

# **FRATERNITY AS A FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT OF ST. FRANCIS' SPIRITUALITY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

"Calling" is a basic concept found throughout the Scripture. It is exemplified by call of Abraham in the Old Testament, the call of Jesus in the New Testament, and the call of Saint Francis in the 12th century. Realizing that God initially "calls" a person to the Secular Franciscan Order, still, every person within the Order has the responsibility to nurture the genuine call. The purpose of the entire formation process is to accompany the person on his or her journey of discovery of God, discovery of St. Francis, and discovery of the individual's own call.

When the first apostles were seeking Christ, His response to them was "come and see"(John 1:39). This also, is the basic attitude of Secular Franciscans toward those women and men seeking to follow Christ today.

*" The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and People. "(SFO Rule 4)*

Formation in and for the Secular Franciscan way of life is understood as the realistic fostering of the growth of the individual Secular Franciscan and fraternities so that the way we live in today's world may conform more and more to the example of the Holy Gospel. Formation must happen through small groups of members sharing their faith experiences. Life in fraternity is an effective agent of formation. Fraternity life contributes to the growth of inter-active relationships, to the formation of the Franciscan personality and character, and to the development of Franciscan attitudes.

## **1. FRANCISCAN HERITAGE**

What began for Francis as a particular answer to an individual call was not to remain that way in the mind of God. Francis originally believed that the Lord's call to his life was for his own conversion. He believed that the call to change his life was an individual call to reform the wayward paths of his youth. So much of his youth was spent with little or no regard for the message of the gospel. This truth gradually became clearer to him through his imprisonment, his illness, his visits to the caves outside Assisi. The Lord's call to change his heart was crystallizing. This call was truly God's will for his life. Francis might have been pleased to remain in this position, but it was not God's intent. How surprised he must have been when the knight Bernardo of Quintavalle asked to join in his way of life after secretly observing Francis in a night of Prayer. The canon Peter also asked to become part of his company. From the fields, the farmer Giles journeyed to join. There was something Francis had captured that drew others to follow in this way of life. Francis' basic question seemingly was, "what form of life?" It was at this juncture that he went again to the Scriptures and to prayer to discern what it was that the Lord desired of him. Francis came to comprehend this more clearly as he recounts in

his Testament that "When the Lord gave me brothers, there was no one to tell me what I should do, but the; Most High himself made it clear to me that I must live the life of Gospel" (Test 14).

Francis used the term "brothers" to refer to those men who asked to join him. Never did he refer to them as followers or sons as was the case in other religious Orders. Francis wanted this group that God had set apart to be known as a family. Even the name he chose for them, the Order of Friars Minor, the Lesser Brothers, gives us an insight into how Francis viewed himself and those with him. They were not to be set above, but to be servants, following the example set by our Lord. Within their own community, no one person was to be set up above the others. The one who was to care for the others was the guardian, guardian of all that would keep them close to God. Francis chose the family as his model of relationship.

*Wherever the brothers may be and meet one another, let them show that they are members of the same family. Let each one confidently make known his need to the other, for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the spirit! (Later Rule 6.7,8)*

*Let each one love and care for his brother as a mother loves and cares for her son in those matters in which God has given him the grace. (Earlier Rule 9.11).*

Beyond making their needs known to one another, they were to for the sick among them, they were to correct one another humbly and charitably; they were not to remember the faults of another. When in hermitage, the relationship between those praying and those caring for them was described by Francis as being the relationship of a mother of her sons.

*Let those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be "the mother" and have two "sons" or at least one. Let the two who are "mothers" keep the life of Martha and the two "sons" the life of Mary (Rule for Hermitage 1)*

This small band of men, this brotherhood, would be the basis for the rebuilding of the church.

As Secular Franciscans, the Lord gives us brothers, and sisters too. " The Rule and Life of the Secular Franciscans is this : to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ..." . We do this by " following the example of St Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people."

