

ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP OF THE SFO

Some reflections

Presidency of the International Council SFO

Accompanying letter of Emanuela De Nunzio, Minister General SFO, to the National Councils and International Councillors SFO In its meeting, from 28 April until 4 May 1995, the Presidency of the International Council SFO considered the topic of the practical application of the General Constitutions Art. 103 that exhorts local Fraternities to open themselves to "those who, without belonging to the SFO, wish to share its experiences and activities." A document prepared by Marianne Powell, member of the Presidency, and Carl Schafer OFM, General Assistant, was discussed, emended and finally approved unanimously. I send it to you now so that you can evaluate whether it would be opportune to distribute it within your National Fraternities in order to resolve certain situations which have already arisen in various contexts, as well as to give the SFO a new and more welcoming ecumenical image.

On this day which commemorates the Visitation of the Virgin Mary to St Elizabeth, I pray that all of us will be "docile to the action of the Spirit", becoming capable of opening ourselves to those wishing to participate in our way of life, overcoming any resistance or lack of understanding.

In view of the fact that St Francis of Assisi is experienced by many people as a gift of God not only to the Roman Catholic Church, but to all people of good will, and acknowledging that many people also outside the Catholic Church feel called in various ways to associate their lives with that of St Francis without being able to enter the Secular Franciscan Order, the General Constitutions of the SFO, Art. 103, open the possibility of associate membership.

Reasons for not seeking full membership may be various: in some cases the person is not a Catholic, in others he or she may for personal reasons be unable or unwilling to meet the requirements of full membership.

Directives

Since the status of associate members within the Order is different from that of the professed members, national or local Statutes should provide directives in this regard. On the one hand, it is important to secure the openness of the Franciscan charism to all people; Catholics do not own Francis of Assisi. On the other hand, it is also important to secure the identity of the SFO as an Order within the Catholic Church consisting of people who have professed a Rule of Life, and whose fraternities have a juridical personality under Roman Catholic canon law.

Commitment

A candidate for associate membership must follow the same procedure as candidates for ordinary membership: In a conversation with the candidate the local Minister (or Vocations Director, or whoever in the local situation has the responsibility) must ascertain, exactly as with ordinary members, whether the candidate is prepared to make a serious commitment. As with ordinary membership, the motivation of the candidate must be examined, and associate membership also requires readiness to undergo formation, to attend meetings on a regular basis and in general to participate in the life of the Fraternity. As in the case of ordinary members, the local Fraternity Council decides on the acceptance or non-acceptance of the associate members.

The commitment to associate membership has the same permanence as the commitment to ordinary membership. After completion of the formation process, full associate membership is confirmed publicly before the SFO Fraternity.

Associate membership and ecumenism

While associate membership opens up great possibilities for ecumenism, it is important that both the ordinary members and the associate members have an authentic ecumenical understanding of the situation. The associate members are not to be regarded as prospective converts, but in the case of Christians from other denominations rather as representatives of their own church community. The associate members must, exactly as the ordinary members, continue to deepen their understanding of their own faith. Only thus can all members develop an ecumenical spirit that is both enlightened and responsible.

Associate members must not consider an SFO Fraternity a context for a non-committed involvement with the Catholic faith. On the contrary, the presence of associate members in a Fraternity must challenge all members to a deeper ecumenical understanding, which involves respect both for one's own Church and that of others. For this reason also, associate members should not be accepted in a Roman Catholic SFO Fraternity if there is a Franciscan Fraternity of lay people of their own denomination within a reasonable distance.

All members must respect current rules regarding eucharistic sharing between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches.

Associate membership and other religions

There could be particular circumstances when a non-Christian could be an associate member of the SFO. However, this associate membership must in no way obscure the Christian, Catholic and Franciscan nature of the SFO.

Roman Catholic associate members

In the case of a Catholic who wishes associate membership, the motivation for choosing this type of commitment rather than profession must be examined. If in the local context there are factors in the personal life of the candidate which make a profession impossible but the candidate is able to undergo formation and live the normal life of the Fraternity, associate membership may be granted. If the candidate is able to undergo formation and live the life of the Fraternity in the normal way but is prevented by psychological, cultural or other barriers from making profession in the SFO, associate membership may be granted. If the candidate is unable to undergo the formation process and live the life of the Fraternity in the normal way, associate membership should not be granted. Whatever the impediment to full membership may be, each case should be studied and decided on its own merits.

Numbers

To secure the identity of an SFO Fraternity, the number of associate members in a Fraternity must remain low. Local Statutes may give indications for this. For a Fraternity to accommodate associate members it must itself be well established, conducted by an elected Fraternity Council, and regularly accompanied by a spiritual Assistant or Animator.

Rights and duties

The associate members have the same rights and duties, including financial ones, as ordinary members, except that they cannot vote in elections and cannot bear office in SFO Councils. National and local Statutes can provide for associate members to have observer status in SFO Councils.