

# *Conference of National Spiritual Assistants*

## Secular Franciscan Order

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A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF MAY 2021.

### FRATERNAL DIALOGUE

The Franciscan movement places a strong emphasis on fraternity. It is both a sign of our unity in Christ and a penance. The term “fraternal” frequently appears throughout the OFS Rule and Constitutions as a constant reminder of the fundamental attitude Secular Franciscans are called to hold towards all people and God’s creation.

The very vocation of the Secular Franciscan is to “live the Gospel in fraternal communion” (Art 3) as an expression of the Kingdom of God. (Rule 14, Art 20.2). It is the primary service and mission of a Secular Franciscan to be a witness of “fraternal communion and love” (Art 19, 100.2) A mission animated by the Holy Spirit (Art 11) based on the Gospel (Art 28.1) and strengthened by Eucharist (Art 53.2).

Secular Franciscans are to be bearers of the Lord’s peace, seeking harmony through “fraternal dialogue” with a trusting hope that everyone can be “transformed through love and pardon.” (Rule 19, Rule 23). This attitude is not limited to members of the fraternity but toward everyone: The Church and Franciscan family, with their families, with non-Christians (Art 103.1), with all creatures. (Art 12)

The word “fraternal” comes from the Latin *fraternus*, which literally means “brotherly.” It emphasizes the familial relationship that St Francis of Assisi saw Jesus inviting everyone into: “We are brothers to Him when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 12:50).

As brothers and sisters of the Lord, what skills do we need to be fraternal??

The Rule and the Constitution point to a key skill for fraternal living: it is the ability to engage in *fraternal dialogue*: the ability to listen and communicate respectfully with each other.

Too many Secular Franciscans have left fraternity through unresolved division and hurt. One Friar Minor said he didn’t want to minister to the Secular Franciscan anymore because he couldn’t handle the division and arguments that he had experienced!

Developing a fraternal attitude and the skills of fraternal dialogue is a core part of formation. We should rejoice in our differences, listen to each other, and be humble enough to accept the will of the fraternity. It requires a lot of give and take! It is through engaging different viewpoints that good fraternal decisions are made.

The Fraternity Council collectively has a responsibility to enter dialogue with members with difficulties (Art 50.2b). For more sensitive issues, the Council works through the Minister & Spiritual Assistant to address the issues. (Art 56.1, Art 58.1, Art 58.2). The aim of these discussions is to keep alive the possibility of reconciliation and resolution of any problem. However, the responsibility for ensuring fraternal dialogue is not solely the Council or presiding Minister but everyone’s.

Fraternal dialogue requires us to:

- Respect that everyone is made in the image of God.
- Listen deeply, not judging but discerning the truth.
- Share our views and feelings humbly without fear of judgement.
- Seek not just a consensus or the majority view but God’s will.

- Allow moments of silent reflection and prayer to be part of the discussion.
- Let Christ's voice through the Gospel be part of the conversation.
- Be open to conversion and an encounter with Christ.

Fraternal life also requires us to respect that when the fraternity has come to a decision that we graciously submit to it: this is part of the Order's penitential life!

The early Church addressed many difficulties through prayer and dialogue. The whole community discussed, after complaints from the Greek disciples, how to distribute food fairly. (Acts 6:1-7) The Council of Jerusalem debated and discerned that non-Jewish Christian disciples did not have to be circumcised to be Christians but asked them not to worship idols, participate in fornication, eat strangled meat or consume blood. (Act 15). St Paul's letter to the Galatians shows that it wasn't the easiest of decisions!

The Church has called many Synods and Councils seeking to enter into fraternal dialogue to reflect on issues of conflict. Not all these gatherings have resulted in unity but they have helped to define more clearly issues facing the Christian family. They are a place of encountering the Holy Spirit's ongoing presence in the Church.

To be a Secular Franciscan is to be bound in a fraternity in love. It is through respecting the differences within fraternity that we learn to discover the true poverty that St Francis of Assisi saw in the Crucified Christ—the willingness to lay down our lives for others. Coming together in fraternity we encounter the living Christ in each other, deepen fraternal bonds of love and rebuild God's church.

*Lord, Father of our human family,  
you created all human beings equal in dignity:  
pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit  
and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter,  
dialogue, justice and peace....*

*May our hearts be open  
to all the peoples and nations of the earth.  
May we recognize the goodness and beauty  
that you have sown in each of us,  
and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects,  
and shared dreams. Amen.*

Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*.

Fr Joseph McKay OFM

National Spiritual Assistant OFS

PLEASE, DISTRIBUTE THIS MESSAGE TO YOUR FRATERNITY,  
INCLUDING ISOLATED MEMBERS