

Re : Workshop # 10: Invitation to live in a fraternity

Excerpts of FRATERNITY AS A FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT OF ST. FRANCIS SPIRITUALITY

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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...

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.

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 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.*

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.

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.

...

Francis' writings suggests 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'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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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 Franciscan, 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.

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.

e. 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 *kénosis* 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?

- **The service of "carrying one another's burdens"**
- **The service of good example**

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 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.

The Challenges of Fraternal Life

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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. (The Cord: volume 48, no.3, 138-139)

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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 so it is important to the entire Franciscan Order.

CONCLUSION

... 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 where we experience family love.

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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 it been a hindrance?
2. What contributions have you been able to make to develop the spirit of family in your Fraternity?

