

Fraternity Life: A Spiritual Reality
An Introduction to the National Priority for 2018-2021
by Mary Bittner OFS

For the years 2018-2021, our National Fraternity has chosen the priority of “Fraternity Life”. To help us achieve this priority we note the following aspects of fraternity life:

- Deepening our Franciscan Vocation
- Growing in Fraternal Communion
- Cultivating Universal Kinship

These concepts provide a focus – they are interrelated, and cyclical. We might return to them often and ask, “How am I deepening my Franciscan vocation? How am I growing in fraternal communion? How am I cultivating universal kinship?”

Our relationships with God, with our OFS brothers and sisters, and with all people made in the image and likeness of God will be the subject of future reflections, as will some of the means (commitment, conversion, communication) we must use to enable our fraternities to grow in holiness.

For now, let us begin by reflecting on the spiritual reality and purpose of our fraternities. We’re so used to participating in various groups, both within and outside the Church, that it’s easy to treat our fraternity as just another group, rather than an integral part of our vocation. Let’s look at our foundational documents. How do they portray fraternity?

Our General Constitutions state:

Art. 28.1. The fraternity of the OFS finds its origin in the inspiration of Saint Francis of Assisi to whom the Most High revealed the essential gospel quality of life in fraternal communion (See *Constitutions* 3.3 (below); *Testament* 14).

Art. 3.3. The vocation to the OFS is a vocation to live the Gospel in fraternal communion. For this purpose, the members of the OFS gather in ecclesial communities which are called fraternities.

Art. 100.3. Fidelity to their own charism, Franciscan and secular, and **the witness of building fraternity sincerely and openly are their principal services to the Church, which is the community of love.** They should be recognized in it by their "being", from which their mission springs.

Points to ponder:

- The fraternity is not an afterthought. It originated with St. Francis, and its essential gospel quality was revealed to Francis by God Himself.
- We don’t just “live the Gospel.” We live it “in fraternal communion.” Fraternal communion is thus defined as a *constitutive element* of our vocation. We have a specific way of being in the world, and a specific way of being together...in fraternal communion.
- The Constitutions tie building fraternity to our Franciscan mission of ‘rebuilding’ the Church. In fact, they term it one of the principal services we as an Order do for the Church. Recall that during our profession we promised to spend our efforts doing this very thing.

“The local fraternity is a visible sign of the Church, a community of faith and love. Together with all the members you now pledge yourselves to spend your efforts **to make the fraternity a genuine ecclesial assembly and a living Franciscan community.** Rite of Profession, Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order].

If we fail to take this seriously, if we work half-heartedly, if we rarely show up at fraternity gatherings, we are failing our brothers and sisters, we are failing to live our profession, and we are failing the Church.

- Thomas of Celano tells us that Francis and his brothers rejoiced when others were added to their company.

“Immediately four other good and sound men were added to them as followers of the holy man of God. ...At that time Saint Francis and his brothers felt great gladness and unique joy whenever one of the faithful, led by the Spirit of God, came and accepted the habit of holy religion whoever the person might be: rich or poor, noble or insignificant, wise or simple, cleric or illiterate, a layman of the Christian people. This was a great wonder to those of the world and an example of humility, challenging them to the way of a more reformed life and to penance for sins.” (1 Celano 31)

Ask yourself: do people today feel that “great wonder” when they visit our fraternities? What sort of example do they see?

- “Come to [Jesus], a living stone, rejected by men yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house....” 1 Peter 2:4-5a

This article is an excerpt from an article on our National Priority in the TAU-USA, Issue 96, page 3-4.