Fraternity is the means by which, and the environment through which, we are called to live the Gospel. " The vocation of the SFO is a vocation to live the Gospel in fraternal communion. For this purpose, the members of the SFO gather in ecclesial communities which are called fraternities." Brothers and sisters are there to provide support and encouragement. They are there to teach. They are there to correct. They are there to help me live the Gospel, and I am there to help them live the Gospel. (cordintro.)

## **2.FRATERNITY MODEL OF FATHERHOOD OF GOD AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF JESUS CHRIST**

It is the basic cell of the Order, visible sign of the Church, a supernatural reality based on the paternity of God and on brotherhood in Jesus Christ experienced in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

It is a gift of the Spirit to Its Church to be received in gratitude, sharing gifts in order to become a sign of communion and unity "for those who believe in me because of their message" (Jn 17,20).

Near that hierarchy is the prophetic and charismatic presence of the Church which participates in its mission. It is the special place where its brothers and sisters are assisted in becoming more aware of their baptismal dignity, in living their belonging to the Church, in making present within the Church the Franciscan charisma, in maturing their faith and become witnesses of Christ's resurrection.

The SFO in the world is the body, and the Fraternities are the parts of this body that sustain it.

Each Fraternity has its own configuration and physical make-up, but it is not and cannot be isolated from the others. This could be stifling. It is deleterious to weaken the sense of belonging to the entire SFO and remain closed within the small environment of one's own Fraternity because it deprives us of that vital link the Order transmits.

The Fraternity is a living gift which should always be carried inside oneself which is quite different from just having meetings: these only mark the rhythm of making the way.

It has its Council that animates and guides it, organizing its meetings so that its members grow on a doctrinal, spiritual, psychological and social level. This is all done to lead the Fraternity to becoming a **mother** who continually generates Francis' followers, and a **teacher** that educates and forms them..(Em.l). During this formation course we will see the necessary aspects of fraternal life. It must be a community of love, it must be a place for ongoing conversion, and it must be a place of support for living the Gospel in the world. Referenced sources quoted in this class include the words, Friars, Brothers, Sisters and men. These writings, which are filled with wisdom, are also applicable to brothers and sisters, men and women, of the Secular Franciscan Order.

The Franciscan ideal of Fraternity derives its basis from the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Jesus Christ. The Trinity is unique in that no person of the Trinity is ever superior to the others. Though this radical equality is not true of creaturely relationships, it is a model that teaches what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26) and offers a vision after which humans aspire for themselves. (.pc6)

Humility opens human hearts to this experience of Diving relationship. In his Praises of God, St.Francis proclaims: "You are humility!"(prsG 4), because our Trinitarian God is relational by nature, i.e., a free communion of persons without domination or subordination. Because they are made in the likeness of God, humans slowly become a free communion of persons without domination or subordination, thus achieving true humility. St.Bonaventure tells us that in the Incarnation, "God humbly bends down to lift the dust of our nature into unity with his own person" (St.Bonaventure: Sermon II on the Nativity of the Lord).

The Trinity is the foundational relationship which creates the Church: " The universal church is seen to be a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (LG 4) "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home in them"(Jn 14:23). Zeal to keep the word of Jesus inspired Francis to make the

Gospel the very foundation of fraternal life (RnB 1 1). Established on fidelity to the Gospel, fraternal evangelical life draws us into the intimate relationship of the Trinity.

