History of the Rules of the Secular Franciscan Order

1221: Francis writes a letter that becomes the basic Rule (Memoriale Propositi) of the Third Order, a Franciscan Order for lay men, lay women and diocesan clergy. In the same year, Pope Honorius III writes to the Bishop of Rimini, urging him to protect the “Penitents” who are being forced to take up arms

1228: A revised version of the Letter of 1221 (To the Faithful) gives some of the precise rules required by the Church [for example, + simplicity of dress + eat meat on only three days of the week + fast every Friday + take Holy Communion three times a year + pay their tithes fully (outstanding debts or overdue tithes) + not bear arms or take up arms against anyone (some historians believe the refusal to bear arms helped bring an end to the Crusades; little wonder there was no great love for the “Penitents” among the powerful) + guide their families in living a Christian life + reconcile with neighbors (with whom they quarreled) + be free of all suspicion of heresy + take oaths only – to preserve peace, keep faith, refute slander or give evidence in court + attend Mass together once a month + pay their monthly contribution (used for the needs of the sick and needy) + attend funerals + visit the sick + offer prayers for all + make out their will within three months of profession + and settle legal disputes among themselves]; in addition, a woman needs the consent of her husband before entering the Movement

1238: Pope Gregory IX mentions the three Orders founded by St. Francis

1288: (February 22) Nicholas IV becomes the first Franciscan friar to be elected pope

1289: (August 17) In the Papal Bull Supra Montem Pope Nicholas IV gives the Franciscan Third Order a revised Rule of Life “for seculars living in their own homes, called Tertiaries” which recognizes Francis as the founder of the Order of Penitents and gives the friars of the First Order responsibility for the visitatores et formationes of the Penitents; it contains 20 chapters and follows The Rule of 1221, but arranges things in better juridical order

1686 – 1689: General Constitutions are drawn up; Pope Innocent XI ratifies them in 1689

1883: Pope Leo XIII gives the Franciscan Third Order Secular a new Rule which contains three chapters and spells out what should and should not be done [for example, avoid extremes, avoid lewd shows, receive monthly Holy Communion and confession, and recite the “Office” of 12 Our Fathers and 12 Hail Marys]; the Order becomes more a devotional society or organization than an Order

1957: Another set of General Constitutions is published

1978: (June 24) Pope Paul VI (now Blessed Paul VI) promulgates a revised Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order (three chapters, 26 articles) which reflects more faithfully the Letter to the Faithful (1st version); this Rule clearly situates the Secular Franciscan Order within the family of the Church and with the other members of the Franciscan family

2000: The current General Constitutions are approved

2013: The current National Statutes are approved for the United States