

Franciscan Guide for Spiritual Directors



The Third Order Society of St. Francis

Province of the Americas

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What is the Third Order?

Francis was a charismatic human being who so closely mirrored the love of Christ and the living Gospel that nearly everyone who met him fell in love with him and wanted to follow his way. Francis realized that not everyone could take up a celibate life of poverty and homelessness, yet he recognized that people unable to do this were still drawn to serve God with deeply committed hearts and lives.

Even before Francis was born, groups of men and women, married or single, in ordinary secular walks of life, were living under Rule and vows as members of “Third Orders.” So, eight hundred years ago, the “Brothers and Sisters of Penance” came to be, later to be known as the Franciscan “Third Order.”

The Anglican Franciscan movement began to take shape in the United States, England, and India early in the twentieth century, merging into its present form as the Society of St. Francis in 1967. For many years, the Third Order in the Province of the Americas functioned as a sort of auxiliary to the First Order brothers and sisters (those who live in community with vows of poverty, chastity and obedience). However, in 1987 the Third Order became autonomous, so while we maintain familial ties with the First Orders, we have our own provincial and worldwide governance, formation program, and Constitution and Statutes. Officially, we are known as the Third Order Society of St. Francis (TSSF).

There are about 3,000 Anglican Third Order Franciscans worldwide. Some 500 of us live in the Province of the Americas which includes North, Central and South America, and the Caribbean countries. We do not live together in community, wear habits or follow the rule of literal poverty that Francis chose for himself and his friars minor; that was probably never his intention for secular Franciscans with family and work responsibilities.

We serve God as we are called, in the ordinary occupations of life. The shape of our lives is formed in the context of the Order’s *Principles* and Rule. Being a Franciscan tertiary is one of many ways of responding to God’s love; it is a specific vocation that may not be “right” for everyone.

Spiritual Direction for those in Formation

Creating a Rule of Life

The Rule of the Third Order contains the *Principles*, and one of your tasks as spiritual director will be to help your directee to formulate an individual Rule of Life to give personal expression to the Order’s Rule. Though all Rules follow the same overall format, specific intentions under each of the nine categories will vary according to the individual’s own special gifts, temperament, and life circumstances, as well as what your directee perceives God is calling him or her to do. What might be appropriate for a person without family responsibilities will probably not be possible for one with family responsibilities and multiple community, church, and job-related duties. An individual’s Rule will necessarily need modification over the years to reflect individual growth as well as changing needs and responsibilities. We normally review our Rules and make any needed changes once a year.

In general, a Rule:

- Includes all nine points of the Order’s Rule: Eucharist, Penitence, Personal Prayer, Self-Denial, Retreat, Study, Simplicity, Work, Obedience. (See Appendix A)
- Should be designed to fit the person writing it, not Mother Teresa!
- Will include specific intentions for incorporating each of the nine points into the individual’s life in his/her own unique way.
- Should be reviewed and rewritten before novicing, once a year after that, and as needed for growth and changing life circumstances.
- Is to be formally approved during Formation by the Formation Director or Assistant Formation Director.
- Is never an end in itself but serves as a framework for developing a balanced spiritual life.

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- Should neither be so ambitious it can't be kept (guilt is NOT one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit) nor so easy that a little stretching isn't required to follow it.
- Should leave plenty of room for the Holy Spirit to work within and through the individual.
- Is for the individual, not his/her family, though the individual's family responsibilities should certainly be taken into consideration when formulating a Rule.
- Should never be rigid or legalistic—there is nothing rigid or legalistic about Franciscan spirituality!

Unlike some religious Orders and Communities, members of TSSF write their own Rule of Life, designed to fit their own life and circumstances, using guidelines provided. Your directee will have a copy of our guidelines. You can also request a copy directly from the Formation Director or Assistant Formation Director.