Francis embraced the plan of God for his creatures as a family of sisters and brothers: brother sun, sister moon, etc. (CtC). He never referred to himself simply as "Francis" but always as "Brother Francis." "Brother" revealed the relationship with every creature to which God called him. "Brother" also revealed his mission to heal relationships through submissive humility (see CtC 10-11 (7th plenary council p6-7)

### **3. LIFE IN FRATERNITY**

"Fraternity", is the key model for Secular Franciscan Gospel life. The divine call to live in perfect charity, to strive for holiness and to build the kingdom of God culminates and takes shape in a fraternity life and the collective efforts of a group. The fraternity aspect of the SFO has already been referred to by the Rule in various contexts: The SFO is an organic union of all catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world(Rule. 2), in a life-giving union with the entire Franciscan family they make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father (Rule.1b), and they are traditionally called as "Brothers and sisters of Penance"(Rule.7a)

A deep and sensitive brotherhood was an outstanding mark of the early friars, an ideal proposed to them by St.Francis. "The Lord gave me brothers" says Francis in his Testament, and established that they be called as " Lesser Brothers". In his Rule he made it plain that precepts and statutes alone do not regulate Franciscan brotherhood. Faith, love and grace have their part. The earlier rule to the friars exhorts: " And each one should love and care for his brother in all those things in which God will give him grace, as a mother loves and cares for her sons."

In his later rule this receives a different wording:

" If a mother has such care for her son born according to the flesh, should not someone love and care for his brother according to the spirit even more diligently? (see from the book the spirituality of the SF in the new rule p. 125-127)

#### **a. *Fraternity of Love***

The fraternity, summoned by the Holy Spirit in Christ's name, is an aspect of penitential life that is highly meaningful and irreplaceable. The brothers help each other to grow in the love of God through reciprocal love, encouragement, fraternal correction, and so forth. Together they overcome difficulties, are freed from selfishness, and give witness of conversion to God.

Francis' writings suggest that he understood the gift of brothers as more than simply supportive instruments of the Lord. They were both necessary conditions and necessary expressions of the Gospel life, which demands witness to the community of God's Love that is, the Trinity. In order to bring to birth the "spirit of the truth of the Gospel, he needed brothers" according to the Spirit." When the Friars or sisters love each other mutually, the Spirit of God lives in them, and God Himself, the Father Almighty, the Son and Spirit set up their dwelling among them. As sons of the same heavenly Father, and as a unity, called to share the divine life, they are brothers of Christ. " Oh how holy and delightful.. ..to have such a brother." Both in teaching and practice, Francis has given birth to a fraternal life which is intense and rich with overtones."(Cord 137) The fraternity, first and foremost, must be a community of love. In her testament, St.Clare tells us " Loving one another with the charity of Christ, let the love you have in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds so that, compelled by such an example, the sisters may always grow in love of God and in charity for one another." (Cord 136)

The SFO fraternity, says the Rule, is a group of brothers and sisters that are led by the Holy Spirit to strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their Profession they pledge themselves to live the Gospel in the manner of St. Francis. We know that the Fraternity is founded on the fatherhood of God and the fellowship in Jesus Christ witnessed within ourselves by the Holy Spirit, guided and guaranteed by the teachings of the Church. All this is lived by means of the example of St. Francis and through his gift of Fraternity.

We learn from the Rule that the Fraternity is "-the basic unit of the whole order-" meaning that there are other units too, forming together the whole body. Therefore an exchange of vitality, relationships and experiences among the various units is necessary to grow together and to avoid isolation in a closed circuit that makes it wither and die.

The Fraternity is "-a visible sign of the Church, the community of love-". From here comes the duty to show the characteristics of the Church by a marked way of life and building up each other.

The Fraternity "-should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members-". That means that the Fraternity has to learn over and over again to be able to develop those values and to make authentic Franciscans out of those whom it has generated into Franciscanism. Only thus will it become that right and privileged place, not only by a sense of duty towards its own vocation, but even more so by its authenticity and the human wealth it offers.

In the Constitutions we read that "-the Fraternity of the SFO finds its origin in the inspiration of Francis of Assisi to whom the Most High revealed the essential gospel quality of life in fraternal communion-" (Testament 14) and that it should promote the "-collaboration among the brothers and sisters and their active and communal presence both in the local and in the universal Church-" (Const. 28).

