed to have been distorted or lost.

**Section 2**

**Francis, a single penitent in the early years of his conversion**

My preferred source for the early life of Francis as a penitent is the *Legend of the Three Companions*. As the introduction to the source in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* states:

*The Legend of the Three Companions* provides insights into Francis, his youth, struggles with his father, and the emerging consciousness of his call that Thomas of Celano and the author of *The Anonymous of Perugia* do not have.

The Legend, dated 1241-1247, tells how Francis took on the lifestyle of a penitent and then recounts the beginning of the brotherhood. It concludes with what might be regarded as an epilogue in the final chapters, summarising the growth of the Order, including a chapter about his canonisation. As an aside, this is the first source to describe the episode when Francis, kneeling before the San Damiano crucifix in the Church of that name, heard an inner voice urging him to repair the church - a direction he took literally and acted upon wholeheartedly.

In chapter III, Francis’s companions note a great change in him: while still acting as a leader among his peers, they note a growing remoteness, which they understood as a love-sickness. Francis began to pray in secret, to view the poor more charitably and eventually went on pilgrimage to Rome, where he changed places with a beggar having given all his money in alms.

Chapter IV describes his meeting with a leper, with whom he exchanged a kiss of peace and to whom he gave money.

Chapter VI details the conflict with his father, Pietro of Bernardone. This is the earliest source to contain the detail that his father first sought a civil hearing before civil magistrates who, no doubt with some relief, passed the case to the Bishop “Because he is in the service of God, he no longer falls within our power.”

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5 Ibid page 64
6 Ibid page 79
Chapter VII reports that Francis made himself a hermit’s habit before going into the city to praise God and to beg the people for help to enable him to repair the Church of San Damiano.

Chapter VII includes his decision to live as a beggar for the love of God who “was born poor, lived very poorly in this world, remained naked and poor on the cross, and was buried in a tomb belonging to another.”

Chapter VIII reports that Francis greeted people with the words “May the Lord give you peace.”

Chapter XII gives an account of the blessing he received from the Pope, Innocent III, after which he and the eleven brothers with him were given the tonsure.

The Testament of Francis is a personal record that Francis adopted a penitential life. Like other penitents: He accepted a new life freely. He changed his clothing for a religious habit. He withdrew from his previous lifestyle. He gave up weapons, public office, business and financial activities, public entertainments and marriage.

Section 3

Francis: Founder of the Order of Franciscan Penitents

Keeping with evidence from Franciscan sources, the following attest to Francis as the inspiration for lay penitents:

*The Life of St Francis, 1C, 36 by Thomas of Celano*:

> Men ran, women also ran, clerics hurried, and religious rushed to see and hear the holy one of God, who seemed to everyone a person of another age. People of all ages and both sexes hurried to behold the wonders which the Lord worked anew in the world through his servant. Francis had become a light for them in the darkness.

*1C 37*

> Many people...driven by divine inspiration, began to come to Saint Francis for they desired to serve under his constant training and leadership...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.

*The Divine Office, Julian of Speyer et al*:

> Three were the Orders he arrayed:...Then thirdly came the Penitents, comprising men and women.

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7 Ibid page 82
8 FA:ED Volume 1, page 215
9 Ibid page 216
10 Ibid page 338

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The Legend of the Three Companions Chapter XIV

Both married men and women given in marriage, committed themselves to more severe penance in their 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...Each one of these orders was in its time approved by the Supreme Pontiff.

The Anonymous of Perugia 41

Married men said, "We have wives who will not permit us to send them away. Teach us, therefore, the way that we can take more securely. The brothers founded an order for them, called the Order of Penitents, and had it approved by the Supreme Pontiff.

The Major Legend of St Francis Chapter2:8

For like the three buildings he built up, so the Church - where there is victory for the triple army of those being saved - was to be renewed under his leadership; by the form, rule and teaching of Christ which he would provide.

These are a representative sample.

In considering the question of whether Francis truly founded the Order, known today as the Secular Franciscan Order (the subject matter of Robert Stewart's thesis), Stewart draws the following conclusions:

Francis did not invent the Order of Penance. Francis' initiative and originality in rediscovering the true sense of Gospel 'metanoia' became channelled within the existing canonical Order of Penance. But clearly, Francis' life and preaching greatly affected his hearers and brought many of them to embrace the life of penance. In this sense and not in a juridical sense, Francis did indeed found the Secular Franciscan Order, an Order which developed progressively and only gradually became more structured and organized.

