

The Spirituality of the Chapter by Fr. André Comtois, ofm

St. Francis early established the custom of holding chapters. They were held at the Portiuncula and were the occasion for Francis to see his first companions, to become acquainted with friars who had recently entered the Order, to give to all paternal advice, and to make adaptations to their way of life he deemed necessary.

The most famous of all was the "Chapter of Mats" at which were present five thousand friars. They were entirely occupied in prayer and in rendering one another charitable service or in talking of spiritual things. The temporary shelters set up in the fields, some of rush mats, gave its name to this famous chapter. Since then the Chapter has always been most important in the Franciscan family. History shows that Chapters have brought about complete renewal in several Institutes and Provinces.



The time for our regional chapter is fast approaching. Like the friars gathered for their chapter at St. Mary of the Angels, we may ask ourselves: "Besides elections of officers and other organization matters, what are the spiritual reasons for our gathering in chapter?" Our vocation as Secular Franciscans is, first of all, to live the Gospel. Times change and our living the Gospel, if it is to be adapted to our society today, requires a continual renewal on our part as a Regional Fraternity, hence the

importance of the Chapter.

A: The primary purpose of the Chapter - I state emphatically, that the purpose of the Chapter is first and above all the spiritual advancement of the brothers and sisters in the pursuit of their common Franciscan ideal. As for St. Francis and his companions, chapters are held not only to elect officers and adopt new legislation, even though these are indispensable for the life of the Fraternity. Concern for the spiritual life of the brothers and sisters should be paramount. They are the first beneficiaries of the Chapter. Saint Francis convoked his brothers to the famous Chapter of Mats at Assisi in 1217, because he had a marked interest in their spiritual advancement. He wanted to help them remain faithful to the Gospel and to the Rule which the Lord himself had inspired him. On that important occasion he insisted on three fundamental points: prayer, life in fraternity, and service to others.

B: How to prepare for the chapter - Evidently, all do not have the same assignment or duty in the preparation of the chapter. For instance, that of the Minister is different from that of the Director of Formation or the Treasurer. But all strive for the spiritual welfare of the members. There is a common concern: "What can I do to help my brothers and sisters to live a more intense spiritual life?" That is how each member, according to his or her part, as well as members who have no special responsibility, are to prepare for the chapter. For that, the importance of prayer must not be overlooked.



C: Preparations to be made: 1) a time of prayer -The presence of the Holy Spirit in our Fraternities, and especially during the Chapter, is paramount; it is he who directs our Fraternity, We must therefore invoke him especially during the preparation of the Chapter. Since the Holy Spirit is the main agent of our chapters, it is only proper that we often pray to him, hence the importance of the Liturgical Prayer, the Eucharist and also Personal prayer

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2) Gospel teachings: -Jesus gave us certain counsels that should be recalled before the Chapter: -"*It is I, Do not be afraid*, (Jn 6, 20) The Master of the Absolute will not abandon those who consecrated to him their lives and all their activities. -To the Apostles frightened on the sea, Jesus cried to them: "*Why are you so frightened, you men of little fame?*" (Mt 8, 26) The greatest storms of history can

do nothing against the disciples of Jesus. At the Transfiguration, after having revealed himself to his Apostles, Jesus said to them; "*Stand up and do not be afraid*" (Mt 17, 8) Jesus knew that if his Apostles lived under the continual eye of the Holy Spirit they would have nothing to fear. They now had to continue in their task. The Transfiguration was not an end in itself, but a point of departure. The Holy Spirit does not work without our cooperation; that is why it is up to all the members to work attentively for the preparation of the Chapter, under the leadership of the Minister. Like the first Christian communities, who had but one heart and one soul, all members should willingly place their talents at the service of the Fraternity.

3) To accept a function asked of us - The Holy Spirit is present in a special way during the time of the elections. Those elected should consider it a pleasure as well as a duty to accept a function in a spirit of service. There are three attitudes that definitely are to be avoided.

A) To consider oneself unworthy. Such members refuse to accept a function and prefer having others, who they consider more worthy, accept the responsibility. That is not a fraternal attitude. As humans before God, no one is worthy to fill a function, More seriously still, one may use being unworthiness as a pretext in order to avoid being involved and to remain free of any responsibility.



B) To be afraid of a function, it is a fear that has to be overcome. There are those timid persons who remained unnoticed, but whose talents are discovered at a chapter. It is understandable that these persons are intimidated when invited to assume a new responsibility. We must remember that the Holy Spirit invoked before and during the Chapter is present to uphold the courage of those who are elected.

C) Lack of time or illness - It is possible that someone may not be able to accept a function because of family, work or illness. These could be valid reasons. Still, such a situation must not be taken lightly and should be considered seriously before God. If there is no serious hindrance, one should accept the function. That way the charge is not relayed to a member who may not have the ability for it. To refuse a function without serious reason could be a lack of love for other members and the Fraternity.

D) To refuse through lack of interest in one's Fraternity. It would be regrettable that one who is well qualified would refuse a function because of lack of interest in the Fraternity. There is always the commandment of love of neighbour, the obligation of the Rule to which a member is committed by a serious promise, One has to remember that accepting a function, one has an excellent opportunity to serve the fraternity and help members progress in their spiritual life.

Conclusion - May the foregoing observations help us to better prepare spiritually the next Chapter of our Region. Let us invoke the Holy Spirit so that we may celebrate our Chapter with the same fervour as St. Francis and his brothers did for the Chapter of Mats in 1 2 1 7. Our Chapter will then may produce the

spiritual results expected.