

"Prayer, Formation, Fraternal Sharing and Necessary Business, and in this order!"

Beloved Brothers and Sisters of Penance,

We all know from the Nicene Creed that the four marks of our Church, the Body of Christ, are that the Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. I write this article to remind you that from our SFO Rule, General Constitutions and SFO Ritual, the four marks of a good Secular Franciscan Fraternity, whether at the local, regional, national or international level, are: Prayer, Formation, Fraternal Sharing and Necessary Business.

In the Jubilee Year 2000, our then St. Margaret of Cortona Regional Spiritual Assistant (and later National Spiritual Assistant) Friar Bart Karwacki, OFM Conventual, made a Pastoral Visitation to my local Fraternity, St. Thomas More, meeting at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Arlington, Virginia. Perhaps we were conducting more "business" than we should have, but for whatever reason, Father Bart told us to the effect that, "Business is not the primary concern of a fraternal gathering. Actually, FRATERNITY is your primary business, and I wish to remind you that the four purposes of a fraternal gathering are: Prayer, Formation, Fraternal Sharing and only as much Business as is necessary, and in this order!"

Well, obviously, I've never forgotten the spirit and thrust of his advice, and so I write:

First is Prayer.

We are wasting our own time and each other's time if we are not striving to achieve our own and one another's salvation. Without question, the essential element of "fraternity" is the spiritual; leadership must never sacrifice the spiritual to business.

We should be always helping our brothers and sisters to get to heaven, to get closer to the Lord, and, with God's great grace, to get ourselves to heaven through, with and in our Lord Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

How can we achieve this without prayer?

We cannot "earn" or "deserve" heaven. This is all God's gift, and to help one another and ourselves, we need prayer: first, last, foremost. Fraternities must nourish a vital prayer life for all their members.

Now, there are many forms of prayer. We have our Liturgy of the Hours; we have our SFO Ritual, available online and officially at:

<http://www.ciofs.org/a9enodoc.htm>

If we have an available friar or priest, we have the highest form of prayer in the Church, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. I am not specifying what form of prayer, nor did Father Bart, but he said to vary the forms of prayer and not become "stuck" in the same "prayer rut" (my words, his thought).

At our October National Gathering at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Arizona, we celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass each day, but with a different priest in different locales, including local Auxiliary Bishop Eduardo Nevares.

Each morning we opened our days with Morning Prayer, but each session was led by different people with different forms of prayer, including the *Liturgy of the Hours* and an original *Liturgy of Creation* by Ed Shirley, our National Ecumenical/Interfaith Chair.

We celebrated a prayerful *Rite of Remembrance* for all of our individual members nationwide who had returned home in the past year.

And we opened and closed our Chapter in prayer from the Ritual and blessings from our National Spiritual Assistant, Brother Bob Brady, OFM.

Second is Formation.

If fraternity itself is our main business, then our main fraternity business, after prayer, must be formation. Good fraternities need solid formation: initial formation, ongoing formation, formation leading to transformation and conversion of heart. Many, many excellent Secular Franciscan materials are available for you. Formation is the business of the whole fraternity.

At our recent National Gathering, each day we had formation, but in different ways.

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THE MINISTER'S MESSAGE is also available in the languages of Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese and Polish.

**These translations may be found online at our NAFRA website:
http://www.nafra-sfo.org/tau-usa/tau_newarticles.html#lbf**

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The first night (Tuesday, October 26), even before our Chapter had officially opened, our 2010 NAFRA Peace Award winner, OFM Brother David Buer spoke to us about his ministry to the homeless, the migrants and the marginalized.

The first official day (Wednesday) we shared our visions and priorities; we heard from our International visitors of their expectations of our national fraternity; and we learned from Dr. Kim Smolik about her great work as Executive Director of Franciscan Mission Service before attending an excellent and dispassionate panel discussion concerning the immigration issue in Arizona particularly.

The next morning (Thursday) we were informed, formed and challenged by Fr. Larry Janezic, OFM, Interim Executive Director of Franciscan Action Network (FAN); Fr. Michael Lasky, OFM Conventual, U.S. Regional Director for Franciscans International (FI); and Alan Ouimet, SFO, Founder and President of Franciscan Family Apostolate (FFA). All of them were excellent speakers about their causes and concerns.

The entire afternoon (Thursday) was directly spent on Formation, specifically, the new Formation Manual to be presented by the National Formation Commission in May.

The formation session transitioned to the day's Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as the celebrant, Father Richard Trezza, OFM, also the Spiritual Director of the Formation Commission, expanded ideas from the afternoon session in his homily.

Yes, good fraternities need solid formation, and solid formation takes time, attention, prayer and planning.

Third is Fraternal Sharing or the purely social aspect of our gatherings.

No fraternity need ever apologize for spending time for socializing or fraternal sharing. In Part II: Prayers for Fraternity Meetings Preface in the SFO Ritual, Number 2 reads:

"The goals of (fraternal) gatherings and meetings are indicated in the Rule, namely, to promote charity among the members and to foster their Franciscan and ecclesial life" (SFO Rule 22,24). Number 4 reads: "The following gatherings of the fraternity are required by statutes: a. a time for getting to know one another as brothers and sisters." Note, the first listed is "a time for getting to know one another as brothers and sisters."

Secular Franciscans should have a good time when they gather! Our recent National Chapter was celebratory as should be your Chapters! We made it our "business" to socialize and have a good time! Every night we gathered, and every meal we socialized. We even spent a day away going to local museums and the beautiful Basilica in downtown Phoenix. We took our "socializing" very seriously!

Of course, Fourth, there is always Business.

Budgets have to be approved. Reports have to be given. Occasionally, bylaws need to be rewritten. Yes, but not first and not only!

At our National Gathering, we approved a budget of over \$200,000.00; we adopted a national statement on migration that received national attention; we amended our National Statutes; we contributed charitably, not from the national budget, to the various organizations who had spoken to us; but most of this necessary "business" was conducted Saturday morning, October 30, the fourth and final full day of our Gathering.

Nationally, for our Chapter, we had the luxury of time because we only meet once a year, but we budgeted our time according to these priorities: Prayer, Formation, Fraternal Sharing and Necessary Business, and in that order! However much time your local or regional fraternity has to gather, please strive to budget your time accordingly. After all, they are not "our" fraternities; they are God's, and if we seek first to spread the kingdom of God, all else will follow!

Peace and love,

Tom