

The Franciscan's Later Rule (1223-2023)



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On November 29, 2023, the Franciscans are celebrating the eighth centenary of the confirmation of their Later Rule (*Regula bullata*) by Pope Honorius III (November 29, 1223). This is one of the four great Rules of consecrated life, along with that of Saint Basil (eremitical), Saint Augustine (canonical), and Saint Benedict (monastic)[1].

Francis of Assisi wrote it at a time of internal tensions. Rather than trying to appease them with a commitment to precise norms, he prefers to appeal again to the grace of the origins; that is, to the evangelical ideal that had transformed his life (*Test 1*). His intention in writing it could be expressed with the biblical phrase: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

For centuries, however, the Rule was seen as a predominantly juridical text. Pope Clemente V identifies 24 precepts in the Later Rule. Others raise the number of precepts to 28, 39, and even to 61. There were even claims that Christ himself had dictated it to Saint Francis. In making the religious profession, the friars vow to observe it, along with the three evangelical counsels, and therefore it was considered a mortal sin to transgress any of the precepts that had been identified in it. The *Werkbuch zur Regel des Heiligen Franciskus*, published in Germany in 1955, "can be considered the first serious and organic attempt to explain the Rule from parameters other than the traditional legal schemes".

The Second Vatican Council promoted a more fraternal style of religious life. Following its teachings, the casuistic interpretation of the legislative texts gave way to a reading conducted in the light of how the founder intended and lived the charism and the life project. In this new context, the Franciscan Rule was no longer primarily seen as a normative text but was instead related to the vital and fraternal dynamism it promoted.

Pope Francis reminds us that consecrated life "is not about survival, but new life"[2]. This means rekindling the vital flame of its origins. If we reduce the Rule to a set of precise norms that regulate daily life, it is evident that it has become obsolete to face today's challenges. Francis of Assisi did not understand it in this way either. He proposed some concrete norms in it, but above all, he speaks of the vital dynamism that leads us to embrace the Gospel. Our main question must focus on how the Rule can help us rediscover today that dynamism that inspired and moved Saint Francis.

More than a program, we need a dream. We know that the vocational crisis is forcing us to close houses and abandon activities. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that our biggest problem is not the decreasing number of candidates, but the mediocrity, the lack of ideals, the disenchanting pragmatism that judges everything with quantitative and efficiency criteria. God

always begins his great works by relying on a "small remnant." But let's not deceive ourselves: being "remnant" is something very different from being "waste".

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[1] These paragraphs are taken from this recent publication, soon available in six languages: Carbajo-Núñez Martín, *Celebrating life: The Rule and Christmas at Greccio (1223-2023)*, 2nd edition, Tau Publishing, Phoenix (AZ) 2023; Id., «Celebrare la vita: La Regola e il Natale di Greccio (1223-2023)», EDI, Napoli 2023; Id., *Celebrando la vida: La Regla y Greccio (1223-2023)*, Efarantzazu, Vitoria-Gasteiz 2023.

[2] Pope Francis, «Homily» (Feb. 2, 2019), in *OR* 29 (Feb. 4-5, 2019) 11.