The spiritual director can be of great help in guiding the directee to recognize gifts and strengths, as well as problem areas that may need attention. Your firsthand knowledge of the person's life situation, responsibilities, conflicts, personality, and basic spiritual development will enable you to help your directee formulate a Rule that is realistic and appropriate. In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* Thomas Merton says "a spiritual guide worth his or her salt will conduct a ruthless campaign against all forms of delusion rising out of spiritual ambition and self-complacency which aim to establish the ego in spiritual glory." This is as vital when helping your directee construct a Rule of Life as it ever will be in the course of the direction relationship.

Living a Rule of Life

A tertiary at any stage of the Franciscan life may have problems with rule-keeping. Francis himself was no exception! In a letter to the entire Order, written near the end of his life, Francis says, "I have offended God in many ways through my grievous fault, especially in not having kept the Rule which I promised the Lord, nor in having said the Office as the Rule prescribes...." Though our individual Rules are not nearly so stringent as the one Francis promised, we all struggle with the "juggling act" of living a religious life in an ordinary secular context, pulled this way and that by our own conflicts, doubts, and misconceptions, by the distractions and responsibilities of our lives. A Rule is not meant to be something that limits us but rather, something that frees us, that provides a balanced framework for enabling our relationship with God and becoming whole, fully human beings in Christ. The basic work of helping a postulant or novice learn to live a Franciscan Rule daily is the province of the formation counselor.

The basic task of the spiritual director is to help the directee "pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship." (Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*).

The Flow of Formation

The Third Order's formation program takes a minimum of two and a half years to complete, moving through stages of initial exploration (aspirancy), testing (postulancy) and developing (novitiate). Formation is designed to help your directee learn about being a Third Order Franciscan and about Franciscan spirituality. It is also a time of questioning: is the Franciscan vocation the expression of Christian life to which God is calling this person? Third Order formation can require postulants and novices to take a hard look at themselves, their attitudes, and ways of relating to God and to others. You may feel at some point that your directee is really on the wrong track in seeking to become a tertiary; if this happens, don't hesitate to explore this with your directee. Sometimes the postulant or novice is really a Benedictine at heart, or is called to a conventual community, or may simply be looking for help in living a Rule as an individual, without any real desire to be part of an Order at all.

Postulancy begins when the aspirant's Rule of Life is approved and the first written report has been received. Not all aspirants are accepted as postulants. Sometimes there are early indications that the Third Order would not be appropriate for the individual. Reasons for not moving forward might be indications of emotional instability or immaturity, untreated substance abuse, or perhaps the person's own quick realization that he or she might be happier as a Companion (an auxiliary group of the Order), or in a conventual Order, or is suited to a different "style" of spirituality. Sometimes we ask an individual to wait until a particularly stressful or unstable time is over.

Formation can be very demanding, especially in the beginning. We hope not to doom an aspirant to failure by piling on more than that individual can readily handle under his or her current circumstances.

Aside from the ongoing formation that occurs in local fellowships for all members of the Order, our formation program is mainly conducted by email, with occasional meetings by telephone, videoconference, or in person. The postulant or novice sends regular reports to the assigned counselor, who is normally not a member of the same local fellowship. This regular contact helps those in formation take stock of how they are doing and helps the counselor assess progress and get to know the postulant or novice on a deeper level. The formation counselor establishes a helping relationship with the postulant or novice on a deeper level that sometimes develops into a lifelong friendship after Profession. The formation counselor is part of a team, which includes the Assistant Formation Director, the Formation Director, the Chaplain, and sometimes the Minister Provincial. All correspondence is confidential within the formation team, and novice files are destroyed after profession.

For those in formation who are geographically isolated from a local fellowship, the formation team may be their only regular contact with the Order. However, with the increased availability of tele-technologies, the Order has developed virtual fellowships and encourages everyone in formation to join such a group or otherwise interact regularly with members of the Order beyond the formation team.

What is Required of the Spiritual Director during Formation

After six months of postulancy, the postulant, counselor, Formation Director, and Assistant Formation Director will decide if it is appropriate for the individual to continue exploring the Franciscan life as a novice. Reviews are also conducted midway through the novitiate, and again when the novice requests profession.