Francis founded the Franciscan Order in the sense that he engendered a new fervour, released new energies, and empowered the work of the Spirit, which then became channelled in the existent form of voluntary penance. Francis was therefore the 'spiritual' founder of the Order; having spread the seed of the Gospel life, he let it grow and develop along its way. Within this understanding of founder, we can affirm that Francis founded not THE Penitential Movement but THIS Penitential Movement, not the Order of Penance, but an Order of Penance that was eventually to be designated the Secular Franciscan Order. 14

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11 FA:ED Volume 2, page 103
12 FA:ED Volume 2 pages 54 and 55
13 Ibid page 541
Those men and women who were unable or unwilling to join religious communities of Franciscans but who were inspired by Francis and the early Franciscan movement sought guidance and direction. The inspiration came from the message – brothers exhorted everyone to penance, which started with each person, centring their lives on God and seeking to live in the Kingdom of God on earth, in and through their own lives, not by belonging to another group or movement. As Francis has been convinced of the unconditional love of God for him, he wanted others to allow God’s love to transform their lives. Francis took the evangelical greeting and message of peace to all people. The laity who sought to live as Franciscan penitents wanted to follow Francis in a way appropriate to their situation that enabled them to remain living where they were. There were two distinct responses, each of which has great importance and significance for the Order:

I. From Francis - a letter *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*, addressed to them, which includes a summary of the life of penance, and which forms the Prologue to the Rule that secular Franciscans follow today

and

II.I from the Church, *The Memoriale Propositi*, 1228, dating from 1221 although the original document has not been discovered. Franciscan Penitents sought and received approval for their way of life before the first Rule for the whole Order which was promulgated in 1289. They were given a version of this text which, since it was not a definitive rule for the whole Order, could be adapted to fit local conditions, eg a local currency could be inserted.

I.

Francis of Assisi: *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*\(^{15}\)

\((1 \text{Lt F})\)

Robert Stewart, in his study *De Illis qui faciunt Penitentiam. The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* which remains the most important English work on the genesis of the 1979 Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, summarises\(^{16}\) the examinations of the so-called Volterra Text, the Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. Stewart explains that this document was not part of another text, as had been previously thought, but that it stood alone. Raffaelle Pazzelli presented clear evidence after his discovery of an early manuscript which had the following (translated from Latin) in red rubrics, “These are the words of life and salvation which, if anyone reads them and puts them into practice, that one will find life and attain the salvation of the Lord,”\(^{17}\). The red rubrics indicate the title of a new text. It came to be recognised as an early text for those penitents who wanted to follow Francis while living and working in their local area.

It is dated 1209-1215, indicating that this version was the result of lived experience and in response to quite early requests for direction.

\(^{15}\) 1 FA:ED pages 41-45


\(^{17}\) See 1 FA:ED. Introduction to the text, page 41.
The letter, as it is usually described, is in two parts. The first part entitled, “Those who do Penance”, the second part to “Those who do not do penance”, remaining deaf and blind to the life-giving words. I have selected the first few lines because they are a summary of penitential life.

As with all the writings of Francis, scripture forms a significant part. This text has particular reference to John Chapter 17 in Chapter 1, Those who do Penance. The second part of the exhortation is addressed to those who do not do penance. An important source for this chapter is chapter eight John’s gospel which concerns those who are blind and do not see the true light. For Francis there is a clear division: people whose life is centred on God and people who are blind.

The opening paragraph of the exhortation:

Analysis of the opening paragraph of the Earlier exhortation:

All those who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their soul and mind, with their whole strength and love their neighbours as themselves

The exhortation opens with the two great commandments of Jesus, “Love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with their whole strength and love their neighbours as themselves”. Penitents strive to obey these, by living lives centred on God and neighbour, in contrast to people whose lives are centred on earthly values and promotion of self.

Who hate their bodies with their vices and sins

The world extols power and riches and tempts individuals to succumb to other “vices and sins”. Hating “their bodies with their vices and sins,” is an admonition to be wary of earth-bound attractions and drives, which take no account of the Kingdom of God, God’s revelations or spiritual matters. These words are not an exhortation to punish the body but a commendation to re-orientate one’s life, to scrutinise the heart and live according to the will of God, as revealed by Christ. For penitents, this becomes the centre of one’s life.

