

SECULARITY IN A FRANCISCAN PERSPECTIVE

First of all, I wish to express my gratitude for this invitation, which allows me to be with you, at least for a day that I managed to snatch from the work of the Definitory in Rome. I carry with me the good memory of numerous A and TP Conventions before Covid, and I would have liked to attend this one as well, but it was not possible for me. The occasion of this day is therefore especially welcome for me. Thank you!

Secularity according to the Spirit

I was asked to speak about *Secularity in a Franciscan perspective*.

First, I would like to say a few words about **secularity**. By secularity we mean that relationship with the world which is true for every Christian and which is assumed as a specific charism in your vocation.

Let us clarify this first: secularity is not a prerogative only of Secular Institutes. It is a true dimension for every Christian living in the world and therefore must manage a Christian relationship with the world. In this sense, secularity is a dimension of the whole Church, that is, of all Christians, including priests and religious, because they live in the world. As *Gaudium et spes* taught us in the Second Vatican Council, the Church lives in the world and “*feels real and intimate solidarity with humankind and its history*”¹.

Within this general horizon, which is true for every baptized person, some Christians, like you, feel particularly called to give identity to their vocation in this relationship with the world. Thus secularity, which is a common element for all Christians, also becomes a special charism for some. Some who grasp in this *being in the world* their specific spiritual intuition. As a good theologian, Giovanni Moiola, put it is a “*secularity according to the Spirit*.” It is the Holy Spirit, in fact, who gives this insight. We can understand this by thinking of how Secular Institutes were born, between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when lay people, for a variety of reasons, began to become aware of their vocation in the Church, especially through associations such as the Catholic Action. Think of Armida, who founded the Women's Youth of the Catholic Action, and realized that this life, dedicated to the Kingdom of God, could be a true vocation, worthy of being “consecrated.” Starting from being lay, secular, she wanted to carry

¹ *Gaudium et Spes* 1

this secularity to the end through consecration: this is secularity according to the Spirit.

This explains the passion for the world that animated Armida Barelli and the sisters who followed her: a passion for the world because this is the world that “God so loved that he gave his only Son”². This is the world in which the Kingdom of God grows, as a seed that germinates and grows without one knowing how, *like the mustard seed that grows from a small seed into a large shrub*³. The Kingdom of God is the same world transformed by the power of God's Spirit and his love, a Kingdom already initiated by Christ and is developing, in the plan of history, until his final coming. This world is the heart of his calling.

Much could be said about this wonderful consecrated secularity that is your vocation, but we do not have the time now.

The Franciscan quality of secularity

Rather, I would like to clarify the *Franciscan* dimension of this vocation in your Institute, which was born by putting secularity at the center within the Franciscan Spiritual Family.

This is certainly also due to the presence of Friar Agostino Gemelli alongside Armida Barelli at the origins of the Institute. Yet I believe that it is not only the coincidence of the presence of a friar that determines this characteristic. Rather, there is a deep harmony between the intuition of secularity according to the Spirit and Franciscan spirituality.

I will try to illustrate some elements of this harmony between secularity and Franciscanism.

Fraternal spirituality

The first element of harmony consists in the fraternal characteristic of Franciscan spirituality, where the presence of a brother or sister is a central element. Francis himself, in his *Testament*, makes his own conversion begin with an encounter with lepers: these suffering and marginalized brothers and sisters became for him the revelation of God, in the sign of “doing mercy.” We can say that for Francis the other person becomes a sacrament of God, because God reveals himself through the face of the other. This is true not only at the beginning of Francis' Christian adventure,

² Cfr. Jn 3:16

³ Cfr. Mk 4:26-32

but for his every step: brothers are a constant, without neglecting all the difficulties that the relationship with them entails.

The importance of the presence of the other in order to encounter God manifests great harmony with the intuition of secularity. Relationship with others is an essential dimension of secularity: for the world in which we are inserted is not only the natural environment, but above all the social world, made up of relationships with persons. A true secular weaves thousands of relationships with those he or she encounters, and the Franciscan perspective helps him or her to experience them as a thousand of opportunities to encounter God. Others are not an obstacle in my relationship with God. To be in relationship with God it is not necessary to put others aside. As Franciscans, we are invited to see a sign of God's presence in every person we meet.

The Canticle: integral ecology

A second element of symphony is offered to us by the Franciscan vision of creation. Here, the fundamental reference is the *Canticle of the Creatures* or *of Brother Sun*, which reveals a gaze capable of grasping God in creation and in history. Not only in the natural world, as shown in the lines dedicated to the sun, moon, water, air, earth and fire, but also in the social world, as shown in the verses dedicated to forgiveness and the endurance of infirmities and tribulations, which generates mysterious peace. This is an approach that today we call integral ecology, that is, a care for the common home that includes, together, both the natural and social environments, which are intimately connected.

Such an attitude is particularly attuned to the secular person, who in his relationship with the world today finds himself having to deal with the issues of the environment and social integration: Franciscan spirituality offers very useful keys of interpretation for placing oneself in the right way in the commitment to integral ecology, which touches both the environment and society and which is absolutely urgent for today's world.

Active

Another element of Franciscan spirituality is indicated by Agostino Gemelli in the last chapter of his volume *Franciscanism*, when he shows the mission of Franciscanism in modern life and identifies that a specific word for today is to give value to activity.

