

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “SECULAR”?

The word “secular” can be very confusing. Our Order has gone through many name changes throughout history, including “Third Order Secular Franciscan” (TOSF). This was to distinguish it from the “Third Order Regular,” the various groups of vowed Third Order Religious. In 1978, the name was changed to the Secular Franciscan Order. The purpose was twofold: first, to eliminate any hint of class structure in the Franciscan Family: third order, third class. Second, to emphasize the particular form of our Franciscan charism: not miniature monks, not the “volunteer friar department,” but Franciscans in our own right.

So, let’s take a look at this word “secular,” and the various connotations it holds.

Secular: from the Latin word, *secula*, which means “age,” has to do with a temporary time period (as opposed to “eternity”), and sometimes is taken as “world,” as in “world without end.” Sometimes, people use the phrase “the world, the flesh and the devil” to indicate the sources of temptation in our lives. However, like the word “flesh,” the New Testament makes some interesting distinctions. There is a distinction between the body, as a material entity, and “the flesh,” which St. Paul uses to denote our addiction to the world of the senses and pleasure. In the same way, there is a difference between the cosmos that God created, and the “world system,” the human systems that try to run the world.

Secular: a juridical distinction in canon law, indicating anything that is not related to religious orders, *per se*. For example, diocesan priests are called “secular priests,” to distinguish them from priests who are in orders or congregations. There are ordained and non-ordained (lay people) in religious communities, and there are ordained and non-ordained (lay people) in the secular state: “living in the world.”

Secular: A distinction between those areas of life that are governed by religion or religious values (e.g., church, synagogue, temple,

theology, etc) and those that do not appeal to religious values. Our government is a secular form of government, not ruled by religious authorities (a theocracy). Our legal system is secular (civil law): based on human laws, human judgments. If Abraham were on trial for attempted murder or child abuse, for example, "God told me to do it" would not be a credible nor acceptable defense.

While historians and scientists, for example, may be religious people, when they act as historians or scientists, their religious beliefs do not, and cannot, dictate their study or their conclusions. They cannot go in with preconceived conclusions. For example, if there is a storm, a scientist cannot list as cause "God did it." He or she must confine his or her search to observable phenomenon. (This is one lesson from the Galileo case: you cannot oppose scientifically-verifiable evidence simply on the basis that "the Quran or Bible says so.")

Secularism: the belief that religion should not hold any place in public discourse. Though we live in a secular society, we do not, as yet, live in a society that espouses secularism, though some people seem to want that. In some countries, though religion is legal, it is highly discouraged, and religious symbolism, discourse and so forth are highly frowned upon, if not completely illegal.

Secularity: the quality of our Secular Franciscan charism. What does it mean to have a secular spirituality? For starters, this is very incarnational, very sacramental. It acknowledges that Christ is, in some way, already present in the world. We are often more like midwives than farmers: we do not so much sow seed as bring forth the Christ with which the world is already pregnant. This is but an extension of a very Catholic principle, namely that the world is already similar to, analogous to, God. The world is a word of God, and tells us something about God. We don't have to "impose" God on the world as much as we must recognize that God is already very present.

What are the elements in your life that speak of Christ?