

**Eighth Centenary of Memoriale Propositi (1221)  
Ancient Rule of the Third Order of Saint Francis of Assisi  
1221 - 2021**

**MEMORIALI PROPOSITI**

**Day of Celebration, May 22, 2021**

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The International Conference of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis was created to be a continuation of the collaborative efforts that brought religious tertiaries from more than 200 distinct congregations together in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council to study and reflect on the Franciscan charism and spirituality in the light of that same council. One might say that it is a conference of General Ministers (or, in canonical language, of Supreme Moderators) that offers educational programs and resource materials on the Franciscan penitential tradition to its members and at times to target groups such as formators or those in initial formation.

At the time of the creation of the conference there were about 200 participating congregations although research had identified the existence of probably twice that amount. To no one's surprise, those congregations varied from very small groups of less than 25 members to institutes with more than 10,000 professed sisters; there were groups founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and others founded in the 20<sup>th</sup>. There were groups of exclusively "lay" brothers, and others with lay and clerical members. There were also monasteries of enclosed contemplative sisters in the diversified family that is the Third Order Regular.

Inspired by Vatican II's call to study the original charism of their institute, many of these sisters and brothers set about going beyond the circumstances of their own foundation and delved into the aspects of the Franciscan charism that inspired their founding group; as they went deeper into the Franciscan story, they reinterpreted it in light of their own institute's history and the present cultural context. Vatican-led efforts to rewrite their particular law, such as Constitutions, Statutes, etc., obviously led to a more thorough study of the Rule of the Third Order Regular, approved by Pope Pius XI in 1927 at the close of the year marking the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Francis. In his Apostolic Brief *Rerum Condicio*, the Pontiff wrote that the first Rule written specifically for the Third Order Regular, approved



**INTERNATIONAL FRANCISCAN CONFERENCE**  
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**MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221-2021**

by Leo X after the Council of Trent, “with the passing of time... either entirely became obsolete or did not agree entirely with the certain prescriptions of the Code of canon law.”

Even that Pontiff had stated the need for updating the Rule of Leo X because of changed social conditions and the 1917 Code of Canon Law, further affirming the desire of the brothers and sisters of the modern era, enthusiastically following the mandates of Vatican II and *Perfectae Caritatis*, to entertain the idea of drafting a new Rule for the Third Order Regular. Many groups came together to draft a new Rule or inspirational document, some groups made up entirely of institutes of the Third Order Regular, others representing members from various branches of the Three Franciscan Orders. Some of these institutes were members of national groups but belonged to international congregations and submitted their draft documents to their general chapter; some of these eventually made their way to “Rome”.

After several inquiries the Holy See replied that they would entertain the idea of approving one new “Rule” for the entire Third Order Regular if it were approved by the leaders of the member institutes. I am sure that, given the number of drafts already created and the diversity of ideas, some skeptics (like myself) would have said, “that will never happen”. However, they soon were proved wrong.

We must not overlook another key factor, which I consider as Providence, not coincidence. The Prefect of the Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, as it was named at that time, was the Servant of God Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio, whose titular Church in Rome was the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian. As such, he had developed a firm friendship with the friars of the Third Order Regular, who are charged with the care of that Basilica and whose general curia is housed there. The renowned Scripture scholar, Father Roland Faley, served as the TOR Vicar General from 1971-1977 and then as Minister General from 1977-1983.

Many Franciscans of all three orders were struck by St. Francis’ statement to the friars whom he sent them out on the first itinerant mission, that “if anyone asks who you are, you should tell them ‘we are penitents from Assisi’”. This was even more striking to the members of the Third Order, whose original title was the Brothers and Sisters of Penance; they used the advances made in Catholic Scriptural studies since the 1950s to look not only at what was understood by “penance” in St. Francis’ day, but to return to the understanding of that word throughout the Christian era. Add into the mix that classes in Franciscan studies, formerly reserved to Franciscan seminarians, had begun to admit “lay religious” and secular Franciscans.