To respect the intimacy of the spiritual direction relationship, at these times we will not ask you for feedback beyond verifying that you have been meeting regularly (and then only if this is in some doubt). However, these would be good times for you to frankly discuss with your directee his or her continuing sense of call towards becoming a professed tertiary. Is the person open and responsive to direction or is participation in the direction relationship more like complying with a requirement? Is being part of the Third Order important and appropriate for this person? Does it add a needed dimension, and bring components of humility, love and joy into the person's life? Does the Rule help or hinder your directee's relationship with God? Is engagement with the Order as a community of diverse (and even sometimes incompatible) people helpful to your directee's spiritual growth? How have either of you witnessed spiritual and personal growth in the directee? What challenges has your directee experienced? Does your directee feel ready for the next step?

Even though novicing simply represents a commitment to continue testing and developing one's Franciscan vocation for a longer period of time, we sometimes ask a postulant to postpone novicing temporarily, especially if his or her life is particularly stressful at the moment, or if reporting has been haphazard or sketchy, or if there is some doubt about the appropriateness of the person continuing. Likewise we may ask a novice to postpone requesting profession for similar reasons. Occasionally we decide it would be best that a person not continue, or the postulant or novice decides to drop out. A spiritual director can be of great service in helping a directee put this in perspective, providing help and support. There is certainly no shame attached to not completing Third Order formation. Realization that a particular expression of spirituality doesn't fit should be seen as a success, not a failure! Probably half of our postulants don't go on to profession, most often by their own recognition that it isn't what they feel God is calling them to do.

Spiritual Direction for the Professed Tertiary

Profession is usually a high point, and as with every major ceremonial rite of passage, there is a letdown which follows it. The transition to Profession can cause an unexpected sense of isolation or abandonment in the newly professed, especially if there are no other tertiaries around. This is less pronounced when there is an active Fellowship but may still manifest itself in some way. A newly professed tertiary must report quarterly for two years to the Area Chaplain, but sometimes receives no answer. We hope that won't be the case, but reality teaches us otherwise. Your directee may need extra support and encouragement in the months following profession. Even

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though he or she may be ready to meet with you on a less frequent basis, it may be best to postpone major changes for a time.

If your directee has been professed for a while, the Franciscan Rule has probably become second nature. This doesn't mean there won't be ups and downs or glitches in the spiritual life—those are part and parcel of the journey. The Rule should help the directee navigate these rough waters, but there may be times of aridity or transition periods when your directee needs more help. In general, someone with a well-established prayer life will need to meet with the spiritual director less frequently than someone just starting out. Although it is advisable for novices and postulants to meet with their spiritual directors monthly, no such guideline exists for the professed. How often you meet is between the director and directee.

Franciscan Spirituality

You certainly don't need to be a Franciscan in order to direct one, but to understand a Franciscan's way of relationship with God, it is helpful to be familiar with the life and spirituality of St. Francis. We are fortunate to have access to Francis' own writings, as well as a wealth of biographies.

Francis was in love with God and threw himself into the love relationship with all the dangerous abandon of a lover. He saw the Reign of God as present now and expressed this with great passion by embracing the radical poverty of Christ. His Order not only did without possessions—including things as basic as shelter from the elements and cash compensation for hard physical labor—they were downright happy about it. The worse things got, the more joy it seemed to produce in Francis and his early followers. Francis looked at the world, saw his Beloved (its Creator) reflected and working in it, and embraced it with open arms. He called all created things his brothers and sisters: sun, moon, living beings, storms, fire, even death. Sometimes this attitude of St. Francis is mistranslated into a sort of sentimental piety that is really anything BUT representative of the passionate Franciscan ethos. Francis had so much love and compassion for Jesus' suffering and death on the cross that he wanted to share Christ's passion as deeply as he was able. Therefore, any pain or hardship he had to endure, he saw as a gift to be celebrated. Any contact for good or ill with creation he saw as contact with his Beloved; thus, in embracing a leper, he embraced the Christ.

