

The Primary Focus and the Four Marks of a Vibrant Secular Franciscan Fraternity

Beloved Brothers and Sisters of Penance,

In my last article, I listed and elaborated the four marks of a Franciscan Gathering: "Prayer, Formation, Fraternal Sharing and Necessary Business, and in this order!" (*TAU-USA Winter 2010, Issue 69*). In this article, please permit me to go back to the primary focus and expand forward to the four marks of a vibrant Secular Franciscan Fraternity at the Local, Regional, National or International Level.

Not to be legalistic, but the last words of the last Canon of the Code of Canon Law offer the primary focus of a vibrant Secular Franciscan Fraternity. Those last words read:

"the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one's eyes."

Canon 1752, Code of Canon Law

<http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/P70.HTM>



Thus, we should first pray at every fraternity gathering because the primary focus or reason for the existence of a fraternity is "the salvation of souls," where we are working with the great grace of God to achieve our individual salvation AND, at the same time, the salvation of our families, our fraternity, our friends, indeed, all souls.

We pray first because spirituality is the First mark of a vibrant fraternity. When I come to visit a fraternity, when I look at my own Local, Regional or National fraternity, I look first at its spiritual life. If we are not about salvation, we are wasting our time. If the Spirit is not alive and well in a fraternity, then no amount of efficient bookkeeping, bubbling agendas or dynamic speakers, however important and stimulating, will bring that life back.

Formation is our Second mark, both in individual meetings and in the fraternity as a whole. Of course, the grace of God can save souls not well-formed, but a well-formed mind and heart humble and open to that grace make the Spirit's work a lot easier!

Our fraternities need to pray for, work and focus on, true Secular Franciscan formation. We need to be attracting new people, forming them, forming ourselves.

This formation is a threefold process of information to effect formation in a process of continual transformation. We take pertinent information from the Gospels, from Holy Mother Church, from the lives of Francis and Clare and all the Franciscan saints, from our own SFO Rule and General Constitutions, to structure and effect formation. With the grace of God, this formation, if effective, achieves "that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls 'conversion.' Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily" (SFO Rule 7).

Formation must deepen and expand our understanding of our Catholic faith, our vocation within fraternity, our Franciscan charism and, finally, our Gospel witnessing out in the world.

With the love and mercy of God, the example of Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit, the fruits of this Trinitarian process of information, formation and transformation should yield better Catholics, Franciscans, workers, spouses, parents, citizens; in short, better people. Thus, formation must lead to the salvation of souls.

Third, we are called to fraternal sharing, to social time together, because we are called to be family, the Third mark of every vibrant Secular Franciscan Fraternity. With our Baptisms, we are already sisters and brothers of the same "Our Father."

Our Professions summon us into fraternity, into a spiritual family. One Secular Franciscan is never enough; there must be at least five of us to canonically establish a fraternity. Our individual holiness must be built by service to that fraternity, service to our brothers and sisters in need, starting with "not turning your back on your own" (Isaiah, 58:7).

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We cannot serve our brothers and sisters in need if we do not know what those needs are.

We cannot know those needs if we do not know who our brothers and sisters are.

We cannot know who our brothers and sisters are without true Secular Franciscan fellowship, spending time with one another, sharing with one another, breaking bread with one another, praying with one another. Salvation for all is salvation for each of us individually.

Fourth and finally, a fraternity must witness to Christ and to the Gospels. We are to be a "community of love" (SFO Rule 22) to all in the world. As Blessed Pope John Paul II told us directly at the Xth General Chapter in 2002,

"The church expects from you, Secular Franciscans, a courageous and consistent testimony of Christian and Franciscan life, leaning towards the construction of a more fraternal and gospel world for the realization of the Kingdom of God".

http://www.ciofs.org/per/2005_lca5en14.htm#b



This witnessing may well involve some form of sacrifice or suffering because in its original meaning, a "martyr" was a "witness." We witness to save the world and save ourselves; again, this is our fraternity's primary "business," but the witnessing itself may take many forms.

Some fraternities have apostolates – courageous initiatives – as the National Fraternity has taken with Catholic Relief Services.

Your Fraternity may adopt a family through the Franciscan Family Apostolate, run by a Secular Franciscan – <http://www.openhearts.org>



You may adopt a missionary through the Franciscan Mission Service –

<http://franciscanmissionservice.org/default.aspx>



If you are concerned with national issues, you might contact the Franciscan Action Network –

<http://www.franciscanaction.org>



If you want to work with international issues, you might contact Franciscans International –

<http://www.franciscansinternational.org>



You may get involved though your parish outreach or a local soup kitchen, hospital or detention center.

These and so many other apostolates are great as long as the fraternity realizes that the apostolate exists to build up the fraternity, not the fraternity to build up the apostolate. Nor it is necessary that every fraternity have an external apostolate.

Witnessing may work best in our caring for our own – not losing anyone who can no longer attend meetings or even those who have fallen away, but still seek help, still seek conversion.

Spirituality, Formation, Family and Witnessing all for the sake of "the salvation of souls" offer us the Primary Focus and Four Marks of a vibrant Secular Franciscan Fraternity.

May God give us the grace, the Living Presence of Christ and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit when we gather to worship, to form, to share, to witness in Christ's Name, always striving to keep our fraternities and our souls alive and focused on salvation.

We pray and live in the Peace and Love of our Risen Savior.

Tom