In response to the Holy See’s green light on drafting a Rule, an international commission of Superiors General was set up to coordinate the process; this was accompanied by a committee of sisters and brothers from various countries who were in positions to help spearhead the information gathering and communication process, and eventually a working group of brothers and sisters who would, assisted by



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[www.ifc-tor.org](http://www.ifc-tor.org)

MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221–2021

*periti* from the three branches of the First Order and Raffaele Pazzelli from the Third Order Regular, be charged with writing the new Rule. Several key decisions were made at this time:

1. The work group would not try to polish any of the diverse “Rule draft” documents already proposed from groups around the world or bring them together in some form; rather they would work together on the creation of an entirely new document;
2. To avoid the risk of the new Rule becoming obsolete soon because of “outmoded” or trendy language, the words of St. Francis would be used as much as possible so that they could be reinterpreted in each age;
3. A consultation of the members around the world helped to identify four “values” that were common to all participating institutes, although not always using the same name for them, they are: penance/metanoia; prayer/contemplation; minority/humility; and poverty.

The work group’s contributions went through a process of consultation and revision, with the process facilitated by the new lightning-speed invention of the facsimile machine or fax; it was approved by a gathering of approximately 200 General Superiors meeting at the *Domus Pacis* in Rome in March of 1982. It was then submitted to the Holy See and, after some amendment, was approved by Pope John Paul II with the Apostolic Brief *Franciscanum vitae propositum*, bearing the date of December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1982. Not by accident, the *incipit* of this Brief obviously brings to mind the *Memoriale propositi* without making specific mention of it, although it does name the Rules of Leo X and Pius XI. It also makes specific reference to the process of collegial discussion and consultation and the express need for “aggiornamento”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much as in past centuries, the **Franciscan ideal of life** even in our times continually draws many men and women desirous of evangelical perfection and thirsting for the kingdom of God. Inspired by the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, the members of the Third Order Regular set forth to follow Jesus Christ by living in fraternal communion, professing the observance of the evangelical counsels of obedience, poverty and chastity in public vows, and by giving themselves to innumerable expressions of apostolic activity! To actualize in the best way possible their chosen way of life, they dedicate themselves unreservedly to prayer, strive to grow in fraternal love, live true penance and cultivate Christian self-denial. Since these very elements and motives for living the Franciscan ideal are clearly present in “The Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis”, and since they are clearly in accord with the genuine Franciscan spirit, We, in the fullness of Our apostolic authority, determine, declare and order that the present Rule have the force and importance to illustrate to the Brothers and Sisters this authentic meaning of the Franciscan life, while bearing in mind what Our Predecessors Leo X and Pius X, with the Apostolic Constitutions *Inter cetera* and *Rerum condicio* presented on this matter in their own times. Since we know how diligently and assiduously this “Rule and Life” has traveled its path of “aggiornamento” and how fortuitously it arrived at the desired convergence of different points of view through collegial discussion and consultation, proposals and studied amendments, for this very reason with well-founded hope We trust that the longed for fruits of renewal will be brought to full realization. We decide, moreover, that this Our decision have force from this moment on and be effectively binding both in the present and the future, everything to the contrary notwithstanding. Given at Rome, at Saint Peter’s under the ring of the Fisherman, on the 8th day of December, 1982, the fifth year of Our Pontificate!



The new understanding of “penance” was a major contribution in the composition of this Rule and Life; this was greatly enhanced by the work of Fathers Roland Faley, Lino Temperini and Raffaele Pazzelli, especially the latter’s research on the Volterra document, now referred to as 1Lf. Long considered to be a later “shortened” version of the Letter to the Faithful, it was now widely recognized as an original document that was later amplified by St. Francis. In order to maintain continuity with the past, the 1Lf was placed as the “Beginning of the Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis”.

When considering how the components of *Memoriale propositi* are lived by the religious of the Third Franciscan Order today, one must keep in mind the variety of histories and realities reflected in the composition of this greatly diversified group. Some of these groups, like my own congregation, were founded by “Franciscan tertiaries” who decided to live the Franciscan Gospel way of life as a religious institute. Others may have simply had a Franciscan spirituality handed to them by Church officials and did not, and in some cases, **still do not** resonate with much of what we traditionally call “Franciscan values”. Added to this is the fact that each religious institute of the Third Order Regular has its own particular law which fleshes out the way these values are continued in daily living.

