

## How to Live the Values of the *Memoriale Propositi* in Today's Context

### MEMORIALI PROPOSITI

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As an Order in the Church, although a lay Order, the Secular Franciscan Order has a Rule that guides its members in living Christian values in the light of Franciscan spirituality in today's world, performing the role that the Second Vatican Council identified for them.

In order to understand HOW to live the values of the *Memoriale Propositi* in today's context, we must first analyze what those values are and find how they are reflected in the current Rule that, we can suppose, the members of the OFS live (or try to live) to the full.

The *Memoriale Propositi* has the same goals as the Rule of 1978 and is addressed to the people of their own time. One might therefore think that what was proposed in it might not be timely for us and no longer valid for our day; however, since we are dealing here with Values, they have a universal import and create a substratum on which we build our life. Therefore, it is an exciting experience to set out in search of the similarities or common roots to see how the way of making those values alive may have changed.

The *incipit* of *Memoriale Propositi* tells us from the start that it is a program of life of the brothers and sisters of penance living in their own houses and it fits quite well with what is found in article two of the current rule when it states that "the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit strive for perfect charity (what *Memoriale Propositi* calls penance) in their own secular state.

What strikes the modern and perhaps even superficial reader is the fact that the rather than being a project of spiritual life as the *incipit* quoted would lead us to suppose, *Memoriale Propositi* seems to be transformed into a series of rules and prescriptions that make it seem like a heavy legal document, one that is certainly not attractive to the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader.



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It enumerates norms about the manner of dress, of keeping certain periods of abstinence and fasting, the manner of prayer, norms about confession, the way of living in the “temporal reality” and the life of fraternity and these very detailed norms that verge on meticulousness.

Why is this necessary? Probably it still bears the influence of the monasticism that had shaped life in medieval Europe. In their life the monks paid an almost obsessive attention to the rhythm of time and rule, to aesthetic regulations and liturgy and in some way, the brothers and sisters of penance, children of their day and age, found their model and inspiration in these “masters”.

I will leave these questions to those who have the historical expertise to offer an academic response and return to the theme I have been asked to address, that is, the task of discovering the values of *Memoriale Propositi* in order to understand how to live them or how, even unconsciously, we are already living them today.

I believe I would not be wrong to suggest that the *Memoriale Propositi* may actually **be** or is **hiding** a treasure, but a treasure that is well hidden; however, I think that in hunting for this treasure we would do well to use our current Rule as a map to follow to discover it.

## Daily Life

In article 11 our map says: “Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs.”

It seems to me that these words are a wonderful synthesis of all the prescriptions that the *Memoriale Propositi* offers us in regard to dress: the men shall dress in humble, undyed cloth...; outer garments laced up and not open... the sisters shall wear an outer garment and tunic made of cloth of the same price and humble quality.



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The goal to strive for is the same, that is that Secular Franciscans live in a just relationship with earthly goods, but while for us we begin with substance (the word “seek” in order to arrive at the form... for our brothers and sisters of 800 years ago they began with form in order to arrive at the substance.

Without a doubt what is proposed to us today requires a notable maturation and continuous verification. Judged with our own eyes this mode is certainly more attractive but also much, much more difficult because of the ease with which we tend to justify our shortcomings or our "lightness."

I offer just a brief reflection on the question about the manner of dress. The penitential movement on which the form of life proposed by Francis was established with certain specifics he gave it provided that its members would assume a public commitment which was also marked by the “habit” that immediately distinguished those who had undertaken this life from all the others. Perhaps this is the reason that particular emphasis has been given to this aspect.

### **Abstinence and Fasting**

Articles 6-11 of the *MEMORIALE PROPOSITI* treat these topics and they do so in great detail, although our rule presents in a greatly nuanced manner in article 7 that is taken up again in the General Constitutions in Article 13.3 – Especially for these two points the differences with today’s world are significant and the article of the Constitutions just mentioned states only that: penitential practices such as fasting and abstinence, traditional among Franciscan penitents, are acknowledged, appreciated and lived according to the general norms of the Church.

Certainly, all the details of *Memoriale Propositi* mirror what was indicated by the Church, since the penitents were assimilated among the religious (although living in their own homes) the norms are much more demanding.

