Relationship with the Franciscan Family

Franciscan, any member of a Christian religious order founded in the early 13th century by St. Francis of Assisi. The members of the order strive to cultivate the ideals of the order’s founder. The Franciscans actually consist of three orders. The First Order comprises priests and lay brothers who have vowed to lead a life of prayer, preaching, and penance. This First Order is divided into three independent branches: the Friars Minor (O.F.M.), the Friars Minor Conventual (O.F.M. Conv.), and the Friars Minor Capuchin (O.F.M. Cap.). The Second Order consists of cloistered nuns who belong to the Order of St. Clare (O.S.C.) and are known as Poor Clares (P.C.). The Third Order consists of religious and Secular men and women who try to emulate Saint Francis’ spirit by performing works of teaching, charity, and social service. Strictly speaking, the latter order consists of the Third Order Secular, whose Secular members – laity and diocesan clergy – live in the world without vows; and the Third Order Regular, whose members live in religious communities under vows. Congregations of these religious men and women are numerous all over the Roman Catholic world. The Franciscans are the largest religious order in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Franciscan movement began in the year 1208, when Francis of Assisi, having lived two years as a penitent (one who seeks to reform his life and draw closer to God through daily life and works,) was joined by a few like-minded followers. Eventually, three major orders arose within the Franciscan movement.

The First Order

When Pope Innocent III approved the Franciscan Rule in 1209, he made them a structured religious order. This became the First Order, known as the Friars Minor (Little Brothers). Over the centuries, the Friars Minor experienced many distinctions and reorganizations based on their understanding of the Franciscan way of life. While different opinions on living the Franciscan life originally divided the branches of the First Order, these have given way to a common desire to serve the Lord and to live the Gospel message in joy and enthusiasm. Today, there are three branches:

- Friars Minor (O.F.M.)
- Friars Minor Conventual (O.F.M. Conv.)
- Friars Minor Capuchin (O.F.M. Cap.)

The Second Order

The Second Order of St. Francis, commonly known as Poor Clares, was founded in 1212 in Assisi when St. Francis received Clare Offreduccio as a follower of his way of life. The Poor Clares are a religious community of women. They observe a cloistered, contemplative life based on the Gospel, a life of prayer and penance in the Franciscan tradition of joy and simplicity.
The Third Order

The origins of the Third Order may be found in the movement known as the Penitents, going back to the sixth century. The original Penitents were people who sought to grow in holiness through their daily lives and work. This desire for holiness assumed many forms, such as pilgrimages to holy sites; constructing, repairing and rebuilding churches; and caring for the poor and sick. The first Franciscans were, in fact, known as “penitents of Assisi.” Men and women who were attracted by Francis’ way of life, but could not leave their homes and families to become wandering preachers or cloistered nuns, banded together. Thus the Third Order was born. Early on, small groups in the Third Order formed more structured communities, publicly professing the Church’s traditional religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and often uniting around specific works of charity or common prayer. Since then, numerous congregations of lay people and religious have developed throughout the world. In each instance, the call to conversion and simplicity of life animates the members. In the Secular Franciscan Order, lay men, lay women and diocesan clergy follow the way of Francis, but are not vowed religious living in community.

The Third Order Regular, on the other hand, is an international community of priests and brothers who emphasize works of mercy and ongoing conversion to the Gospel. The Third Order Regular is also known as the Franciscan Friars, T.O.R. This branch of the Franciscan family was originally founded in 1447 by a papal decree uniting several groups of Third Order hermits. Today, the T.O.R.s are a religious community serving God’s people across the world.

Francis as Founder of the Three Orders as Cited in the Sources

[Francis] founded three religious Orders: the first, the Order of Friars Minor; the second, the Order of Sisters of Saint Clare. Earlier these had been called the Poor Ladies of Saints Cosmas and Damian, but now, with Saint Clare having been canonized, they are called the Sisters of Saint Clare. The third is called the Order of Penitents, known as the Penitent Brethren. These Orders may be understood as his three “daughters,” and they were founded for the purpose of honoring God. [The Morning Sermon on Saint Francis Preached [by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio] at Paris, October 4, 1267 in Francis of Assisi: The Founder: Early Documents, Vol. II, Armstrong, Hellmann, Short, p. 750]

He established three Orders in the Church; he named the first that of Lesser Brothers, using the pretext of the word which Christ will say in judgment to those about to be judged, “What you did for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did for me,” whom he holds fast by reason of his habit, his profession, and his love. The second, which is called that of Poor Ladies in which Saint Clare having been canonized, they are called the Sisters of Saint Clare. The third is called the Order of Penitents, known as the Penitent Brethren. These Orders may be understood as his three “daughters,” and they were founded for the purpose of honoring God. [The Morning Sermon on Saint Francis Preached [by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio] at Paris, October 4, 1267 in Francis of Assisi: The Founder: Early Documents, Vol. II, Armstrong, Hellmann, Short, p. 750]

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Other references to Francis establishing a Third Order can also be found in The Anonymous of Perugia, The Little Flowers of St. Francis and in the Chronicle of Erfurt.

Note: The Penitents became the Third Order of Saint Francis and then the Secular Franciscans.

[Compiled by Deacon Dave & Thérèse Ream, O.F.S., Revised July 2017]