



*The Principles
of the
First Order SSF*

Historical Note

The Principles are in large measure derived from the documents of the Christa Seva Sangha, a brotherhood established in 1922 in Poona, India.

They were revised in 1930 for the Brotherhood of the Love of Christ, St Ives, Huntingdonshire, England and again in 1937, when the Brotherhood of Saint Francis of Assisi, Hilfield, Dorset, England amalgamated with them to form the Society of Saint Francis.

In 1967, the Order of Saint Francis, at Mount Sinai, New York, United States of America, united with the Society of Saint Francis and *The Principles* were adopted as part of the Rule of the brothers of the First Order. The Community of Saint Francis, a sisterhood founded in 1905 in England, became a part of the Society of Saint Francis in 1964 and adopted *The Principles* as part of its Rule. In 1973, they were recognised as the sisters of the First Order.

The text used is that generally in use prior to 1966, but now with inclusive language and biblical quotations from *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, © 1989.

The Principles are arranged for daily reading over the month.

Authorisation

This text of *The Principles* was authorised as part of the Rule of the First Order of the Society of Saint Francis by a Joint Meeting of the Chapters of the Brothers and Sisters of the First Order in 1993, and ratified by the Joint Meeting of the Chapters in 1996.

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The Object of the Order

Day 1 Jesus the Master speaks, *Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*

Jn 12.24-26

The Master sets before us in the example of his own sacrifice the secret of fruit-bearing. He surrenders himself to death, and lo! he becomes the source of new life to myriads. Lifted up from the earth in sacrifice, he draws unto him all those multitudes of which the Greeks, whose coming kindled his vision, are the foretaste and prophecy. The life that is cherished perishes: the life that is renounced is eternal.

cf Jn 12.20-21

Day 2 This law of renunciation and sacrifice, which is the law of the Master's own life and fruit-bearing, he lays also upon his servants, bidding them follow him in the same path. To those who thus follow he promises the ineffable reward of union with himself and acceptance by the Father.

The object, therefore, of the First Order, is to build up a body of men and women who, accepting Christ as their Lord and Master, will seek to follow him in the way of renunciation and sacrifice as an act of witness and for the loving service of his brothers and sisters in the world.

The Three Conditions of Life

Day 3 The community, recognising that God has at all times called certain of his children to embrace a state of celibacy for the kingdom of heaven's sake, that they may be free to give themselves without distraction to his service, sets before itself the aim of building up a body of men and women who shall be completely dedicated to him alone both in body and spirit.

These, after a sufficient period of probation, voluntarily in response to God's call, dedicate themselves to a life of devotion

to our Lord under the conditions of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Day 4 It is not without reason that these three conditions have ever been embraced by those desiring to live the life of religious detachment; for they stand for the ideal of perfect renunciation of the world, the flesh and the devil, which are the three great enemies of the spiritual life.

Poverty

Day 5 The Master willingly embraced a life of poverty in this world. *He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor.* He chose a stable for his birthplace and for his upbringing the house of a village carpenter. Even that home he left in early manhood and became a wayfarer, with *nowhere to lay his head.*

Matt 8.20

Jn 12.26 Us also he calls to poverty. *Whoever serves me must follow me. None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*

Luke 14.33

The brothers and sisters, therefore, seek to be poor in spirit. They desire to escape from the love of the world and the things that are in the world and rather, like their patron Saint Francis, to be in love with poverty. They covet only the unsearchable riches of Christ. They recognise, indeed, that while some of their members may be called to a literal following of Saint Francis in a life of actual penury and extreme simplicity, for most so high an ideal will not be possible.

Day 6 The brothers and sisters desire to possess nothing which cannot be shared by those around them and such things as will help to satisfy their needs.

They receive no pay and own no personal possessions. They live as a family having all things in common. They receive for their use the simple necessities of life. Yet what they receive they regard not as their own but rather as lent to them for a season.

