**THE LAITY**

***in the World and in the Church***

The members of the Catholic Church can be divided *according to their function in the world and in the Church ,* into "laity" and "clergy". The clergy are deacons, priests and bishops. In the Roman Catholic Church, they are men only. They are the ministers of the sacraments and their essential function is to build the community of the Church. On the other hand, the laity are all the other members of the Church, both men and women. They work in secular society and their essential function is to build the secular community. Some cooperate with the clergy also in building the Church community, but they are not clerics or ordained ministers.

The members of the Catholic Church can also be divided in a different way, *according to their condition of life in the world and in the Church*, into "secular" and "religious". Men and women religious make public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They live a celibate life in a religious community, subject to a religious Superior. On the other hand, secular men and women may be married or single. They may be living in the family of their own or of their parents, or not living in a family. They do not make the three public vows. Some make private or social vows.

So, we can distinguish Catholics in four broad categories. There are the secular clergy and the religious clergy (clerical religious), and the secular laity and the religious laity (lay religious). Most Secular Franciscans are secular laity, but some of them are secular clergy. That’s why we talk about the *Secular* Franciscan Order, not the *Lay* Franciscan Order.

The Scriptures provide both a negative and a positive concept of "secular", “the world.”. Negatively, St John speaks of this world as the place opposed to God where the evil one is at work seducing people. He writes: "Have no love for the world, nor the things that the world affords. If anyone loves the world, the Father's love has no place in him, for nothing that the world affords comes from the Father. Carnal allurements, enticements for the eye, the life of empty show ‑ all these are from the world" (1 Jn 2: 15‑16).

Positively, the same St John writes: "The real light which gives light to every man was coming into the world" (Jn 1: 9). "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ... God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3: 16‑17).

St Francis often expressed a negative concept of the world. For example, he addressed a letter to "All who love the Lord ... and hate their bodies with their vices and sins..." But he does not think of the world as totally separated from God or independent of God, because the world is God's creation.

St Francis admonished us to protect ourselves from the contamination of the present world. He wrote: "A man is really clean of heart when he has no time for the things of this world but is always searching for the things of heaven..." (Admonition XVI).

But Francis, like the Scriptures, entertained both negative and positive concepts of the world. He grew to experience the world not only as a place of opposition to God but also as a place of friendship with God. He himself was released from the constrictions of selfishness and he enjoyed the freedom of God's children. Consequently, his world lit up with hope and it took on the features of its risen Saviour.

Francis is better remembered for his positive concept of the world. His biographer, friar Thomas of Celano, wrote that Francis "never ceased to glorify, praise, and bless the Creator and Ruler of all things in all the elements and creatures." What more positive concept of the world could we find than in his Canticle of the Creatures?