However, although the form may be changed, the substance remains the same: live in a spirit of ongoing conversion.



## Prayer

Personal prayer in its varied forms specified by the *Memoriale Propositi*, this too in great detail, must fill the day of the penitents. In Article 8 our rule goes to the heart of this topic: let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do. This is the soil in which to work, and in order to make it fertile we are told: participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in Liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.

We are told the very same things but in a different manner, in accordance with the times and cultures (after all, 800 years lie between us)!!

## The Sacraments, Other Matters

I believe that the chapter concerning Confession and Communion is the point in which the change is most apparent (from Confession three times a year and Communion at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost). Today, at least in what regards Communion, there is a radical change; we know that it is believed that there is a crisis in regard to the Sacrament of Confession, and so this topic is in need of a profound personal and fraternal reflection.

Memoriale Propositi states : Do not take up offensive arms against anyone and do not bear them. This is certainly a great value that, in order to be put into act, required a great effort, both spiritual and willpower, because it was normal to bear arms.

Our form of life is not so specific, but in various articles it appears as a model of non-violence, is the path to follow today when this choice still requires great strength of spirit and will (Articles 11-13, 15). Then, too, in article 23.2 of the General Constitution the topic of refusing to bear arms is taken up again in more modern language in the statement: "they should respect the choice of those who, because of conscientious objection, refuse to bear arms."



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## Special Mass and Meeting Each Month

In these articles we find step by step what is also asked of us today. The monthly Mass and the meeting of the fraternity are values that we hold today, too, but their lack because of Covid has had a profound effect on the life of our fraternities. Its substitution by Video conferences or formation webinars certainly does not have the same “pregnancy” and impact, but at least they have helped us not to lose contact, even visually.

There is the beautiful passage about the contribution (a sore spot and therefore a value that we would do well to examine and reflect on deeply), which *Memoriale Propositi* also offers practical examples concerning its use.

This gives rise to a consideration that I offer first and foremost to myself. This celebration is helping me think that the *Memoriale Propositi* is not simply a manuscript that, once the anniversary is past, should be closed up again and shelved and forgotten until the next centenary. Rather, it is a living document that is still useful for us (me), offering guidelines that help in the concrete living out of the values the rule proposes. Furthermore, it has been the guide and inspiration of many of our brothers and sisters.

What is striking today is the fact that the figure of the Spiritual Assistant is not yet defined: ... “if it be convenient at the time, they are to have some religious who is informed in the words of God to exhort them and strengthen them...”.



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## Visiting the Sick, Burying the Dead

Here too the *Memoriale Propositi* is very specific and detailed. but the value of these corporal works of mercy is very much alive in today's fraternities and the second part of article 19 motives us to perform these works "immersed in the Resurrection of Christ"

Beginning with article 25 until the end of the document, in addition to discussing the topic of peace among the brothers and sisters in fraternity or of disputes with civil authorities that we find are not treated directly in articles of the present form of life, it discusses the topic of life in fraternity and offices and we find many similarities with the third part of the rule.

What perhaps is most striking is that in the *Memoriale Propositi* there is no inclusion or connection of the movements of the penitents with the other Franciscan groupings of the *time* and therefore, to the seculars of our time this seems to be something lacking in regard to how we experience our relationship with the other Franciscan realities which the current rule mentions and confirms in the first three articles, inserting the OFS in its own right in the Church and the Franciscan Family (under the guidance of a Rule approved by the Pope).

A second idea the *Memoriale Propositi* is missing, but I think it is because we are living our Vocation after a fundamental event, the Second Vatican Council; is that there are no direct references to the Gospel, while instead Article 4 of the present Rule states quite unequivocally: the Rule and Life is to observe the Gospel. ....

However, this invitation was obvious for the brothers and sisters of 800 years ago.

In conclusion, as I have already mentioned, when this anniversary is over, let us not forget this treasure, but rather use it concretely and give continuity to the path of our Order; and why not get a little help from some of the prescriptions found in it to live fully the form of life that is our spiritual habit. I believe I personally shall follow this advice that I am offering.



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