The members of the Fraternity, "-the brothers and sisters are co-responsible for the life of the Fraternity to which they belong and for the SFO... throughout the world. This requires personal presence, witness, prayer and active collaboration, in accordance with each one's means and possible obligations for the animation of the Fraternity-" (Const. 30).

### ***b. Fraternity the lived experience of togetherness, unity of mutual love***

An important quality of community is the lived experience of togetherness. The implications of this quality for life in community are as follows:

1. Fraternity is a gift to be discovered and lived out, it is dependent upon the urgings of grace and the demands of God's initiative, and not just upon one's own categories of acceptance, whims of decision, or choice of partners.
2. Fraternity is based upon a free and responsible acceptance of a call, it is togetherness because of personal self-giving, willful decision, and the obligation flowing from intimacy, not just legislation or communal structures. It is a concrete expression of "one body, one spirit in Christ," the being of "one mind and one heart," not a togetherness based upon regular observance or uniformity.

3. Fraternity life has to reflect the Father's loving us intensely, his choosing us to come together in Jesus Christ, his giving the energy of the Holy Spirit to restore all things in Christ.

4. Life in Fraternity recognizes the dignity of every person to be a chosen child of God, to be redeemed by Christ, to have the potential to respond to the Spirit's urging, to be the artisan of one's own world, to embody a unique blend of characteristics or talents (10) Benet The Cord (vol.48no3)

" The fidelity and authenticity of our commitment, manifested to community, provides a model for those in the world of what a life with God can mean and demonstrates to them the possibilities of their own hearts to strive for holiness" 11 The earliest Franciscans, free from all selfish love, poured all their affection into the heart of the fraternity. Fraternal love displays a unity for the world to see.

The unanimity of the sisters (Poor Clares), "possessing the one love, united in spirit and ideas" (Phil2.2) was the countenance of God's gentleness the sacrament of God's tenderness, the witness of God's kindly regard... ..As Jesus prayed, " that they may be one in us so that the world may believe that you sent me" and " that their unity may be complete so that the world may know.. ..that you love me" and "that your love for me may live in them and I may live in them"(Jn. 17:21,23,26), so life in fraternity is meant to both show and secure the gentle, loving, and caring presence of the Most High." 12 (Cord)138 volume 48,No.3.

### **c. Fraternity as Sacrament of Gospel Living**

Life in Fraternity is to be communicated as the " sacrament" of gospel living which expresses and brings about the whole gamut of living in union with Christ as the center and inspiration of our life. Life in Fraternity has this sacramental quality because it is:

- an effective support system for evangelical growth;
- a productive experience of group spiritual direction;
- a context of stability for grounding and maturing Gospel values and praxis; - a concrete, human manifestation of a deeper spiritual reality;
- a real sign of the Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation of the Reign of God

### **d. Components of Life in Fraternity**

Life in Fraternity, as the ideal and normative situation for gospel living has the following components:

1. A particular structure (SFO Rule 20-22)

- a real **Fraternity** (not a club or sodality) existing on various levels;
- animated and guided by the leadership of a **Council**;
- fulfilling a particular ecclesial, apostolic and **Franciscan function**.

## 2 A necessary vitality (SFO Rule 23)

- brought alive by adequate *formation*;
- deepened through the *permanent commitment* of its members
- matured through *dialogue* and harmonious problem solving

## -3 Sustaining forces that nourish Fraternal life (SFO Rule 24-26)

- regular and frequent *meetings* of the Fraternity and its council;
- on-going *support* of the members;
- adequate *spiritual assistance*;
- pastoral and fraternal *visits*.

## 4. FRATERNAL SERVICE

The Gospel fraternity finds its basis in Christ, firstborn of many brothers, who makes of all men one true fraternity. Fraternal life is built in welcoming the option of the *kenosis* of the Incarnation and of Easter, and in following in the footprints of Christ the Servant. In fact, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20,28).

