

# **National Minister's Annual Report to the Order - 2010**

**National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States  
October 4, 2010: The Blessed Feast Day of "Our Holy Father, Francis of Assisi,  
Deacon, Founder of the Three Orders"**

## **NATIONAL MINISTER'S ANNUAL REPORT TO THE ORDER**

**Beloved National Family, "All who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength (cf. Mk 12:30), and love their neighbors as themselves (cf. Mt 22:39) and hate their bodies with their vices and sins, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance":**

**When your newly elected National Executive Council came together for its first formal meeting in St. Louis February 26-28, 2010, we sought to craft a brief vision statement and to articulate our major priorities for the coming year. That vision statement was "Keeping the gift of Gospel living alive" to be promoted through the following priorities or areas for focus and development:**

- 1 - Fraternity**
- 2 – Formation**
- 3 – Communication**
- 4 – Youth**

**"Keeping the gift of Gospel living alive" includes our basic Secular Franciscan vision of going from Gospel to life and life to Gospel; of seeking first the Kingdom of God; of reflecting Christ's love through the working of the Holy Spirit to all around us, to all of God's creatures and to creation itself; of making Christ our goal, our light, our life, our love by following in the footsteps of Sts. Francis, Clare and all the Franciscan saints.**

**This vision has become the theme of our NAFRA Gathering: Bringing the Gift of Gospel Living to Life "Our Credible Witnessing," and I would like to use our four articulated priorities, Fraternity, Formation, Communication and Youth, around which to organize this 2010 National Minister's Annual Report.**

- 1. The first priority is Fraternity.**

**Let me start with the numbers that you have seen in the 2010 NAFRA Annual Report Collation, which you already have, and which, for convenience, is also attached with this email.**

By the numbers, NAFRA, the Secular Franciscan Fraternity of the United States, has just over 14,000 active permanently professed members nationwide. The exact number may vary. In the 2010 NAFRA Annual Report Collation, the Regional Ministers collectively reported 14,399. Bob Herbelin, our beloved Data Base Administrator and Vice Minister of St. Francis Region, "corrected" that number to be 14,079. Rather than individually poll our 30 Ministers, I will cite Bob and the Data Base as my reference for all further numbers.

In any case, our numbers are down. Our beloved previous National Minister, Patrick Mendes, reported in his 2009 State of the Order Report 14,722 active, permanently professed members, which itself was a decline of 1,089 from the 2008 number of 15,811. Although the decline from 2009 to 2010 has been less steep than the decline from 2008 to 2009, still, we are down over 1700 active members in the last two years.

To fill those missing seats at the SFO table, we currently have 1224 Candidates and 927 Inquirers last year. Let us all pray for their successful formation and discernment.

We currently have 688 canonically established fraternities, which is an increase of 14 from the 2009 number of 674 and a decrease of 30 from the 2008 number of 718.

Perhaps, God and others willing, we will see in the not too distant future more than the 2008 number of 718, for the 2010 NAFRA Annual Report Collation records 43 "Emerging Communities" and 29 "Newly Forming Groups."

What do these numbers mean? I'm not a trained demographer nor am I writing a History of our Order in the United States, like our Historian and former National Secretary and Minister Bill Wicks. However, from my own traveling around the United States and from personal exchanges and reading, I would say that we are an aging order with members who die or can no longer attend actively; but those of us who are still active can attract new blood by our faithfully living out our Franciscan calling and charism within vital Secular Franciscan fraternities.

Without question, the essential element of "vital Secular Franciscan fraternities" is the spiritual. Leadership must never sacrifice the spiritual to the business of the Secular Franciscan fraternity; vital fraternities should nourish a vital prayer life for all its members. Every Secular Franciscan fraternity deserves "capable and well-prepared persons" (General Constitutions Article 88.1) as Spiritual Assistants.

According to the 2010 NAFRA Annual Report Collation with Bob Herbelin's Data Base corrections, we have 506 Spiritual Assistants for 688 fraternities. I was recently in the Troubadours of Peace Region in the Northwest United States, and there are, I believe, two friars in the whole Region, one who is very ill. This is a continuing problem, which needs our continued prayer and attention. I know of no "easy fix."

