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National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order - USA
Minister's State of the Order Address – October 12, 2022
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I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for faith, hope and love – and I'm not talking about my cancer diagnosis. I'm talking about my commitment to my vocation and what has kept me here.

- It's faith. It's believing that God who loves me so much, has called me to this life.
- It's hope. It is the hope that gives me such energy and totally unflappable joy, because I know the hope to which we have been called.
- It's love. It's my love for God, my love for each of you, my sisters and brothers, and the opportunity to try my best to love as Jesus loved, and as Francis and Clare loved.

I've attended the last 17 National Chapters, and I have served 13 years on the National Council. My choosing not to run for another term has nothing to do with stopping, as if to say, I've done my part. Service in the order is for a time, but commitment to the Order is lifelong.

I know what God is calling me to do next. I also know what God is calling me to do today.

God is present and active in the smallest particles of the universe. He is present and active in all the events of our lives. We must always ask him to give us eyes to see, and ears to hear, so we can recognize his work among us. When we do that, he gives us the wisdom to see his hand at work, and the wisdom to know when our plans are not his.

That being said, this is not the State of the Order address that I thought I would be giving.

Some days ago, Mary and I discussed what we should include in the State of the Order address. What we intended was to examine our progress in reaching the goals that were set by previous chapters, however in looking back over the past year, as well as the year prior, we could not deny the fact that we had spent much of our time *not on our projects, not on our goals*, but on addressing issues of contention at both the local and regional levels. The disagreements, the squabbles, and the disputes that are happening are heart-wrenching for all of us. Addressing these issues has taken much time for those of us on the NEC, as well as for each of you. This not just occurring in one fraternity or in one region. It's in one region, one fraternity after another. It's pervasive.

The situation seems especially perplexing since our priority for these past four years has been fraternity life. We have had wonderful articles on fraternity in every issue of the TAU-USA, we have encyclicals, and the Popes, from Leo XIII on, have spoken to us about who we are called to be. We have our Rule. We have the Gospel. But instead of taking these to heart, we are not modeling fraternity, we're not embracing each other in reconciliation, we're not bringing the Gospel to life. Rather than being salt and light, we are mimicking society.

I believe this says something about our commitment to our vocation, and how we are called to dedicate ourselves to the goal of perfect Christian love.

Perhaps we need to look back to what we promised at our profession: to work intently, to pledge ourselves, to spend our efforts, along with all the members of the fraternity, to make the fraternity a genuine ecclesial assembly and a living Franciscan community. Have we truly dedicated ourselves to this? Do we not make a connection between the words we have said and the life to which we are called? Do we see any connection with the increasing prevalence of these disputes and the lack of life in our fraternities? Do we not think this is important? Or have we lost our way and ignored the clear guidance of the Gospel?

We need conversion. Like Francis, we must be tireless in pursuit of holy newness. Are we tireless in pursuit of holy newness? Like Francis, we must constantly hope to begin again. We must apply the words of the Gospel and the advice of Francis to these situations. I will share with you two that come to mind:

Jesus said, "Whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment..." (Mt 5:22) and "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Mt 5:23-24) That's how important reconciliation is.

Francis also has advice for us – much advice for us about fraternal life. Here is one that I chose from the earlier Rule: "And let all the brothers, both the ministers and servants as well as the others, take care not to be disturbed or angered at the sin or the evil of another, because the devil wishes to destroy many through the fault of one; but they should spiritually help [that one] who has sinned as best they can, because it is not the healthy who are in need of the physician, but those who are sick (Mk 2:17)." (The Earlier Rule Ch. V:7-8)

Sisters and brothers, I see your Franciscan spirit. I see your desire, and how hard you work, and the way you give of your time. I see you pray. I see your devotion. I am simply asking that you consider how can we each do better and how can we help each other. How can we encourage reconciliation in those places where these things are happening?

First, as always, let's turn to God in prayer, and ask for his mercy and forgiveness. The power of God's love can bring order out of chaos, peace out of conflict, and healing out of injury. God can renew us, so that we become who we are called to be. Let's pray for this. And then, where necessary, let's go to our brother or sisters and say "I'm sorry. Can we start again?" Let us look at each other with eyes of mercy, and as Francis says, if they do not ask for forgiveness, ask them if they want forgiveness.

In our hearts right now, let's thank God ahead of time for how he will help us. He will help us. But we must listen. We really need to listen.

When I look at our National Fraternity, I see how God has already given us so much to help us. He pours his gifts upon us. He continues to guide us along the trajectory of renewal that I spoke of in the 2019 State of the Order. That trajectory continues. Let's look at what God has given us most recently.

A few months ago, Mary was looking at the website for the Franciscan School of Theology and a certain video caught her eye. She listened to it, and listened to it again, and sent me the link. Both of us were struck by how it applies to our current needs, and we posted this video on our website as one of the preparatory materials for this Chapter.

The video is entitled *A Franciscan Spirituality of Discernment*¹, and the presenter, Fr. Tom Nairn, OFM, describes a process of discernment that is uniquely Franciscan, moving us from "See, Judge and Act" to "Listen, Discern and Go Forth." This initial step of listening does not mean a passive hearing (which implies that the action is one-sided), rather it's very active. In essence, listening becomes an encounter, an encounter with God and with others, an encounter that is critical in directing our discernment. He then challenges us to go forth.