Francis, in fact, does not choose to live in a hermitage all his life: the hermitage, which is also a component of Franciscan spirituality, is for him a

pause in active life, experienced among people. Activity is an essential element of Franciscan life, which precisely discovers the presence of the Spirit in action.

One of the key phrases which summarizes Francis' spiritual insight is the invitation to "*desire to have above all things the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation*"⁴. I underline that he links the Spirit to operation, that is, action. And I think it should be interpreted not only in the moral sense, whereby in our actions we should be consistent with faith, but also in the deeper sense of grasping the presence of the Spirit in holy actions. Perhaps there is an echo of his experience, when in *doing mercy* toward the lepers (and I emphasize that it is a *doing*, an *action*) he experienced the action of the Spirit changing what was bitter into sweetness for his soul and body.

The holy operation with the lepers turned out to be for him a manifestation of the Spirit. And so, Francis invites us to do the same, so as to discern in our lives, in events, and especially in our own actions the call of the Spirit, who suggests to us how to do better, how to make our operation more and more holy.

It is clear that this focus on *action* and *praxis* is deeply attuned to the experience of a secular person, who lives in a world that values action in every way. We know that the risk of our world is precisely activism, which exhausts us in an action that loses the meaning of action itself. In such a world, the Franciscan perspective is extremely apt, which does not ask us to suspend our action (which we cannot do), but to live it with a different awareness, one that is able to recognize in it the signs of God's Spirit, the signs of the times through which God himself speaks to us.

Relational poverty

Franciscan spirituality is famous for the theme of poverty. Here we might think that this is not so much in tune with secularity, living, working and managing in the world the use of worldly goods. But if we listen carefully to St. Francis, we can realize that the poverty he speaks of is to be lived above all in relationships with others, and this is certainly very secular. In *Admonition 14*, which comments on the beatitude of poverty of spirit, this is how Francis speaks to us:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

There are many who, while insisting on prayer and obligations inflict many abstinences and punishments upon their bodies. But they are immediately offended and disturbed about a single word which seems to be harmful to their bodies or about something which might be taken away from them. These people are not poor in spirit, for someone who is truly poor in spirit hates himself and loves those who strike him on the cheek.⁵

Interestingly, to illustrate what poverty is, Francis discards those who “do much abstinence and bodily mortifications”. And instead gives the example of two relationships: one with someone who insults you or the other who takes away something you consider your own. Here is a test whether he/she is really poor, whether he/she will be able to bear these difficult relationships patiently. This is what I like to call “relational poverty,” and which all of you are called to experience, in the secular condition. This poverty in relationships with the other is also expressed by the adjective “minor” which Francis chooses for himself and his brothers, the name ‘*friars minor.*’ Minor means small: it is the relational poverty I mentioned. One consequence of such an attitude is freedom and joy.

How precious poverty is in secular life you know better than I: when you speak and act as Franciscans, as those who have nothing to defend and nothing to lose, you live free in the use of everything and in detachment from all, and it is for this that you experience joy.

Mission/Apostolate

A final element of harmony between Franciscanism and secularity seems to me to be the theme “mission”, which is particularly dear to you, Missionaries of the Kingship. In the Writings of Francis of Assisi, mission is indicated by the expression “*going out into the world.*” In the Rules, in fact, a chapter is devoted to “*how the brothers go about the world,*” and in that chapter we speak of mission, which consists first of all in witness. Even more explicitly, in the First Rule, another chapter is also devoted to “*those who go among the Saracens and other infidels,*” that is, those whom we would call missionaries today, and it is said that

they can live spiritually among [them] in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians.

⁵ FA:ED Vol. I, p. 133-134

The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord, in order that [unbelievers] may believe in almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Creator of all, the Son, the Redeemer and Savior, and be baptized and become Christians.⁶

The first way is that of silent, humble and submissive witnessing, which is not afraid to declare that one is a Christian if asked, but which avoids arguments, quarrels and disputes. The second way involves proclaiming the Word of the Gospel, but only “*when they see that it pleases God.*”

It seems to me that this is also a very useful description for you, who are in the world as a humble and silent presence of secular witnesses of the Gospel, and who avoid a grandiose and aggressive evangelization. Your “*going out into the world,*” to use Francis' expression, is the substance of your evangelization, of your being missionaries. And, as you know better than I, you are also facilitated in this by your ‘reserve’, which allows you to enter every environment and every group of people with ease, bringing the light of your witness.

Conclusion

To conclude: I have tried to weave the intuition of secularity according to the Spirit and Franciscan spirituality, grasping the harmonies that make up the charism of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ, that is secular and also Franciscan by vocation. We have distinguished these two dimensions for logical clarity, but in the real experience of each of you they are one, because charism is not a theory, but a life that each of you interprets in your own way. And also, in this you are (and are) Franciscans: in this profound respect for the singularity of each and every one. If other Christian spiritualities are molded to be good little soldiers, as equal to each other as possible, in our house you will not find one Franciscan the same as another.

And the Institute reflects this characteristic very well, with the special ability to live the same charism in a thousand different forms, which nevertheless refer back in a manner that unites us. It is the grace of your vocation that is, at the same time, secular and Franciscan.

⁶ FA:ED Vol. I, p. 74