

Relationship Between Consecrated Life and the Secular Franciscan Order

A question has been raised about the canonical status of members of the Secular Franciscan Order (and other Third Orders in the Church): are they considered as living a form of the Consecrated Life?



In canon 573 of its *Code of Canon Law*, the Church defines her understanding of the Consecrated Life in these words: *The life consecrated through the **profession of the evangelical counsels** is a stable form of living by which faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having been dedicated by a new and special title to His honor, to the building up of the Church, and to the salvation of the world, they strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the Kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the Church, foretell the heavenly glory. The Christian faithful freely assume this form of living in institutes of consecrated life canonically erected by competent authority of the Church. Through vows or other sacred bonds according to the proper laws of the institutes,*

they profess the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience and, through the charity to which the counsels lead, are joined in a special way to the Church and its mystery.

The most common form of Consecrated Life is that lived by those in vowed religious life. Other persons recognized by the Church as living a form of Consecrated Life include those living the Eremitic Life (hermits and hermitesses), Consecrated Virgins and Widows, those living in Societies of Apostolic Life, and members of Secular Institutes.

Then is the Secular Franciscan Order a Secular Institute? No, although many elements of the lifestyle are similar, Secular Franciscans ordinarily do not make a private profession of the evangelical counsels (vows) of poverty, chastity and obedience. A Secular Institute is defined as *an institute of consecrated life in which the Christian faithful living in the world strive for the perfection of charity and work for the sanctification of the world especially from within* (canon 710). *By a 'life perfectly and entirely consecrated to [such] sanctification,' the members of these institutes share in the Church's task of evangelization, 'in the world and from within the world,' where their presence acts as 'leaven in the world.' 'Their witness of a Christian life' aims 'to order temporal things according to God and inform the world with the power of the gospel.' They commit themselves to the evangelical counsels by sacred bonds and observe among themselves the communion and fellowship appropriate to their 'particular secular way of life' (canon 713.2).*

Actually, the Church defines who we are in canon 303 which states, “[Public] associations whose members share in the spirit of some religious institute while in secular life, lead an apostolic life, and strive for Christian perfection under the higher direction (i.e., *altius moderamen*) of the same institute are called third orders or some other appropriate name.”



Although the Secular Franciscan Order is technically not a form of the Consecrated Life in the Church, we are very closely related to the Consecrated Life in that we make a public Profession witnessed by and officially recognized by the Church to live our Rule and the life of the Gospel in the spirit of the traditional evangelical counsels. The beginning of our Profession formula reads: “I, N., by the grace of God, renew my baptismal promises and **consecrate** myself to the service of his Kingdom.” That is to say, we are the *secular* expression of Franciscan evangelical life just as the friars and sisters of the Franciscan First Order, Second Order and Third Order Regular are the *religious* expression of the same charism. So it would be accurate to claim that the OFS is **very closely related** to the Consecrated Life of publicly vowed Religious and privately vowed members of Secular Institutes. On the international level, the relationship between the Holy See and the Secular Franciscan Order is managed by the same Vatican office that serves the Franciscan First Order, Second Order and Third Order Regular – the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.