Francis unhesitatingly followed the leadings of the Holy Spirit, which he perceived in scripture and deep prayer. He followed the Gospels literally. The “playboy” excesses for which he was notorious before his conversion were simply channeled into his relationship with God: he became a zealot, a “fool for God.” He surely would not pass psychological tests for ordination today, though he was quickly ordained a deacon when his original Rule was approved—lest he be turned loose on the world with his crazy insistence that the Gospel could and should be followed literally. Francis abandoned himself to God as to a lover. Everything he did was done with great heart, deep humility, and much joy. Prayer leading to action, generosity and joyousness of spirit, careful discernment, and close following of the Gospels should characterize the tertiary's way of seeing and being in the world today, just as they did that of Francis.

General Information

During formation, we expect postulants and novices to meet regularly with a spiritual director. In most circumstances, this should be monthly. If your directee is unable to meet this frequently, it is worthwhile to explore why.

When choosing a spiritual director, tertiaries should not choose someone from their own fellowship. The spiritual direction relationship should not be compromised by fellowship issues. Clarity and honesty are too important for spiritual growth.

Tertiaries' spiritual directors may have formal training and long experience in direction, or none. They may be clergy, members of religious orders, or lay people. Wherever you fall in the broad spectrum of direction, we appreciate your willingness to help. Without direction, we all risk self-delusion and falling by the wayside on the spiritual journey. There is nothing as important to our spiritual health as a good spiritual director.

We suggest that tertiaries choose a spiritual director who will understand their commitment to a radical Christianity in the Franciscan way, a person who prays, with whom he or she is able to communicate well, who doesn't encourage dependence on his or her "authority" or judgment, and neither believes Christianity to be "other-worldly" nor entirely a matter of morals and humanitarianism. Ideally, the director will also be under spiritual direction, and will have someone who serves as a supervisor or advisor for the direction relationship (without breaking confidentiality with the directee, of course). If it is possible—and often it isn't—we suggest that people not use their parish priests as spiritual directors, because there can be a real conflict of interest. Tertiaries are usually involved in parish activities, and it is easy for the discussion to turn to parish rather than spiritual direction issues. If the person is having problems in the parish, there can be real reluctance to share this. We certainly understand that the ideal situation is often neither practical nor possible. Probably few spiritual directors will meet all of those suggested criteria completely!

Some religious orders specialize in spiritual direction and offer training. Sometimes there are diocesan programs available, also. Some people seem to have a natural gift for helping others recognize where God is touching their lives and become fine spiritual directors without any training at all. If you have no previous experience or training as a spiritual director, there are a few basics to remember:

Spiritual direction is not the same as pastoral counseling. It is about helping an individual recognize and develop a deeper personal relationship with God.

- Everything that is said during direction is confidential and not to be shared outside the relationship.
- Keeping the time with your directee focused on direction rather than in casual conversation is especially important if your directee is also your friend. Setting a specific time to meet and to end the session and keeping to it can help set it apart from a social time. (An hour is usually about right.)
- Everything in your directee's life will reflect his or her relationship with God. A person's religious life is not something that can be separated from day-to-day living. In general, if one's personal relationships are "out of whack", so is one's relationship with God.
- Begin by asking some questions. How did your directee come to seek out spiritual direction? What is his or her prayer life like? What does your directee expect from the direction relationship? (What are your own expectations?)
- You don't have to share the same spirituality to direct someone, but, if you find yourself unable to relate to the person or if you are feeling uncomfortable, suggest that the person find another spiritual director.
- Sometimes what isn't said is more telling than what is said. Be aware when issues are being avoided, and don't be afraid to ask relevant questions.
- Beginning the session with a prayer or a few minutes of silent reflection can help set the focus.
- Try to do more listening than talking. Sharing your own experiences can sometimes be helpful but may turn out to be intimidating. That is something you will have to discern for yourself.

The Formation Director, Assistant Formation Directors, Provincial Chaplain, or Area Chaplains of the Third Order Society of St. Francis Province of the Americas, will be happy to answer questions or discuss problems with you. Your directee will be able to give you the name and contact information for these individuals.

On behalf of TSSF, we thank you for your ministry. May God bless you in your work.