

Secular Franciscans Live Gospel as Lay Women and Men

by Fr. Felix Petrovsky, O.F.M.Cap.

Most Catholics, when they hear the word “Franciscan,” generally think of friars or sisters who live in a religious community and take religious vows. These Catholics may be surprised to learn that most Franciscans live and work in the everyday world and are members of traditional families. Franciscans can be recognized by the tau cross they wear as a lapel pin or pendant. They are members of the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO), formerly the Third Order of St. Francis.

“...the SFO gives me specific direction. It gives me focus, discipline and a community to trust. Because of the constant conversion, it always gives me great hope.”

Jean Finch, recently professed member of a Secular Franciscan Order in Lawrence, Kansas

After at least 27 months of formation or preparation, the Secular Franciscans profess to live “the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Secular Franciscan Order by observing its rule of life.” The Order is identified as “secular” because it is lived, not in a cloister, monastery, convent or friary, but among the lay community.

At the beginning of the 13th century, St. Francis began his life of conversion as an oblate. An oblate is someone who dedicates their life to the service of God and the Church without belonging to an order. Soon others imitated St. Francis’ life as an oblate, but with little organization.

After several years, with the approval of St. Francis’ *Rule of Life (Forma Vitae)*, those with the freedom to do so left their families and their homes to join St. Francis’ new religious



Members of the Secular Franciscan’s Santa Maria de las Montanas Regional Executive Council meet at the Capuchin Provincial Offices in Denver in June. Pictured: Julieta Bauseman, Kathy Smith, Fr. Felix Petrovsky, Mary Anne Lenzi, D.J. Walker, Diana Rivers and Tom McMahan.

brotherhood, sometimes referred to as the First Order of St. Francis. St. Clare of Assisi, guided by St. Francis, established a community of cloistered nuns known as the Second Order of St. Francis. Others, with family commitments and other responsibilities, continued to live in the secular world as members of the Third Order. With the passage of time, some members of the Third Order came together in religious

communities, known as the Third Order Regular. Those who continued to live outside of such communities were known as the Third Order Secular.

Belonging to the Franciscan family as an autonomous branch, the Secular Franciscans are guided at various levels by elected



Jean Finch, Susan Tabor and Monica Olivera stand before Fr. John Schmeidler and witnesses of their final profession to the Secular Franciscan Order on May 31 at St. John’s Church in Lawrence, Kansas.

councils and ministers. Living a rule that is rooted in the charism of St. Francis of Assisi, the Secular Franciscans call on Franciscan friars for spiritual assistance

and pastoral care. The Capuchin Province of Mid-America provides this care to SFO fraternities throughout the Midwest with the assistance of diocesan priests, deacons, religious sisters and specially prepared Secular Franciscans.

The primary task of a Spiritual Assistant to the SFO, according to *Franciscan Family Connections* handbook for Spiritual Assistants, is to “communicate Franciscan spirituality and to cooperate in the initial and ongoing formation of the brothers and sisters” and is “specifically responsible for the animation of liturgical celebrations and spiritual reflections during meetings of the Council or of the Chapter.”

Fr. Felix Petrovsky serves as a Regional Spiritual Assistant to two Secular Franciscan regions. These regions are the Santa Maria de las Montanas region of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Nebraska and South Dakota and the Juan de Padilla region of Kansas, Oklahoma and portions of Missouri. Santa Maria includes 16 established, emerging and newly forming units with approximately 175 professed members and 17 candidates. The Juan de Padilla region boasts 17 units with approximately 200 professed members and 20 candidates. Throughout the year, each region hosts activities including professions, retreats and council meetings. This summer, each region will hold its annual retreat and, similar to the First and Second Orders of St. Francis, will celebrate the 800th anniversary of the establishment of the Order.

With the ongoing growth of the Secular Franciscan Order, the Capuchin Province of Mid-America welcomes the opportunity to assist its faith-filled members of the Midwest.