**At the National level, however, we are all blessed by the prayers, advice, example and service of our Conference of National Spiritual Assistants: in alphabetical order, Fr. Lester Bach OFM Cap; Bro. Bob Brady OFM, current President in turn; Fr. Steve Gross OFM Conv; and Fr. Kevin Queally TOR. Would that every Region and Local Fraternity could have such Spirit-filled assistance! Please make yourself known to them at our National Gathering. Ask for their advice and prayers.**

**I must say that I recently had a local minister and friend ask me if a member could practice their Secular Franciscan vocation totally apart from the life of the fraternity. I answered to the effect that although all of us by our baptisms are called to holiness, and our lives in fraternity are empty if we are not pursuing a life of holiness, still, our essential Secular Franciscan call is to pursue holiness together in fraternity. Article 22 of our Rule reads:**

**The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members.**

**Thus, the "basic unit" of our Order is NOT the individual, but "the local fraternity." In Article 2 of our Rule, we strive for "perfect charity" "in these fraternities":**

**The Secular Franciscan Order . . . is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful. In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state.**

**The General Constitutions, Article 3:3, perhaps say this even more clearly:**

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

**Now, addressing Regional Ministers and members of the National Fraternity, I leave us all with the challenge given by Father Benet Fonck OFM in the Official Commentary on the Secular Franciscan Rule (p.27): "Regional, provincial, national, or international groupings are not just a federation of independent, semi-autonomous fraternities or a forum of exchange, but actually a fully operating community with its own character, interactivity and authority as defined by the statutes."**

**In other words, I would like each Regional Fraternity AND our National Fraternity to be truly a family where we all have a place at the table. Please help me build this sense on a national level at our National Gathering later in October 2010.**

I believe that as we strive for personal holiness, we also strive to build holy fraternities where we each support one another to draw closer to Christ by following in the footsteps of Sts. Francis and Clare. As we do so and build a "community of love" at our local, regional and national levels, I believe we will continue to attract new members who seek to "produce worthy fruits of penance" in their lives for all their lives.

As a final note, I am excited that "Fraternity" is the focus for our next (2011) Summer Seminar held at St. Francis University in Loretto, PA from, I believe, dinner Thursday evening June 23rd through lunch on Sunday, June 26th. The presenters will be our own beloved National Councilor Mary Bittner and National Spiritual Assistant Lester Bach OFM Cap. Regional Minister and CNSA Secretary Cyl Maljan can no doubt provide more information at our NAFRA Gathering, but please try to attend.

2. The second priority is Formation.

All of us know that a great variety of Formation Materials are available in this United States. If anything, I would suggest that we have too many texts, at least when I review the list of materials you gave us, including: Angel Power; Build with Living Stones; Called to Build a More Fraternal and Evangelical World; Called to Make Known the Charism; Capture the Spirit of Francis and Clare; Catechism of the Catholic Church (4); Catch Me a Rainbow [Bach] (6); Catch Me a Rainbow, Too [Bach] (22); Clare of Assisi [Delio]; Come and See [Bach & Baker] (25); Complete Works of Francis and Clare (2); and 52 other named sources. 52! Wow!

I am not a "text dictator" to mandate one and only one text, but more consistency and coherence in Initial Formation across the United States would allow Candidates and Inquirers a greater sense of the "oneness" yet "catholicity" in our great Order.

I hope to join with Bob "Fitz" Fitzsimmons and his hard-working National Formation Commission at the National Formation Workshop, entitled "Forming the Formators" at Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois from May 12-15, 2011 to "come and see" if our new National Formation Manual should be prescriptive across the entire NAFRA family.

Fitz and his Formation Commission have promised an initial taste of this National Formation Manual at our NAFRA Chapter later this month, and I hope to glean from our International Visitors there attending what are the current initiatives from International concerning the standardization of the Formation Process around the globe.

Thus, it should be an interesting year ahead in Formation. Many thanks to Fitz, to the National Formation Commission and to all who have worked on the new National Formation Manual. I beg for your prayers and discernment.

3. The third priority is Communication.

My preferred form of Communication is one-on-one, couple to couple, or in a small group, preferably over a meal and/or a beverage, most especially before or after "breaking Bread together" at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Seldom am I able to this with beloved members of the National Family.

My second most preferred form of Communication is email, perhaps surprisingly. I cannot talk forever on a phone, like some. Maybe because I spend so many hours teaching, especially almost every evening from 7 to 9 pm with my wonderful adult ESOL students or in adult Bible study at my church, I have no opportunity to communicate until it is too late to call.

In any case, I average perhaps 20 to 30 emails every day, with 50 being a high and 10 an "easy" day. It's a lot of correspondence that I don't always handle well. Of course, I have no staff, no personal secretary. I have no office; the computer is mine. It's all by me, and I'm only me.

In addition to email, this is a Communication Era of YouTube and Blogging. Our Secular Franciscan Channel set up by Mary and Bob Stronach on YouTube has three episodes that have received nearly 2000 viewers during the past year.