Who receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ

Penitents “receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ”. This phrase resonated clearly in the post Lateran Council IV Church because the Council decreed that Christians must receive the sacrament. The reverent practices, of adoration and contemplation, had displaced frequent reception of the Eucharist. The fact that reception of the Eucharist had been in decline is well documented. The Church was concerned about the Albigensian heresy which denied that God could be present in material substances, including the Eucharist. Franciscans helped to spread orthodox doctrine and played an influential role in encouraging believers to follow this decree particularly. In his writings, Francis always uses the entire expression “the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” to refer to the sacrament Holy Communion. The words instil due reverence in the listener/reader and attest to his orthodoxy. In his day, they would have been recognised as a direct attack on the Albigensians.

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18 Bonaventure of Bagnoreggio, later Minister General, Doctor of the Church, used the image of man bent over because of original sin. In this state, vision is limited to the realm of the earth, where vices and sins are naturally attractive. Penitents must be able to recognise the dangers and then despise them. No-one can perceive the supernatural realm without grace which will be bestowed once the sinner lifts up his/her heart to God.

19 Norbert Nguyen – Van – Khanh The Teacher of his Heart: Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St Francis of Assisi, NY Franciscan Institute, 1994 Chapter 6
The exhortation does not name all the sacraments. Francis singled out reception of the Eucharist, by extension, penitents are expected to be faithful the teachings and practice of the Church.

**And who produce worthy fruits of penance**

Everything a penitent does from the heart will necessarily reflect that God is the centre of his/her life. As Paul said to King Agrippa, “They should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance”\(^{20}\).

**A summary of principles to guide the Life of a Franciscan Penitent**

This short extract provides a summary of what is most important in the life of a penitent. In answer to the question, “Which is the first of all the commandments?”\(^{21}\), Jesus immediately cited the Shema, “the central prayer and confession of Judaism”\(^{22}\), to which he added a second “You must love your neighbour as yourself” saying “there is no commandment greater than these”. These have become fundamental guiding principles for Christians. “On these commandments hang the whole Law.”\(^{23}\)

The law must not remain dead, a true disciple hears “the word of God and put(s) it into practice”\(^{24}\). A penitent examines his/her values from the new perspective of love of God and neighbour and earthly values become a challenge.

For Francis, a penitent is rooted firmly in the tradition and practice of the Church.

The life of a true penitent will attest to their conversion so that in all that they do they will produce worthy fruits.

Francis wrote a later admonition known as *Later Admonition and Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*. The date is probably after 1220, partly because it states that Francis cannot visit people because of “sickness and weakness of body”.\(^{25}\) This repeats much of the text of the earlier letter but, in addition, gives details on what is expected of Franciscan penitents in daily life, in terms of duty and responsibility. At the heart of the text Francis urges mercy, minority, humility, service:

> Let anyone to whom obedience has been entrusted and who is considered the greater be the lesser and servant of the other brothers. And let him have and show mercy to each of his brothers as he would want them to do to him were he in a similar position. Let him not become angry at the fault of a brother but, with all patience and humility, let him admonish and support him. We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh, but, instead, desire to be above others, but we must be simple, humble and pure. We must never desire to be above others, but, instead, we must be servant and subject to every human creature for God’s sake.\(^{26}\)

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20 Acts 26:20
21 Mk 12: 28 f
22 Footnote to Dt 6:4 CTS New Catholic Bible p 261
23 Mt 22:40
24 Lk 8: 21
25 1 FA:ED page 45
26 *Later Admonition and Exhortation* 1 FA:ED page 48
The Memoriale Propositi

Approved by the Church

This text, modelled on an approval of the Form of Life given to a prior group on penitents the Humiliati, is a prescriptive, legal text.

Paul Sabatier discovered four similar versions of the memoriale propositi. The "title" is believed to have been: "Here begins the Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance in the names of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. A Memorial of the Proposita of the Brothers and Sisters living in their own homes, begun in the year of the Lord 1221 (reformed in the year of the Lord 1228) in the time of Pope Gregory IX, May 29th.

The author could have been Cardinal Hugolino. It was the Church's official response to the need for a more organized structure for Penitents - as various fraternities were springing up throughout Italy. This would have given approval to local fraternities and the text would have appeared in their local statutes.

Summary of Contents

Dress - this was important in the Middle Ages - it indicated one's position in society. The men were to wear garments of ordinary colourless cloth, of a low-cost material. They were to avoid openings of the neck, without buckles and with closed sleeves. Sisters were also to wear simple clothing, with restrictions related to modesty.

Penitents were to avoid certain entertainments and have nothing to do with actors. Abstinence and fasting were specific. Prayer, in accord with Gratian's Decretum. Sacraments of Confession and Communion - three times a year was common practice among Penitents.