Nor must they, while excluding the snare of the world from their individual lives, allow it to return in the corporate community, where it may work a wider and more fatal destruction. It would be small gain were they to surrender their personal possessions only to live in luxury through the abundance of the common stock. Therefore the community

must turn away from excess. The buildings it erects and the style and manner of life which it permits must be the simplest that are consistent with good health and efficient work. If there is money beyond what such simple needs require, let it be spent in works of mercy and service, or else be used for the house of God, which it is right and seemly with proper moderation to adorn, or for the purchase of books which are necessary to the work of study.

Day 7 In all things let the brothers and sisters exhibit the simplicity of true Franciscans who, caring little for the world where they are but strangers and pilgrims, have their hearts set on that spiritual home *where their treasure is.*
Matt 6.21

Chastity

Day 8 The brothers and sisters are bound, like all Christians, to resist and by God's grace to conquer the temptations of the flesh and to live lives of purity and self-control. They must ever strive through faithful self-discipline and prayer to be chaste both in mind and body.

Furthermore, that they may *promote unhindered devotion to the Lord*, and give themselves wholly to his work, being wedded only to Christ, their true spouse, they embrace of their own will the vocation of celibacy.
1 Cor 7.35

They do this not because they believe that the unmarried state is in itself higher than the married, but because they believe that for them the unmarried state is that in which God wishes them to serve him. Therefore they look to him with confidence to give them the grace needed for this life which, if they should undertake it contrary to his will, would be to them a state of greater rather than less distraction than that of marriage.

Day 9 In thus accepting the state of chastity, the brothers and sisters must ever be on their guard against the temptation to self-centeredness, coldness or a lack of sympathy with the interests of others. Their espousal to Christ must not weaken or mar their human affections. Rather must their union with him enable them to love more richly with his love all with whom they are brought in contact.

Obedience

Day 10 The Master, who, coming into the world not to do his own will but the will of him that sent him, *became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross, says to those who follow him, Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*
Phil 2.8
Matt 11.29

The brothers and sisters desire, therefore, to surrender their wills to the will of God, in the spirit of perfect obedience, that being delivered from self-will and pride they may find true freedom and peace and be ready instruments which he can use for his purposes.

Day 11 Further, by voluntarily accepting the Rule as binding upon them, the brothers and sisters pledge themselves to abide by this Rule and to obey the decisions of the Chapter, by which the common mind of the community is expressed and interpreted.

It is the work of the Ministers to administer the Rule and to see that the decisions of the Chapter are observed. Their directions, therefore, unless they order something contrary to the Rule or in itself sinful, must be promptly and cheerfully carried out. In their absence obedience is due to their Assistants. Brothers or sisters put in charge of a department of work are also to be obeyed in that department. But none may on any authority act contrary to the guiding of their own consciences. The Ministers are, like the other members, under obedience to the Rule and Chapter and are bound to exercise their authority, not in a spirit of partiality or pride or selfishness, but with equal consideration and love and with humble prayer for the divine wisdom.

Day 12 The obligation of particular obedience within the community is gladly accepted by the members, not as something different from the obedience which they owe to God, but rather as part of that obedience. They are confident that, if God has called them to a life under Rule, they will, in fulfilling the obligations of that life, be most truly obeying him and that whatever limitations or humiliations their obedience may involve will, if cheerfully accepted, be a means by which pride is vanquished and a more perfect consecration achieved.

When working away from the community, the brothers and sisters should put themselves under the discipline of the parish or society in which they are staying.

The Three Ways of Service

Day 13 The brothers and sisters seek to serve their Master by the life of devotion, by sacred study and by works. In the life of the community as a whole all these three ways must find full and balanced expression. It is not, indeed, to be expected that all will devote themselves equally to each of these three tasks. It is right that their several employments should vary according to the particular ability which God has given them, as that some should, with the approval of their Minister, give themselves in large measure to prayer and contemplation, others to the pursuit of learning and the writing of books and others mainly to the ministry of active service. Yet must room be found in the lives of all for at least some measure of each of these three employments.