Ever since Christ gave his life for others, service implies the aspects of renunciation, humiliation and suffering. Service finds its natural context in the expectation of solidarity in sorrow, and not in that of reward and recognition. The commitment to fraternal life and the cult of the same pass of necessity through *the gift of a service rendered as a sacrifice and gratuitously*.

*Gift*, because we are talking about serving our brothers, and not of being served by them.

*Sacrificial service*, because it is service wherein there is sacrifice; only service costs something.

*Gratuitous service*, because it does not demand recompense, because it does not find its own motivation in the constraints of slavery, but in the freedom of love, in the need of a caring charity for others and for the fraternity.

### What service?

#### a. The service of "carrying one another's burdens"

It is the first and fundamental form of fraternal *diakonia*, because the brother is not an object to be dominated, but a "burden" to be borne: and he is brother precisely because he weighs heavily on the shoulders of others.

Fraternal communion is realized in "support", just as the communion between God and men is realized in support. In fact, God supported men in the Body of Christ, because "He was burdened with our sufferings, *he has taken on himself our sorrows...*; he was pierced for our sins, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment which gives us salvation fell on him..." (Is. 53, 4-5).

Fraternal communion is the communion of the Cross; it is present whenever one feels the weight of the other. On the other hand, there would not be Christian communion and the law of Christ would be disowned if one did not feel the burden of the brother.

## **b. The service of good example**

Good example finds its place always in connection with and in dependence on *metanoia* which enjoins self-transformation, by doing violence to one's own passions and evil desires. Fraternal life is not built with discussions, it is not the outcome of a defense of the fraternity; it is founded instead on the example of the one who is ready for sacrifice, the one who overcomes the reluctance of his own nature to carry out tasks which imply renunciation, weariness and distress; the one who does not allow himself to become disheartened by the opposition of a mediocrity for which "good example" is a reproach.

Fraternal life is the result of a humble and simple witness: it depends on personal readiness to die like the grain of wheat; it is the winning-post, never definitively reached, of constant daily heroism.

## **5. FRATERNITY A PLACE OF CONVERSION**

A fraternity should be a place of conversion and a launching pad for apostolic activity of the members. SFO constitution Ch.3 "Life in Fraternity" tells us that

*"the local fraternity....becomes the basic unit of the -whole Order and a visible sign of Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of us members. "*

The local fraternity is the basic living organism of the whole SFO. It is the center for spiritual growth, apostolic outreach, and loving union among members. Fraternity should be a place where we are offered an opportunity for conversion, for spiritual growth. There are two facets of Fraternity Life. One is internal calling and other is external calling, internal spiritual growth and external apostolic works. Both are important for the life of SFO. Rule of SFO calls Secular Franciscans to go from Gospel (conversion) to life (apostolate).

## **6. THE EUCHARIST CENTER OF LIFE IN FRATERNITY.**

The plan of penance and ongoing conversion involves the choice of participating fully in the Eucharist so that the Body of Christ will become a main source of support and accountability for one's decision

to bring renewal through the cross and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Eucharist as covenant, sacrifice, meal, celebration, community-builder, reconciliation, and life-style is a primary experience of intimate real presence to activate and actualize the union between the penitential and the loving Lord.

## **7. THE CHALLENGES OF FRATERNAL LIFE**

A fraternity is made up of all kinds of people, and we are not all alike. These differences should be respected. Mary Ann Julian, SFO, writes:

*Our fraternities are the nurseries where God prepares nurtures, and strengthens us for our work in the world. In these "gardens of love, " all plants (us) are unique, varied, purposeful. Each has the capacity to give honor to God and to benefit others in some way. Now temptations blow through the garden and often the way we "rub against each other" causes us to become irritated. If we rely, or take pride, in our own gifts, friction and division will occur. If we learn to die to self and submit to the loving care of the Gardener (and our lawful superiors), His beauty, His love, and His peace will increase in us and overflow to all the world.(cord 138)*

