

Initial Formation Process

Part I: The Orientation Phase [Time frame: at least three to four months]

When we look at the Secular Franciscan formation process, it is important to see it as a continuum, that is, each stage flowing into the next. Aspects that are essential in the first phase, Orientation, will still be essential in the second, Inquiry, the third, Candidacy, and into the specialized program for Newly Professed as well as Ongoing Formation of Professed members.



Orientation is a favorable time to observe the whole person, physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and interpersonally. It is very important that formation resources allow for and encourage ample dialogue and sharing since this is the ideal time to discern a prospective member's call to a Secular Franciscan vocation and will allow him/her to commit to the Secular Franciscan way of life. If discernment is addressed early, it can save time and avoid heartache for both the individual and the Fraternity. This is an ideal time for the Aspirant to learn to pray St. Francis' prayer before the San Damiano crucifix which he prayed early in his conversion process: ***Most High And Glorious God, Bring Light To The Darkness Of My Heart! Give Me Right Faith, Certain Hope, And Perfect Charity. Lord, Give Me Insight And Wisdom So I Might Always Discern Your Holy And True Will. Amen.***

The materials used in Orientation should allow for comprehensive, yet nonintrusive, personal disclosure so as to discover the person's reasons for wanting to become a Secular Franciscan. We need to discern the extent to which his/her motivation is compatible with what we know the Order to be. In this way, potential "mismatching" can be handled early, avoiding much anguish for all concerned.

While we're "getting to know the person," we expect the person to "get to know us," our roots and our charism. Therefore, some form of introduction to the lives of Saints Francis and Clare is appropriate as early as possible and throughout the entire formation process.

Especially useful during Orientation are resources that allow the Fraternity and the Formation Team Members to gather knowledge about the individual's understanding of the Catholic faith. Remedial work takes time. If the person's knowledge is inadequate, perhaps involvement in the local church's adult religious education program or RCIA process would be appropriate BEFORE continuing with Secular Franciscan Initial Formation. Please make sure that the person is a fully initiated member of the Catholic faith (i.e., Baptized, received First Holy Communion and Confirmed).

The Orientation phase of formation is critical. This is a time to watch for specific clues that the person before you is or is not being called to be a Secular Franciscan. It is a time for discerning whether or not the prospective member has the basic dispositions that are essential for entering into mature committed relationships such as those which membership in the O.F.S. requires. The *Interview Guide for Prospective Members of the Secular Franciscan Order* is especially useful during this phase. It is ideal because it uses dialogue to ascertain the information.

Part II: The Inquiry Phase [Time frame: at least six months]



The Inquiry phase begins with the *Ceremony of Introduction and Welcoming* (*The Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order, pages 9-10*). This is a simple paraliturgical service that promises the support of the Fraternity on the journey that the Inquirer is about to undertake. It does not take place as a separate ritual, but as part of the regular meeting or gathering of the Fraternity.

The Inquiry phase of initial formation is a time for the most serious and prayerful discernment of the Inquirer's vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order. During this phase of initial formation, the Fraternity and the Inquirer continue to get to know each other more fully. Opportunities for dialogue and sharing continue to be important to ensure that the Inquirer and the Fraternity are compatible.

During Inquiry and before the *Rite of Admission*, certain aspects of the relationship between the Inquirer and the Fraternity must be examined. Prior to the *Rite of Admission*, the Fraternity needs to be confident that the Inquirer has an adequate grasp of the Catholic faith to sustain his/her deeper journey into the Franciscan way of life. The Inquirer's life should reflect a determination not only to know the faith intellectually, but also to live the faith in practice. The Inquirer should understand and be able to articulate the concept of vocation and, more specifically, a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order.

The Inquirer with the help of the Formation Director/Team, must seek to determine honest responses to these basic questions:

- What is a vocation, and how am I called?
- What is Gospel life, and how am I called to live it?
- What is a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order?
- What signs indicate that I might be called to live this way of life?

Note the emphasis on “before the *Rite of Admission*.” Once this Rite is celebrated, the Inquirer officially becomes a Candidate and is admitted into the local Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order to prepare for permanent commitment. If the discernment of vocation is incomplete or mistaken during the Orientation and Inquiry phases, it must be rectified before the *Rite of Admission* takes place.

The Inquiry phase, as the first formal period of initiation, is a time of discernment and choice to live the Franciscan way of life. During this time, the Inquirer participates in the life of the Fraternity and comes to understand our way of life. At the same time, the Fraternity comes to know the Inquirer better, so that it can discern how best to respond to the Inquirer's request to become part of the Fraternity.

Part III: The Candidacy Phase [Time frame: a minimum of 18 months and up to a maximum of 36 months]



The Candidacy phase begins with the *Rite of Admission* (*The Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order*, pages 11-17), which is the public acceptance by the Order of the Candidate's request and intention to live the Gospel life in the manner of Saint Francis as contained in *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* which has been approved by the Church. This is a time for assisting and promoting the growth of the Candidate as a human person, as a Christian person, and as a Franciscan person. All three dimensions are interrelated and, if the vocation is true, will blend into one harmonious human being.

As in all phases of formation, it is essential that resources allow for dialogue and sharing between the Candidate and the Fraternity as well as among any other Candidates and those in the other phases of formation. This is a time for the Formation Director/Team to encourage the Candidate's growth in Franciscan spirituality and the practice of Gospel values. It is important that the Candidate be given opportunities to experience, interiorize, integrate and live out the Gospel values presented in *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*. It is the time for the Candidate to take on a gradually more active role in the Fraternity and in society, especially by means of participation in Franciscan activities and apostolates.

Candidacy is the most important stage in the Initial Formation process since its purpose is to prepare the Candidate for a life-long commitment to live *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, while making a mature and enduring decision to participate as fully as possible in the Church's life and mission in accordance with the manner of Saint Francis.

During Candidacy, *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* supplies the path, the approach, and the guide. Therefore, considerable emphasis is placed on reading, understanding, digesting and incarnating the *Rule*. The living out of the *Rule* is crucial in preparing for Profession since it provides the structure for growing in the spirit of penance and ongoing conversion within the context of the local Fraternity. The entire Fraternity participates in and nurtures the growth and development of the Candidate's evangelical living out of the *Rule*.

A retreat may serve as a fitting formation experience prior to making Profession.

Rite of Profession (*The Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order*, pages 18-26) or

Rite of Temporary Commitment (*The Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order*, pages 27-29)

[adapted from the National Formation Commission as Parts 1,2, and 3 of a four-part statement on the process of Secular Franciscan formation in the United States, March 2001, revised 2005 by Deacon Dave & Thérèse Ream, O.F.S., Revised July 2017, updated 3/1/18]