The stipulation not to bear arms which would mark penitents out, sometimes causing animosity as they could not be take up arms even to assist their communities in time of need. That they were not to take oaths could similarly cause resentment.

Monthly meetings were the normal practice even at the beginning of the movement. If not ordained, penitents could not preach but could give exhortations.

That women had to have the permission of their husbands to be admitted to the Order continued to be the rule until 1979.

In 1289 Supra Montem was promulgated, the first specifically Franciscan rule to be adopted universally. Its contents were based on the memorial. A later Rule, 1883, had a similar format but was less demanding, designed to attract as many members as possible at a time when other social and political movements were thriving. The 1979 Rule is of a very different nature and members are still struggling with the nature and identity of the Secular Franciscan Order. Much work has been done especially through a developing formation programme.

27 The Memoriale Propositi (Capistrano version) is quoted in full in Appendix 1 of Robert Stewart’s study.
Section 4

The Secular Franciscan Order: Vocation, Mission and Charism

The Secular Franciscan Order shares the Franciscan vocation, mission and charism. Seculars live their vocation in the world, part of a parish, with a family, working, and enjoying leisure activities. According to their state, members seek, through fraternity, to understand, sympathise with and live the realities of the Church and the world.

Just as for Francis, Christ is at the heart of their lives, so prayer and contemplation are essential, as is radical conversion daily. Franciscans seek to live the gospel and to be faithful members of the Church, taking Francis as their model and inspiration. A real Franciscan vocation means taking the same path of identification and total conformity that Francis took with his Christ; to accept, to live and to let grow within the charism of Francis and make it present in the world. The common Franciscan mission of rebuilding, repairing the Church often starts, for seculars, with building up the people with whom they are in contact, conscious that the wider Body of Christ is to be repaired with Christ Himself, through His Spirit. Therefore, Franciscans call on the Holy Spirit whom Francis called patron of the Order (along with Mary, the Mother of God).

Among the characteristics found in Franciscans are: Eucharistic spirituality, poverty, minority-humility, simplicity, obedience, joy, chastity, fraternity, respect for all life and creation.

Profession into the Order is a public, solemn and perpetual commitment before God and the Church to follow Jesus in the footsteps of St Francis. As Francis sought to be conformed to Christ, mindful of the poor, suffering Christ as well as of the unconditional love and mercy of God, so secular Franciscans strive to follow his footsteps. Evangelical Franciscan Radicality: The sources inform Franciscans that Francis embraced Christ in His totality, not only one or two aspects of Christ.

The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order

Throughout the 20th century many popes were Third Order Franciscans. Often occasions, such as commemoration of key events in the life of Francis, were used to remind Franciscans of the seriousness of their vocation. Before Vatican Council II there was already work in progress to revise the rule and constitutions. Certain principles were eventually established and the OFS Rule was built around these:

1. To live the Gospel according to the spirit of St Francis
2. Continual conversion
3. to live as brother/sister to all people and all of creation
4. To live in communion with Christ
5. To follow the poor and crucified Christ
6. To share in the life and mission of the Church
7. To share in the love of the Father
8. To be instruments of peace
9. To have a life or prayer that is personal, communal and liturgical
10. To live in joy
11. To have a spirituality of a secular character
12. To be pilgrims on the way to the Father
13. To participate in the Apostolate of the Laity
14. To be at the service of the less fortunate
15. To be loyal to the Church in an attitude of dialogue and collaboration with her ministers
16. To be open to the action of the Spirit
17. To live in simplicity, humility and minority.

The Secular Franciscan Order today is a Public Association of the Faithful, not a Third Order, according to Canon Law. It has its own Presidency Council with responsibility for governing and funding itself. Spiritual Assistants, from the First Order Friars Minor and Third Order Regular, have pastoral responsibility and ensure fidelity to the Franciscan charism and the Church. In becoming autonomous, the Order is returning to its original state, after many centuries as a Third Order, when fraternities often been had been called together and guided by one of the three of the First Order of Friars Minor.

Having Francis’ admonition and exhortation for the Prologue to the Rule serves the same purpose as it originally did: it keeps the Franciscan spirit of penitence present and alive; it brings Francis to mind, and therefore, the challenge to hearts and souls of following this saint, conformed so closely to Christ yet embracing all creation in love, as creatures of the one Father, Creator; through the Incarnation, with Christ as our brother; through the Eucharist, Christ coming regularly to us.
Select Bibliography


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