As stated above, the 200 distinct congregations actively participating in the Rule process were able to agree on the four fundamental values which then provided the structure of the Rule. In addressing the sisters of her own congregation, IFC-TOR President, Sr. Deborah Lockwood, used the analogy of a building; the Franciscan way of Gospel living is the foundation, the Rule with its four “pillars” provides the framework, and their own particular law is the roof that caps it all off.

With these caveats in mind, let us look at how these “four fundamental values” were expressed in the *Memoriale propositi*, and how their “vestiges” are contained in the Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, approved by Pope John Paul II.

First of all, the *Memoriale* begins with ample prescriptions concerning clothing, which should be seen as an attempt to make sure that the brothers and sisters are dressing simply and similarly. We must keep in mind, however, that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, religious life began with a ceremony of “vestition”, the donning of the religious habit. Similarly, the brothers and sisters of penance had a distinctive dress – simplicity. When treating of **initiation into this life**, the Rule and Life does not speak about externals, but **internal** matters... they must be Catholic, they must have a period of initial formation and. “as a sign of their conversion and consecration to gospel life, they are to clothe themselves plainly and to live in simplicity.”



INTERNATIONAL FRANCISCAN CONFERENCE  
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MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221–2021

## Penance/Metanoia

The *Memoriale* devotes a section to fasting and abstinence, dietary prescriptions most often associated with penitential practices. In article 6, the Rule and Life states simply, “Led by God, let them begin a **life of penance**, conscious that all of us must be **continuously converted**.” This simple statement clearly shows the effect of the Scriptural basis for understanding *penitentia* as *metanoia*, a life of continuous and continual conversion. Again, the Rule and Life does not make specific mention of any penitential practices, which are obviously contained in the particular law of each institute.

The difference between those in initial formation and those who have made a perpetual commitment is not expressed in the presence of knots on the cincture or the color of a veil, as may have been true in past times, but in the Franciscan concept of being “received into obedience, promising to observe this life and rule always”. I cannot fail to note that the idea of the “perpetual simple vows” taken by most members of the Third Order Regular, was included in the universal Canon Law for the very first time in the Code of 1917.

## Prayer/Contemplation

In its treatment of prayer and the Sacraments, the brothers and sisters of penance are told what they should pray and how often to receive the sacraments, especially Communion and Penance.. Again, prescriptions of **when** to pray, **what** to pray and even **how** to pray are not to be found in the TOR Rule and Life, but in the particular law of each institute. Chapter three of our Rule and Life, however, addresses the “Spirit of Prayer”; although making specific mention of the Liturgy of the Hours, participation in the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance, it begins “Everywhere and in all places, at all times and in all seasons the brothers and sisters are to have a true and humble faith. From the depths of their inner life let them love, honor, adore, serve, praise, bless and glorify the most high and sovereign God, eternal Father and Son and Holy Spirit. With all that they are, let them adore God because we should pray always and not lose heart: this is what God desires.” Although it obviously cannot be a matter of legislation, our prayer is to be constant and Trinitarian, fundamental elements of Franciscan theology and spirituality.

Although all of us are invited to live a contemplative life, we are also reminded of the members of our order whom “the Lord has called to the life of contemplation” [who] with a daily renewed joy should manifest their dedication to God and celebrate the love that God has for the world, when God created us, redeemed us, and will save us by mercy alone.” We are reminded of our need for mercy, but also of our obligation to show it to others.



INTERNATIONAL FRANCISCAN CONFERENCE  
of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis

MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221–2021

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In number 10 of the Rule and Life invites the brothers and sisters, “with all creation” to “praise God Ruler of heaven and earth, and give thanks because, by the holy will and through the only Son with the Holy Spirit, God created all things spiritual and material, and created us in God’s image and likeness”. This recognition of the “hallowedness” of all creation takes on the added necessity of care for creation in the light of today’s environmental crisis. as so masterfully pointed out by Pope Francis in his Encyclical on the Care of our Common Home (*Laudato Si’*), a problem which our 13<sup>th</sup>-century brothers and sisters did not know.

