



**Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations**  
**Franciscan Experience—8. History of Franciscan Movement**  
<http://www.christusrex.org/www1/ofm/fra/FRAht11.html>

**M**

**Meditation – Franciscan History**

**THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER**

**8.1** The Franciscan movement is an evangelical option which is open to persons from all walks of life. St. Francis is considered to be the founder of the First Order of friars, the Second Order of contemplative sisters, and the Third Order, made up of male and female religious (Third Order Regular) as well as seculars (Secular Franciscan Order).

**8.2** The history of the origins of the Franciscan movement shows that these three Orders were born together, and that they are a sign of Francis' unique understanding of the signs of his times. We shall give an overall view of the history of the Secular Franciscan Order and present its charism for today's world.

**The Order of Penitents**

**8.3** From the early centuries of Christianity, the Order of Penitents was the institutional medium of penitential practices which were either imposed by the Church or else were chosen freely as a way of evangelical perfection. The "*Ordo Poenitentium*" was quite popular in the middle ages. It was made up of various categories of penitents, such as oblates, hermits, recluses, pilgrims. The centuries immediately preceding St. Francis are marked with a particular tendency towards the penitential life, which was common in the great reforms of monastic and eremitical institutions....

**8.4.** The penitential movement became very popular after the Gregorian reform at the end of the 11th century. It was a spontaneous movement, and was widespread among the laity. Its characteristic notes were an apostolic life, expressed through poverty, popular preaching, penitential practices and acts of mercy towards outcasts, lepers, etc.

**8.5.** The spontaneous nature of the penitential movement was instrumental in its development, but was also an occasion for heretical tendencies. The official structure of the Church, the Papal curia, the bishops, the monasteries, were often disinterested in noticing the great evangelical upsurge coming from the laity. This lack of direction was one of the causes of the spreading of heresy. Such was the case of the Cathari in France and Italy, for example.

**8.6.** The need for genuine reform in the Church was providential in prompting the direct intervention of the Pope in order to secure the orthodoxy of the lay penitential movements. From the beginning of the 12th century the Popes were taking under their protection various groups or guilds who lived a penitential life. In 1195, when Francis of Assisi was still a teenager, a group of penitents known as Umiliati was established in northern Italy. Innocent III approved their way of life or "*Propositum*" in 1201. In 1208 he approved the "*Propositum*" of the Poveri Cattolici and in 1210 that of the Poveri Lombardi. Note that this is the same year in which Innocent III orally approved the "*Propositum vitae*" of the Friars Minor.



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**Francis of Assisi as a penitent**

**8.6.** In his Testament Francis states that the Lord called him to embark upon a life of penance. From the very beginnings Francis considered himself to be a penitent on the road to conversion....

**8.8** "(Francis) became an example to those who followed Christ perfectly. We have plenty of reason to be firmly convinced of this. First of all, there is the mission which he had received 'to summon all men to mourn and lament, to shave their heads and wear sackcloth' (Is 22,12) 'and mark the brows of those that weep and wail with a cross' (Ez 9,4), signing them with the cross of penance and clothing them in his own habit which was shaped like a cross" (LegMaj, Prologue).

**Francis, founder of the Order of Penitents**

**8.9.** We have already noted that the Third Order of Penitents was not a personal invention of St. Francis, but rather a personal initiative with the aim of grouping into a stable form of evangelical life the various groups of Penitents among the laity.

**8.10.** The Franciscan Sources are quite clear regarding the beginnings of the Order of Friars Minor and the Order of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. The beginnings of the Order of Penitents instituted by Francis of Assisi are not so clear.

**8.11.** According to 2 Cel 38, a certain lady of Cortona came to the hermitage of Le Celle, and asked Francis to help her to live a life of penance in her married state. The Legend of Perugia 34 mentions the spirit of penance and conversion of the inhabitants of Greccio. But it is in L3S 60 that we find an explicit reference to the Order of Penitents: "Not only men, but also women and unmarried virgins were fired by the brothers' preaching, and, on their advice, entered the prescribed convents to do penance; and one of the brothers was appointed as their visitor and guide. Married men and women, being bound by the marriage vow, were advised by the friars to dedicate themselves to a life of penance in their own houses"....

**8.12.** In the LegMaj IV,6, Bonaventure states: "Carried away by the force of his preaching, great numbers of people adopted the new rule of penance according to the form instituted by St. Francis which he called the Order of the Brothers of Penance".

**...8.15.** Popular tradition has indicated a certain wealthy merchant from Poggibonsi, called Luchiesio, together with his wife Buonadonna, as the first Franciscan Tertiaries. Luchiesio died on 28 April 1260, and is even venerated as a "*beato*", whose cult was approved by Pius VI. This tradition lacks historical foundation. We can only say that the Order of Penitents began to be known as such in 1221 with the "*Memoriale Propositi*"....—Go to the website and check out the rest of the story.