Prayer

Day 14 Praise and prayer constitute the atmosphere in which the brothers and sisters must strive to live. They must endeavour to maintain a constant recollection of the presence of God and of the unseen world. An ever-deepening devotion to Christ is the hidden source of all their strength and joy. He is for them the One all-lovely and adorable, God incarnate, crucified and risen, whose love is the inspiration of service and the reward of sacrifice.

Day 15 That their union with this Lord and Master may be ever renewed and strengthened, the brothers and sisters unite in offering daily before God the memorial of his death and passion and feeding often upon his sacrificial life. The Holy Eucharist is the centre round which their life revolves. It is above all the heart of their prayer life.

The time of morning prayer is the preparation of mind and spirit for entrance within the sanctuary. The meditation which follows later is the opportunity for quiet tryst with him who through the sacrament, is present inwardly, and for feeding on him in the heart by faith with thanksgiving.

The services of intercession and thanksgiving are times when those who have been thus joined with him in communion and meditation may plead with God in sure reliance on his promise: *if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you*, and also thank him for continuous experience of its fulfilment.

John 15.7

The evening office is the renewed offering of praise and prayer to the same Lord at the end of the day's work, and in its closing silence the hearts of all are together steeped afresh in the peace of that inward uncreated light which, as the shadows of life deepen, abides unchanged. Complines is the Master's blessing of protection and peace.

Day 16 The brothers and sisters must strive ever to remember how essential is the work of prayer to every department of their lives. Without the constant renewal of divine grace the spirit flags, the will is weakened, the conscience grows dull, the mind loses its freshness and even the bodily vigour is impaired. They must, therefore, always be on their guard against the constant temptation to let other work encroach upon the hours of prayer, remembering that if they seek in this way to increase the bulk of their activity it can only be at the cost of its true quality and value.

They must be regular and punctual in their attendance at corporate prayer. They must also bear in mind that it is of little value to be present at the common devotions in a formal or careless spirit. They must seek to make of each office an offering of true devotion from the heart. The reverent, ordered and earnest offering of the corporate worship is the very heart of the community's life.

Day 17 So, too, the brothers and sisters must guard with jealous watchfulness the times of private prayer. They must remember that corporate worship is not a substitute for the quiet communion of the individual soul with God, and they must strive to go forward to ever fuller enjoyment of such communion, till they are living in so constant a remembrance of God's presence that they do indeed *pray without ceasing*.

1 Thess 5.17

Day 18 It is to assist such an attitude and practice of recollection that the rules of silence have been laid down and the brothers and sisters

will welcome and use such silence, regarding it not as the imposition of an artificial restraint, nor merely as an external rule to be observed by refraining from speech, but as the opportunity for growing in the sense of the divine presence. They will welcome in a like spirit the retreats and days of quiet which the community's Rule provides as times when, in the withdrawal from all external distractions, the life of the spirit may be renewed and deepened.

In these and suchlike ways, the brothers and sisters will seek to keep ever fresh and living their devotion to Christ their Lord; and when through human frailty they fail in their high endeavour, they will yet return again to Christ with humble contrition and earnest purpose of amendment; and they will hold in special esteem that sacrament of penance and absolution whereby they are cleansed from sin and renewed in the life of grace.

Study

Day 19 The true knowledge is the knowledge of God. The highest wisdom is that holy wisdom whereby the soul is made one with God. The first place, therefore, in the brothers' and sisters' work of study will always be given to the study and practice of the way of the soul's ascent to God and the devotional study of the scriptures as one of the chief aids to that end. They will study also the teaching of the Christian saints concerning the spiritual life.

It is the hope of the community that some of its houses may be not only homes of prayer but also homes of learning. It is out of this recognition of the value and importance of study that some of the hours each day are set apart for this purpose under the Rule; and it is mainly for the uninterrupted securing of these hours that the rule of the lesser silence is laid down whenever possible.