We strongly recommend this process of Franciscan discernment as a starting point for each of us as we seek God's will for our own lives, and also as we discern where our National Fraternity is being called in the next three years.

I will explain for the benefit of the newer members of our National Fraternity Council that at each elective chapter, one of our tasks is to determine our priorities for the next three-year period. During this Chapter we are focusing on our priorities. I encourage you to actively listen to each other, and to the movement of the Spirit so that you will be ready to give input when we ask, "What should our priority be?"

In setting priorities, a major source of input for us are the directives of the International Council (CIOFS.) I am deeply grateful to CIOFS for all the communications and other material they provide to us. I am amazed at their keen insights, and how they pinpoint what is most needed in our Order. Truly the Holy Spirit is at work in our servant leaders.

The materials from CIOFS that are pertinent for us at this Chapter are the Conclusive Document from the XIV General Chapter and the Guidelines for OFS Councils, which will be the topic for our ongoing formation later this week. You may recall the 2021 Conclusive Document from CIOFS entitled Animate and Guide with Servant Leadership which set the stage and goes hand in hand with these current Guidelines for Councils. You might best remember Animate and Guide for how it introduced us to the concept of "prophetic creativity."

As we look at these materials, we must ask ourselves, "Where is God is calling us as an Order?"

Let us also consider the recent Quinquennial Congress. The Quinquennial (the "Q") is, of course, a joyful gathering, a time of prayer and a celebration, but there is an important formative aspect as well. At this

¹ See "A Franciscan Spirituality of Discernment, Dr. Thomas Nairn, OFM, YouTube

Congress we were introduced to a deeper understanding of “Jubilee².” We must ask ourselves, is it enough to say that we have simply been restored and that’s it? It is true that Jubilee is about God’s mercy and forgiveness, and subsequent restoration, but it is also about identity. Once restored we are to *begin again*, and as reflected in the Q mission statement we must “*renew our Franciscan calling in the spirit of conversion.*”

Our keynote presenters at the Q explored the ideas of conversion and renewal in various ways. Fr. David Couturier examined the signs of the times and challenged us to *build a more fraternal world* in response to what he described as a crisis of trust in our society today. As we look to the signs of the times, both in society and in our Order, we must ask what is needed for us to continue on this course, this trajectory of renewal?

Let us move from considering our priorities to another component of the State of the Order, and that is all the amazing work of our national councilors, our commissions, and committees. Time prohibits my listing their many accomplishments this past year, but I rejoice in the progress that has been made in every area they each represent. The fruit of their work is clearly visible, not only in their annual reports, but in every issue of TAU-USA (which is still our very best means of communication with each member of our national fraternity), in their interactions with all of us, and most especially in the effect they have within the national fraternity. We are also abundantly blessed by the great number of individual members who say “yes” to a myriad of tasks and give countless hours of service to support our national initiatives. Again, I wish I could list them all.

As for the current National Executive Council, our term will end in just a few days. It has been a blessed time. Yes, there have been tears, but we know what God does with tears. We may go forth weeping, but we return rejoicing! We know where perfect joy comes from. Where does that joy come from? It’s not from the great things that are happening in our lives. We find that joy when we *meet* the challenges, when we *meet* the hurt. It is about meeting the challenges and living in virtue. God blesses that.

We are committed to a smooth transition. We will meet with the new NEC on Sunday morning. At that time, we will review with them the most pressing items that need to be addressed, including upcoming Regional Visitations and Elections. We have prepared a list of recommendations, with strong support for continued outreach by our Accessibility Committee. This ministry made a profound impact at the Quinquennial. I see their work under a wide umbrella which also includes translations and the work of our Multicultural Councilor. This work, this outreach, must continue. When we meet with the new NEC, we will also arrange for the transfer of records, and we will continue to be available to assist the new NEC as needed, and as requested.

And what lies ahead? I truly believe the Holy Spirit will continue to move us on this trajectory of renewal – the renewal that has been happening from the time of the new Rule. I’m excited about the future and I look forward to what God will do next.

² See “Franciscan Jubilee” Issue 106, TAU-USA

Finally, brothers and sisters, in the words of St. Paul, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:12-16)

This is Gospel living. This is God’s word to us.
Let’s live the Gospel, and let’s do it together.

And may perfect joy, purity of heart and all the holy virtues, which are poured into the hearts of the faithful through the grace and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, make us faithful to God.

I close with a quote from Bonaventure’s sermon on the feast of the transference of the body of St. Francis – May 1267:

“Go up higher. (Christ) addresses St. Francis in these words,” and Christ says to each of us, “Go up with my help by calling on me in prayer. Go up after me, by following my example in your life. Go up to God’s presence by contemplating the divine splendor. Go up because of one whom you shall see at last in glory.” (FAED II, 744)

Go up! Go up higher!

With grateful joy and fraternal love, your sister,
Jan

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In consultation with the National Executive Council