

How is Franciscan Life Distinct?

(Rob Breen, OFS, Ph.D)

Franciscan life is distinct and different from the many other Catholic spiritual traditions. It is not better, but is more appropriate and fitting for certain people, lifestyles and concerns. Since all charisms are a gift of the Holy Spirit to the people of God, we can help people listen to their own Call and charism from God, and introduce them to spiritualities that might fit better.

This is a general summary of the Franciscan charism and lifestyle:

1. Balances and integrates the masculine and feminine. Francis and Clare are the original source of the Franciscan tradition. It emphasizes a very strong integration of masculine and feminine as complementary and essential for each other.
2. Balances and integrates action AND contemplation.
3. Balances and integrates the idealistic AND practical . . . every ideal is made real by implementing. The “implemented ideal” is the only REAL.
4. Balances and integrates reason and the arts . . . science and poetry.
5. Balances and integrates individuals IN community and IN society (“the world”).
6. Emphasizes images of God as Trinitarian (God as loving community); as Divine Artist; and Christ as “God become human out of Love”, not just “to pay the sin-debt.”
7. Emphasizes the Incarnation. The world is created in love and goodness, and is made holy by Christ’s incarnation: Christ becomes flesh and blood, and makes all material things esteemed by taking on material life.
8. Emphasizes Scripture of the Gospel of John for its Christology; simple/poor /mendicant model for Christian ministry (adopted by Christ & early apostles); Beatitudes; use of Psalms (poetry) as the preferred communal prayer life.
9. Accepts this world ---the everyday, normal, disappointing, struggle-filled, messy, confusing experiences---as the occasions of grace, conversion, and “perfection” – it is living in THIS world that we encounter Christ and salvation.
10. Recognizes the special graces in finding God in the “other,” and requires a special ministry to the “other.”
11. Recognizes that service is using power for servant leadership. The world’s abuse of power is to be forsaken for Christ’s power of love, peace and justice.
12. Poverty and simplicity erode the false self of ego, and build the True Self that is the image of God. Poverty also puts us in solidarity with Jesus Christ and the Poor, and exchanges abusive power for love.

11. Recognizes that God has established a Kinship of Creation, that is interdependent. All Creation has intrinsic worth, because it is created by God.
12. Is characterized by joy, celebration, laughter, humor, and fun.
13. Presents a challenge by promoting daily, ongoing, lifelong conversion—called “Franciscan Penance”—as the daily lifestyle. It requires new seeing and listening, taking this to heart in dialogue, change of behavior and lifestyle, and offering this to the world in love.
14. Emanates from the Church--the body of Christ, the entire people of God--but offers alternative ministry models and spirituality that address the needs that aren't well addressed through normal diocesan models.
15. Accepts that a Franciscan vocation is a lifelong journey, and takes a lifetime to reap the harvests of the vocation. The Franciscan vocation accepts that people change slowly, deeply and profoundly over time, and need new challenges that offer growth at each new level. A Franciscan vocation offers something to the simplest, most naïve, most powerless life to the most educated, sophisticated, powerful, complex, intense life; from the most sinful to the most saintly, and everything in between. It has always been hospitable to the old, and especially the young.
16. Was always intended to be inclusive of all states and vocations of life: priest/ordained, religious/brother/sister, and laity – each has its own distinct expression of the Franciscan charism.
17. Is a proven, well-tested, 800-year-old tradition of prophetic-wisdom and discipleship that has worked throughout the centuries.

The Secular Franciscan Charism:

18. Has its own unique and special Secular Franciscan “Rule of Life” that is clear but flexible and adaptable. The MANDATE FROM FRANCIS is that the rule and charism be adapted to new times and circumstances. Each generation of Secular Franciscans must adapt them to real life, and real historical circumstances. This Charism and Rule are fundamentally the same rule established by Francis 800 years ago.
19. Is especially appropriate for responding to the Church's call to the laity's role in the marketplace and the civic world, the role of the Church to engage the Modern World, environmental vocations, and preferential option for the poor.
20. As expressed in the Secular Franciscan Order today addresses very important contemporary issues of youth and young adult formation, environmental issues and global social injustice. It also responds to the growing emergence of lay discipleship as a preferred vocation and Call.

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