Episode 1 is an interview with Patrick Mendes, our past National Minister; Episode 2 features an interview with 2009 Peace Award recipient Don Ryder. Episode 3 features me discussing the significance of the National Peace Award. All episodes are now available for viewing on both blip.tv and YouTube: <http://secularfranciscans.blip.tv/> and <http://www.youtube.com/secularfranciscans>.

I have no idea how many viewers have seen and read our blog "Instruments of God's Peace," (<http://instrumentsofgodspence.blogspot.com/>) but it has some good stories of Secular Franciscans letting their lights shine from all over the United States. My favorite was submitted on Friday, June 18, 2010, and entitled "Franciscans Passionate about Serving Others." It told about Debbie Schisler, a 53-year-old wife and mother of five who was about to be permanently professed as a Secular Franciscan. She was inspiring.

I wish more of you would share your stories!

I have also written a series of National Minister's Monthly Messages, which have garnered some interest from the number of emails and comments I have received.

We hope soon to have our first edition of the TAU-USA under our new editor Anna Geraci. We miss Frances Wicks terribly, and we thank Bill Wicks for editing one edition of the TAU-USA while the NEC searched for a new editor. Honestly, we are

very excited with Anna; and from what I've seen of this first edition, I think everyone will be equally excited!

National Councilors and the National Formation Commission have been requested to stay in touch with Regional Ministers and Formation Directors to increase Communication. National Councilor Michelle Kim has organized a Translation Team to help improve Communication to our non-English speaking fraternities.

Michelle Kim, Webpage Master and Regional Minister Vickie Klick, and Elaine Hedtke have begun discussions about what may make our NAFRA webpage more "state of the art" and "user-friendly." These conversations will continue face to face at our NAFRA Gathering later this month. If you have any insights or expertise, please share it!

More always needs to be done in the area of Communication.

4. The fourth priority is Youth.

Service in our Secular Franciscan Order is, by Rule, "for a definite period" (SFO Rule 21). When I first began serving as a Regional Minister and attended my first NAFRA Chapter in 2000, I met Kathy Taormina and learned of her work with Youth. Kathy can never be thanked enough for her service with our Youth, but we need Youth to be represented by Youth. Youth must be first nurtured at the Local Fraternity, transition up to Regional, then up to National; not merely be told what to do from National down, in my opinion. Youth is the concern of all of us, and all of us need to do more to celebrate and encourage Youth, at least in praying for youthful hearts for all of our members that we might attract other youthful hearts, no matter the age.

Franciscans International has a "Human Rights Competition" that Father Mike Lasky OFM Conv will speak on at our NAFRA Gathering that involves young people creating essays, songs, videos or art around the topic: "Why Human Rights Matter to Me" that may earn them a trip to the United Nations. I would encourage you to think if your Regional or Local Fraternity might sponsor or facilitate this creative activity to attract youth.

I need more help and prayers from all of you to attract Youth and Young Adults into our NAFRA family.

5. For Special Attention.

First, of course, you did not elect just me, you elected an entire National Executive Council, and I love this National Executive Council! They are spirit-filled people, good friends and worker-bees! At this writing, every elected member of the National Executive Council has attended every minute of our Executive Council sessions, and some, Mary Bittner and Jan Parker to name two, spent one whole night, I believe, after our meeting finished one evening in our Nation's Capitol,



trying to put together the schedule for our upcoming NAFRA Gathering. We have conducted LONG conference calls, and every elected member of the Council has made at least one National Visitation or chaired one Regional Election in this past year.

Specifically, Elaine Hedtke has, for starters, been a better National Vice Minister than me, her predecessor! She has given us our 2010 NAFRA Annual Report Collation on which we base so much of our knowledge; she has handled the Election and Visitation Schedule; she and Jan Parker have worked with the Youth; every "special assignment" I have given her she has accepted. She's a trusted advisor and dear sister.

He probably doesn't like it, but National Treasurer Dennis Ross has six children with his lovely wife Lynn, and he has been nicknamed by me "Daddy," not only because he always covers everybody's expenses, but also because he has such a wealth of experience. (He's also a school teacher by profession, and I love school teachers.) It is a blessing to have him serving for a third term.

National Secretary Jan Parker has called herself an "SS," a Serving Secretary, and so she is! She was the "hostess with mostest" at our first NEC gathering in St. Louis in February, including being our personal cook and caterer for one of the evening meals! She makes the calls, keeps the minutes, and organizes the agendas, doing all with her accustomed grace and with often a song and a strum of her guitar. I hope she will never leave us!