## Poverty

Chapter six of the Rule and Life speaks of the Life in Poverty in two simple paragraphs: “Let all the brothers and sisters zealously follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though rich beyond measure with the most blessed Virgin, his mother, he wanted to choose poverty in this world and he emptied himself,” thus situating our poverty in the *kenotic* self-emptying of Christ. It then admonishes the brothers and sisters to be content with the bare necessities of food, clothing and shelter, happily sharing life and resources with those living on the margins of society.

“The truly poor in spirit, following the example of the Lord, neither appropriate nor defend anything as their own and live in this world as pilgrims and strangers.” Our lack of attachment to material things, not a Rule or Church law, makes us peace-bearers and “heirs and rulers of the reign of God... materially poor, but rich in virtue”.

## Minority/Humility

*Memoriale propositi* places the idea of fraternal relations in the context of the monthly gathering at which the brothers and sisters assist at Mass, make their contribution to the common treasury and, if it is deemed appropriate, listen to some spiritual exhortation. The money collected is to be distributed “among the poor brothers and sisters, especially the sick and those who may have nothing for their funeral services, and thereupon among other poor”. At first glance this has nothing to do with the life of the brothers and sisters of the Third Order Regular today since its members have bound themselves by public vow to life in community/fraternity and to place their resources in common.

However, when we note that the Chapter on the monthly meeting is immediately followed by legislation regarding care for those who are not able to attend it, namely, the sick and the recently deceased, we find a parallel in Chapter seven of the Rule and Life where it states that “Because God loves us, the brothers and sisters should love each other” and encourages them to “manifest their love for each other in deeds. With confidence let them make known their needs to one another so that each can find and offer to the other that which is necessary. Blessed are those who love the others when they are sick and



INTERNATIONAL FRANCISCAN CONFERENCE  
of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis

MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221–2021

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unable to serve, as much as when they are healthy and of service to them. Whether in sickness or in health, they should only want what God wishes for them. For all that happens to them let them give thanks to our Creator.”

Throughout history many tertiaries banded together to perform the works of mercy and developed into religious institutes; the great majority of today’s institutes comprising the Third Order Regular of St. Francis are defined as “active” (rather than contemplative) apostolic groups, Following this line, chapter nine of the TOR Rule and Life treats of the Apostolic Life, rather than “apostolates”, for many groups formerly identified their traditional apostolate as their “charism”. The Franciscan mission makes us bear witness to the sovereignty of God in and through all things with our whole heart and mind and being. We express this, however, in care for our brothers and sisters, those with whom we have made a life-long commitment, and to the poor and little ones, the ones favored by the God-man Jesus Christ. This is most often expressed in our dedication to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy—preaching, teaching, health-care, catechesis, prison ministry, ministry to refugees and displaced persons, in short, everything in every age that needs a Gospel-based response. And, “as they announce peace with their lips, let them be careful to have it even more within their own hearts. No one should be roused to anger or insult on their account; rather, all should be moved to peace, kindness and harmony because of their gentleness. The sisters and brothers are called to heal the wounded, to bind up those who are bruised, and to reclaim the erring. Wherever they are, they should recall that they have given themselves up completely and handed themselves over totally to the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, they should be prepared to expose themselves to every enemy, visible and invisible, for love of the Lord because he says: Blessed are they who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, theirs is the reign of God”.

To conclude this presentation, I would like to point out first of all that, although written in the words of St. Francis, the Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis is in line with and incorporates the values expressed in the *Memoriale propositi*. There is, however, another similarity between the *status quaestionis* of the relationship between the early documents about the Third Franciscan Order and today’s documents of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis. In his article in the *Analecta TOR*, Fra Lino states that the First Letter to the Faithful was a “*regola scritta ispirazionale*”, that is, a “written inspirational rule” while, with the growth of the Third Order all throughout Italy and beyond, just a few years later it was “increasingly urgent” for Francis and Cardinal Ugolino to “provide an adequate organizational structure with opportune legislative norms” that would “present the basic ecclesiastical dispositions of the penitential life”. In a similar way, the Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular, with the First Letter to the Faithful as its opening passage, interprets this document for today’s members in the light of recent Scriptural and Franciscan scientific study, while leaving to each institute’s particular law the “provision of adequate organizational structure with opportune legislative norms”.

Thank you for your kind attention.



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MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221–2021