Works

Day 20 Jesus the Master took on himself the form of a servant. *He came not to be served but to serve. He went about doing good; curing all who were sick; bringing good news to the poor; binding up the broken-hearted.* Those who would claim to be his servants and follow him must be diligent in ministry to others.
Mark 10.45
Acts 10.38
Matt 8.16
Luke 4.18
Isa 61.1

1 Thess 5.17 The active works by which the brothers and sisters seek to serve their Master begin within the house and garden. The sweeping, dusting and other menial offices, as well as certain forms of manual work, are apportioned among them so that all may contribute their share to the work of the household and the cost of their own living. All must be capable of engaging in some form of manual work. All must consider the interests of the community in its work for God and study strict economy. Brothers and sisters will do their own work as far as possible. Saint Francis said that *the idle (member) has no place in the community.*

Day 21 Outside the special works of service to the community itself there are many opportunities of ministry, particularly to the uncared-for, the sick, the suffering and needy. The community sets before it, as the special programme of service which it would like to be able to carry out, those acts of mercy the doing of which even to the humblest the Master declares that he will accept as done unto himself. By helping in the relief of poverty we may give him food and drink. By hospitality to strangers we may take him in. By relieving those homeless and naked we may clothe him. By caring for the sick we may relieve him.
cf Matt 25.35-35 By visiting the prisoners we may cheer him.

The community does not, indeed, expect ever to have at its disposal many funds for the administration of charitable relief, but it will gladly lend its members in the work of such relief and co-operate with others who are doing it. In all such work, the community will seek to serve all irrespective of creed, offering its services not as a bribe but as a reflection of the love of Christ himself.

Day 22 But chiefest of all forms of service that the brothers and sisters can offer must ever be the effort to show others in his beauty and power the Christ who is the inspiration and joy of their own lives. They will seek to do this, not in a spirit of aggression, nor with contempt for the beliefs of others, but rather because, knowing in their own experience the power of Christ to save from sin and to give newness of life, they must needs seek to share their own supreme treasure. Out of the fullness, therefore, of devoted love they would seek to give their beloved Master to all.

They must remember that, in this task of showing Christ to others the witness of life is more eloquent than that of words. Franciscans must, therefore, seek rather to be living lives through which Christ can manifest himself than to preach much in public. Nevertheless, there will be some amongst them called more particularly to the ministry of the Word, and all must be ready at all times to give an answer for the faith that is in them, and particularly to guide all who are sincerely seeking after truth. They must also be ready by instruction and prayer and spiritual direction to strengthen the faith of Christians and lead them forward in the spiritual life.

cf 1 Pet 3.15

Day 23 The brothers and sisters must be glad at all times to relieve those who come to them for help or counsel. They must never give the impression that they have no time for such ministry. Rather must they be ready to lay aside all other work, including even the work of prayer, where such service is immediately required, confident that such a negligence will surely be well-pleasing to the Servant of all.

The Three Notes of the Order

Day 24 The three notes which must ever in special degree mark the lives of the brothers and sisters are humility, love and joy. If these prevail within its members, the object of the community will be fulfilled and its work fruitful. If they are lacking, it will be unprofitable and barren.

Humility

Day 25 The brothers and sisters will strive to keep ever before them the example of him who *emptied himself, taking the form of a slave* and who, on the last night of his life, humbly in the guise of a slave washed his disciples' feet. They will ever seek after his pattern to

1 Pet 5.5 *clothe themselves with humility in their dealings with one another.*

Humility is the recognition of the truth about God and ourselves, the recognition of our own insufficiency and dependence, seeing that we have nothing which we have not received. It is the mother of all Christian virtues. As Saint Bernard of Clairvaux has said, *No spiritual house can stand for a moment save on the foundation of humility.* It is the first condition of

a happy life within the family. Thus those in the house must remember that brothers and sisters who are always confident that they are right and eager to impose their opinion on others, will themselves be unhappy as chafing under the discipline of subordination and correction and will also make the life of the family unhappy by marring that distinctive atmosphere of harmony and order which depends on everyone doing their allotted task with cheerfulness. The glad acceptance of the rule of obedience, and the loyal fulfilment of orders that are distasteful or difficult, will be one sure means of growing in this grace.