Our three National Councilors are Mary Bittner, Michelle Kim and Arturo Villareal. They reflect a welcome diversity to our National Council. For just about three days, I would like to borrow Mary's brain and spirit. Then I really think I could do something as National Minister! Michelle wears many hats, and we need to take advantage of ALL of them. For example, she has a lot of experience at the United Nations and in working with Franciscans International. She is bilingual in Korean and English. She has professional experience with computers. She is a wise woman and friend. For his part, if we get down at our NAFRA Gathering, I will turn the microphone over to Arturo Villareal, who always speaks with such power and motivation. He inspires me, and I hope he will organize a "Speakers' Bureau" for Regions to call on and include himself among those recommended Presenters. He is bilingual in Spanish and English and is a dynamite dancer with his lovely wife Sofia.

My longest friend and sister on the NEC is our dear Anne Mulqueen, our International Councilor. Anne and I are fellow members and Spiritual Assistants in St. Margaret of Cortona Region and have done workshops together entitled "Catch the Fire" to return fraternities to their original Franciscan charism. What a blessed resource Anne is! She has forgotten more about our great Franciscan vocation than I have yet learned.

**Please pray for this National Executive Council that you have elected!**

**Second, our NEC, especially with the help of Jan Parker, helped identify Kent Ferris, our Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Chair. I think Kent brings many gifts to the table, and I pray that he will help us find God's will in our efforts with our fellow brothers and sisters. Please introduce yourself to Kent at our National Gathering.**

**Third, this same spirit of cooperation and inter-dependence among and between our 1st, 2nd and 3rd Order Regular and Secular Franciscan Sisters and Brothers spurs my desire to maintain our presence on the Franciscan Action Network. FAN enjoys the institutional membership of 46, I believe, entities in our great Franciscan Family, among whom we are only one (<http://www.franciscanaction.org/Links/exec/institutionalmembers>). We have a lot to learn from one another. The Executive Director of FAN Larry Janezic will be with us at our National Gathering, and I look forward to see how we might continue our cooperation.**

**Fourth, we are called to mission, and we have helped sponsor a youthful Nora Pfeiffer in her work in Bolivia with the Franciscan Mission Service (<http://norainbolivia.blogspot.com/>). Their Executive Director Dr. Kim Smolik will be with us at our National Gathering to talk about Nora and other Franciscan missionaries and their work (<http://www.franciscanmissionservice.org/default.aspx>). Additionally, long-time friend and fellow SFO Alan Ouimet will speak at our National Gathering about his mission work with the Franciscan Family Apostolate in India (<http://www.openhearts.org/>). Please listen to these good people and pray how we might support their efforts.**

**Fifth, I was so pleased with the 2010 NAFRA Peace Award process, the nominations and the eventual winner, Brother David Buer OFM, first among so many equals working for peace (<http://instrumentsofgodspeace.blogspot.com/>). This year we had more nominations (22) than ever before; every voting member of our National Fraternity was given the opportunity to nominate, be nominated or vote. Many took advantage of these opportunities, and Brother David Buer AND his Mom will be with us at our National Gathering! Please rejoice with them and continue to work for peace.**

**Sixth, there are many other "NAFRA" people I would like to thank, many of whom do great work for our family and will be at our NAFRA Gathering. Please forgive me if I should mention your name and have forgotten to do so, but do permit me to mention by title and name: Public Relations, Robert and Mary Stronach; Archives, Sharon Deveaux; Historian, Bill Wicks; all of our Computer Committee: Chairperson Dan Mulholland, Web and Blog and Minister's Message Master Vickie Klick; Data Base Administrator Bob Herbelin and Master of all Trades Roger Raupp; Ecumenical/Interfaith Chair and SFO At Large Ed Shirley; Minister of Vocations**



**Marie Amore. Please thank and/or hug these people if you see them at our NAFRA Gathering!**

**Finally and personally, if I ask myself how am I doing after one year as your elected National Minister, well, honestly, I feel a little like the feeling I get when I read the Gospel story of Peter on the sea (Mt 14:22-33). This feeling and its implications, plus this Annual Report and its implications, I will share more fully both one on one, again my preferred form of Communication, and collectively with the National Family so gathered and physically and spiritually present at the appropriately-named Franciscan Renewal Center in late October in Scottsdale, Arizona, God willing. Please feel free at any time by email, phone or in person to discuss these and other matters with me.**

**A blessed Feast Day to one and all. May Father Francis intercede for us and have God show us what is ours to do AND supply the grace to do it! Let us pray for one another.**

**With Peace and Love in Christ's and your Service,**

**Tom**