

Belonging to the Secular Franciscan Order:
Implications for Membership in the OFS
for Persons in Invalid Marriages or Same-Sex Civil Unions

This document is intended to help reflect on our responsibilities and some of the challenging situations we face in life and in leadership.

One of the defining characteristics of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) is its relationship with the Church. As an Order in the Church, **the OFS is dedicated in a special way to the service of God and the Church.** "...they [Secular Franciscans] intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in *the life and mission of the Church.*" (OFS Rule, Art. 1) Our relationship with the Church is spelled out in the OFS Rule and General Constitutions (GC).

The Secular Franciscan Order is established by the Pope, and its legislation (Rule and General Constitutions) is approved and promulgated by him (OFS Rule Art. 3).

"The OFS is governed by the universal law of the Church, and by its own: the Rule, the Constitutions, the Ritual, and the particular statutes." (GC Art. 4.1)

"The Rule establishes the nature, purpose, and spirit of the OFS." (GC Art. 4.2)

"The Constitutions have as their purpose:

- to apply the Rule;
- *to indicate concretely the conditions for belonging to the OFS, its government, the organization of life in fraternity, and its seat.*" (GC Art. 4.3)

The **Constitutions define the qualifications for membership** in the OFS.

"The OFS is open to the faithful of every state of life. The following may belong to it:

- the laity (men and women)
- the secular clergy (deacons, priests, bishops)." (GC Art. 2.2)

However, potential **members must meet certain criteria to be admitted and to remain members in good standing.**

"Conditions for admission are:

- **to profess the Catholic faith,**
- **to live in communion with the Church,**
- **to be of good moral standing,** and
- **to show clear signs of a vocation."** (GC 39.2)

"Profession is *the solemn ecclesial act* by which the candidate, remembering the call received from Christ, renews the baptismal promises and publicly affirms his or her personal commitment to live the Gospel in the world according to the example of Francis and following the Rule of the OFS." (GC 42.1). "I, N.N., by the grace of God, renew my baptismal promises and consecrate myself to the service of his Kingdom." (OFS Ritual, Rite of Profession)

During the Rite, **the candidate also affirms** the following:

"You have been made members of the people of God by your Baptism, and strengthened by Confirmation by the new gift of the Spirit, in order to proclaim Christ by your life and your words. ***Do you wish to bind yourself more closely to the Church and to work intently to rebuild the***

ecclesial community and fulfill its mission among all people?” (OFS Ritual). The ecclesial witness confirms the candidate’s commitment in the name of the Church (OFS Ritual, Rite of Profession).

“Profession incorporates the candidate into the Order and is by its nature a perpetual commitment.” (GC Art. 42.2; OFS Rule Art. 23)

There are certain **implications to making a perpetual commitment in the OFS. A member may not make or remain in another commitment that is contradictory to their commitment to the OFS or is contrary to church teaching.**

1. A person who is not a Catholic (see GC 39.2) may not become a member (although they may participate in the fraternity as an affiliate).
2. A person who already belongs to a religious Order or another Third Order may not become a member. “The Vocation to the OFS is a specific vocation that gives form to the life and apostolic activity of its members. Therefore, those who are bound by a perpetual commitment to another religious family or institute of consecrated life cannot belong to the OFS.” (GC Art. 2.1) In addition, someone should not belong to the OFS and a second expression of the Franciscan charism.
3. Someone whose lifestyle is obviously counter to the Gospel or to Church teaching.
 - Someone who is “living together” in a romantic relationship without marriage.
 - Catholics who are divorced and re-marry without the benefit of a church annulment. Divorce is not an obstacle for joining the OFS. However, attempting a second marriage without an annulment would hinder one’s entrance into the OFS.
 - Entering into a same-sex civil union is a public statement which is opposed to the teachings of the Catholic Church and therefore, not in keeping with the Rule of the OFS. Those who have entered into a same-sex civil union cannot be admitted to, or continue in, the OFS. (See https://www.secularfranciscansusa.org/resources/guidelines_forms_and_other_resources/national_forms_and_guidelines/national_guidelines/ “Clarification on Sexual Orientation and Sexual Identity Issues published by the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants.)

Serving on a Fraternity Council in the OFS

The nature of the OFS as an Order in the Church has certain implications for those who serve on its Councils at every level. The offices we hold in the Secular Franciscan Order are offices in the Church. The Church relies on our leadership to guide the Fraternity and the Council. We work together, each co-responsible, with the Minister exercising a special role.

“The offices of service within the Council are **ecclesiastical offices**: each of them is fundamental for the animation and [guidance] of the Fraternity and as a whole (the Council) is called to exercise the assignment in a co-responsible way (GC Art. 51.1; 63.1; 67.1), it being understood that the office of Minister specifically exercises the functions of representation and coordination.

Since the Council is made up of various ecclesiastical offices, those who are elected to carry out their functions must be suitable (Code of Canon Law Can. 149) and free from impediments deriving from ecclesiastical and state legislation.” (CIOFS Guidelines for OFS Council Members 2021. II. Meaning of service Offices and role of Councilors p. 2)

That is, the members of the Council hold offices in the Church, so those elected must be able to serve, according to Canon Law, free of any obstacles or restrictions in Church or civil law.

“Since the service offices are ecclesiastical offices, a lack of co-responsibility or a non-compliant exercise of functions has the direct consequence of the applications of the provision of removal (GC Art. 84), if dialogue and fraternal correction have not been successful.” (CIOFS Guidelines for OFS Council Members 2021. II. Meaning of service Offices and role of Councilors p. 3)

Further, a refusal to follow through on the responsibilities of leadership should prompt dialogue and fraternal correction. If that fraternal dialogue is not successful at facilitating co-responsible leadership or the proper exercise of leadership, the Church and Franciscan legislation has a process to remove leaders that persist in not fulfilling their responsibilities.

Questions for reflection:

1. What does it mean to be “welcoming” of people when someone is happy to hear about the Gospel or about St. Francis but not prepared to let go of some dimension of their life which is incompatible with Church teaching? Have you had an experience that helps you to understand this?
2. What does making profession in the Secular Franciscan Order mean to you? What should it mean?
3. People often think that the things we do at liturgy are our main service to the Church, however, our profession calls us to something more profound. What is one way in which you “bind yourself more closely to the Church and to work intently to rebuild the ecclesial community and fulfill its mission among all people”?
4. What is one situation you have encountered where your responsibilities as a member of an Order in the Church have been difficult to act on?
5. If you are a member of a fraternity council at some level, what is one way in which you have exercised co-responsibility with others on the council?
6. What experience have you had of people in irregular marriages (that is, marriages not blessed by the Church) or same-sex civil unions and their participation in the Catholic Church?

Approved by the National Executive Council, October 11, 2022.