Lester Bach, OFM Cap., also indicates that all is not peaches and cream:

*The community will experience the Exodus experience again and again. Some problems persist beyond their time. Failure is not easy to handle.....We will have more than our share of humanness. Still, we are committed to create a climate where humanness is understood and accepted. On the other hand, we have good celebrations. We have prayer experiences that move us to tears of joy. We are gently surprised by the dedication of a brother and sister. We are impressed with the joy of one who suffers. We realize our strength as a people dedicated to Jesus, willing to "keep on keeping on" no matter what the price. We learn so much from the example of others in the community. It is good to know we are not alone on this pilgrimage to God. We learn about Jesus through the honest sharing in community. We learn to celebrate the ordinary gifts that life brings. We find joy in our covenant with the poor. Service brings us satisfaction. New members bring us happiness in seeing another person answering the Gospel call of Jesus. When Sister Death calls someone home, we gather together both in grief at our loss and thanksgiving for eternal life. When our experience helps someone else, the gift is mutually satisfying, (Cord 139)*

The family is faced with the degradation of fundamental values, a wrong conception of independence of married people, an ambiguity in the relationship between parents and children, divorce, abortion, sterilization, a contraceptive mentality, and corruption of the idea and experience of liberty.

The family is a victim of the many forces bent to destroy and deform it. The dominating secularism is added to immature psychology and social-economic and political causes which shake the ethical and moral values of the family. The results of this reality are the problems of irregular couples and the growth of civil weddings without sacraments

Serious situations of misery, hunger and desperation caused by unemployment, lack of decent living areas, lack of education and health services, etc. demonstrate clearly that we are constantly challenged

by the death culture (imperialism, family planning as understood and sponsored by the Government, wars and guerilla warfare, kidnapping, terrorism. drug traffic, etc).

The SFO accepts the challenge to make its choice for the formation of me family so that young people and children find the security and orientation and an adequate paternal and maternal image which contributes to the maturity of their personality. This choice means caring and a constant battle against the attacks of a consumeristic society, hedonistic and with no regard for the person, in a reality where the woman, in many cases, is the only one who sustains the family and educate;, the children.

No one enters and remains a single unit. Entering the Franciscan Order, in any of its branches, involves entering a family, a fraternity. In Francis' journey, there was no rule, no way of life until God had given Francis brothers. This truth holds true for us today. The basic unit of the Secular Franciscan Order is the local fraternity. It is comprised of persons who have received on indi\idual call from God to live more deeply the radical call of gospel life. In the Franciscan framework, this call is to be lived, supported, challenged and honored with others. The local fraternity is the home in which the vocation of each member is nurtured and guided. This was the vision Francis had received from God, Family was important to Francis, and ,o it is important to the entire Franciscan Order.

## **CONCLUSION**

The very nature of the Franciscan charism begs for fraternity- Whenever Seculars get together, fraternity is experienced- In the conduct of the business of the Executive Council, fraternity is formed. The basic unit of the Order is the local fraternity. This is the privileged place where we are involved in apostolic and social activities, where we experience spiritual growth, and v. here we experience family love. The Friars or Spiritual Animators (religious, diocesan clergy, religious sister or certified Secular Franciscans) contribute to the Fraternity by their participation as an equal member of the Executive Council, provide ongoing formation, preside at the liturgies, and most important, arc present with brothers and sisters of SFO at their gatherings May St. Francis and St.Clare and their communities continue to be an inspiration to us in our life in fraternity. Let us journey together as brothers and sisters, following in the footsteps of Christ and St.Francis, prayerfully remembering that initial and ongoing formation is the key to renewal and updating in the Secular Franciscan Order.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. How has fraternity helped your Franciscan vocation grow? In what ways has il been a hindrance?
2. What contributions have you been able to make to develop the spirit of "family" in your Fraternity?