

# Very Brief History of the Secular Franciscan Order

[Source: Wikipedia]

## Foundation of the Secular Third Order

The preaching of St. Francis, as well as his example, exercised such a powerful attraction on people that many married men and women wanted to join the First or the Second Order, but this being incompatible with their state of life, Francis found a middle way and gave them a rule animated by the Franciscan spirit. In the composition of this rule St. Francis was assisted by his friend Cardinal Ugolino di Conti, (later Pope Gregory IX).

As to the place where the Third Order was first introduced nothing certain is known. The preponderance of opinion is for Florence, chiefly on the authority of Mariano of Florence, or Faenza, who cites the first papal bull known on the subject (*Regesta pontificum*). The less authoritative *Fioretti* assigns Cannara, a small town two hours' walk from the Portiuncula, as the birthplace of the Third Order. Mariano and the Bull for Faenza (16 December 1221) suggest that 1221 was the earliest date for founding of the Third Order. Thomas of Celano wrote that the oldest preserved rule was dated 1221.

Another story tells of Luchesius Modestini, a greedy merchant from Poggibonzi, who had his life changed by meeting Francis about 1213. He and his wife Buonadonna were moved to dedicate their lives to prayer and serving the poor. While many couples of that era who experienced a religious conversion chose to separate and enter monasteries, this couple felt called to live out this new way of life together. Francis was moved to write a Rule for them which would allow them to do so.

Thus began the Brothers and Sisters of Penance in the Franciscan movement, which came to be called the Franciscan Third Order. The Chiesa della Buona Morte in the city of Cannara, (Church of the Good Death, previously named, "Church of the Stigmata of S. Francesco") claims to be the birthplace of the Third Order. Another contender from the same city is the Church of S. Francesco.

This way of life was quickly embraced by many couples and single men and women who did not feel called to the stark poverty of the friars and nuns, especially widows. They zealously practiced the lessons Francis had taught them concerning prayer, humility, peacemaking, self-denial, fidelity to the duties of their state, and above all charity. Like Francis himself, they cared for lepers and outcasts. Even canonical hermits were able to follow this Rule and bring themselves into the orbit of the Franciscan vision. The Order came to be a force in the medieval legal system, since one of its tenets forbade the use of arms, and thus the male members of the order could not be drafted into the constant and frequent battles cities and regions waged against one another in that era.

## Third Order of St. Francis in the United States

Early Franciscan missionaries established fraternities in the Southern and Southwestern states, where there was extensive French and Spanish Catholic influence. A fraternity was

established at Santa Fe before 1680. Another fraternity operated in New Mexico almost from the time of the Reconquest (1692–1695), as reported by the Father Guardian (*custos*), José Bernal, dated Santa Fe, 17 September 1794. While evidence does not support existence of a Third Order for lay people anywhere else, single individuals among the Indians were sometimes classified as tertiaries. It is likely that a confraternity was founded at St. Augustine, Florida, before the close of the 16th century, as this was the first Spanish settlement in what is now the United States. One was established at San Antonio, Texas, before the middle of the 18th century. The establishment of provinces of the order of Friars Minor brought about the establishment of many confraternities. In 1919 a number of friar provincials decided to set up a national organization.

With the approval of a new Rule in 1978, the fraternities were reorganized as an independent arm of the Franciscan Movement. The National Fraternity of the United States was formed and divided into thirty regions. As of 2016, there are over 12,000 Secular Franciscans in the United States.

## Famous Secular Franciscans

The following people belonging to the Order have been proclaimed saints:

\*Elizabeth of Hungary (d.1231) \*Rose of Viterbo (d. 1251) \*Ferdinand III of Castile (d. 1252)  
\*Louis IX of France (d.1270) \*Margaret of Cortona (d. 1297) \*Ivo of Kermartin (d.1303)  
\*Amato Ronconi of Saldezzo (d.1304) \*Angela of Foligno (d.1309) \*Elzéar of Sabran (d.1323)  
\*Roch (d.1327) \*Elizabeth of Portugal (d.1336) \*Conrad of Piacenza (d.1351)  
\*Bridget of Sweden (d.1373) \*Joan of Arc (d.1431) \*Catherine of Genoa (d.1510)  
\*Thomas More (d.1535) \*Angela Merici (d. 1540) \*Charles Borromeo (d.1584)  
\*Jane Frances de Chantal (d.1641) \*Mariana de Jesús de Paredes (d.1645)  
\*Peter of Saint Joseph Betancur (d.1667) \*Mary Frances of the Five Wounds (d.1791)  
\*Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo (d.1842) \*Vincenza Gerosa (d.1847)  
\*Vincent Pallotti (d.1850) \*Emily de Vialar (d.1856) \*John Vianney (d.1859)  
\*Joseph Cafasso (d.1860) \*Maria Giuseppa Rossello (d.1880) \*John Bosco (d.1888)  
\*Pope Pius X (d.1914) \*Luigi Guanella (d.1915) \*Frances Xavier Cabrini (d.1917)  
\*Pope John XXIII (d.1963)

17 members of the Third Order of St. Francis were included in the canonization of the 26 Martyrs of Japan. More members of the Third Order of St. Francis were included in the canonization of the Martyrs of Japan and the Chinese Martyrs.

## Resources

### Websites

St. Anthony Fraternity, Albuquerque, NM: [www.franciscansalbuquerque.sfousa.org](http://www.franciscansalbuquerque.sfousa.org)

Secular Franciscan Order, National, USA: [www.nafra-sfo.org](http://www.nafra-sfo.org)