Day 26 The brothers and sisters must also refrain from all contemptuous thoughts one of another, and not seeking for pre-eminence must *regard others as better than themselves*. The faults that they see in others must be subjects for prayer rather than criticism and they must be more diligent to *take the log out of their own eye* than *the speck out of their neighbour's eye*. They must be ready not only gladly, *when invited, to go and sit down at the lowest place*, but rather of their own accord take it. Nevertheless, if entrusted with a work of which they feel incapable or unworthy, they must not shrink from accepting it on the plea of humility, but attempt it confidently through *the power (of Christ) made perfect in weakness*.

Phil 2.3

Matt 7.5

Luke 14.10

2 Cor 12.9

In their relations also with those outside, the brothers and sisters must strive to show their Master's humility. They must welcome gladly all opportunities of humble service that come to them and never desire pre-eminence or praise. In particular they must resist the temptation to consider themselves superior to others because dedicated to a life of religion, realising how much greater often are the sacrifices and difficulties of those engaged in the ordinary professions of life and how much more nobly they face them.

Love

Day 27 The Master says, *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*. Love is thus the distinguishing feature of all true disciples of Christ. It must be specially an outstanding note in the lives of those who are seeking to be specially consecrated to Christ as his servants. *God*

John 13.35

1 John 4.8

Col 3.3 is love and, for those whose lives are *hidden with Christ in God*, love will be the very atmosphere which surrounds all that they do.

This love the brothers and sisters must show towards all to whom they are united by natural ties of relationship or friendship. They will love them not less but more as their love for Christ grows deeper.

They will love also with a special affection those to whom they are united within the family of the community, praying for each individually and seeking to grow in love for each. They must be on their guard against all that injures this love: the bitter thought, the hasty retort, the angry gesture; and never fail to ask forgiveness of any against whom they have sinned. They must seek to love equally with others those with whom they have least natural affinity. For this love of one another is not simply the welling up of natural affection but a supernatural love which God gives them through their common union with Christ. As such it bears testimony to its divine origin. Our Lord intended the unity of those who believe in him to be a special witness to the world of his divine mission. The community must show the spectacle of a Christian family whose members, even though they be of varied race and education and character, are bound into a living fellowship by this supernatural love.

Lastly, in all their relationships with those, whether Christians or not, with whom their work brings them in contact they will seek to show forth this same supernatural Christ-like love; and, remembering that love is measured by sacrifice, they will seek gladly to spend whatever gifts they may possess of body, mind and spirit in the service of those to whom God calls them to minister.

Joy

Day 28 Finally, the brothers and sisters, *rejoicing in the Lord always*, must show forth in their lives the grace and beauty of divine joy. They must remember that they follow the Son of Man, *who came*

Luke 7.34 *eating and drinking*, who loved the birds and the flowers, who
cf Mark 10.16 *blessed little children*, who was *a friend of tax collectors and sinners*, who sat at the tables alike of the rich and the poor. They will, therefore, put aside all gloom and moroseness, all undue

aloofness from the common interests of people and delight in laughter and good fellowship. They will rejoice in God's world and all its beauty and its living creatures, *calling (nothing) profane or unclean*. They will mingle freely with all kinds of people, seeking to banish sorrow and to bring good cheer into other lives. They will carry with them an inner secret of happiness and peace which all will feel, if they may not know its source.

Acts 10.28

Day 29 This joy, likewise, is a divine gift and comes only from union with God in Christ. As such it can abide even in days of darkness and difficulty, giving cheerful courage in the face of disappointment and an inward serenity and confidence in sickness and suffering. Those who possess it can be *content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever they are weak, then they are strong*.

2 Cor 12.10

Day 30 These three notes of humility, love and joy, which should mark the lives of the brothers and sisters, are all supernatural graces which can be won only from the divine bounty. They can never be attained through our own unaided exertions. They are miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. But it is the purpose of Christ our Master to work miracles through his servants; and, if they will but be emptied of self and utterly surrendered to him, they will become chosen vessels of his Spirit and effective instruments of his mighty working, *who is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*.

Eph 3.20

