

Conference of National Spiritual Assistants

Br Louis Schmid OFM Conv.
Dingley Victoria
Mobile Phone: 0422 028 647
Email: brlouis@hotmail.com



Br John Cooper OFM Cap
96 Catherine St Leichhardt 2040
Mobile Phone: 0412 162 946
Email: johncap@ozemail.com.au

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CELEBRATING 40 YEARS THE RULE OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER (Part 3)

Focusing again on the word “**dialogue**” let us look at number 19 of the Rule:

Mindful that they are bearers of peace
which must be built up unceasingly,
they should seek out ways of unity
and fraternal harmony through **dialogue**,
trusting in the presence of the divine seed¹ in everyone
and in the transforming power of love and pardon.²
Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance,
they should strive to bring joy and hope to others.

As bearers of peace, **dialogue** is seen as the way to “fraternal harmony” but only if we trust in the transforming power of love and pardon.

"Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned."

Canticle of the Creatures

It is an extraordinary and rare grace for those who have suffered abuse at the hands of others to achieve that freedom in Christ, which allows them to pardon those who caused them such anguish. Often there is a sense of vengeance that is a “*rusty nail spreading poison in the soul*.”³ In such cases, only Divine Mercy can restore peace of soul.

To have the freedom in Christ to give pardon and to enter into **dialogue**, we must learn to die on one hand to our sense of self-importance, and on the other hand to our fears and sense of inadequacy. We must be willing to humble our selves and pray ardently for transformation in Christ, “*until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*.”⁴ “*The way up is down!*”⁵ The Glory of Christ shines forth in service towards all.⁶ *Perfect love casts out all fear.*⁷

The Secular Franciscan must clearly understand that if he or she is to be a “*Messenger of Perfect Joy, in every circumstance*,”⁸ and an instrument of the Lord’s peace, then they must give witness to others to that joy, hope and peace that comes from knowing and loving Christ. Only when I can say: “*Jesus is my best friend!*”⁹ Will I learn to

¹ This “divine seed” causes “*Our Hearts [to be] restless until they rest in God*.” (St Augustine’s Confessions Ch. 1 Paragraph 1. “St Thomas Aquinas following St Augustine teaches that the deepest desire of the human heart is the desire for happiness. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says in Ch. 1: 27: “*The desire for God is written into the human heart*.” Therefore, the Rule of the OFS tells us to trust that this desire for happiness, this restlessness of spirit is in the heart of all those we meet begin a loving dialogue with.

² Rule of Leo XIII, 2:9; 3 Comp. 14:58 (*Omnibus* p. 941); (The Founder p. 102.)

³ The Letter of St Francis of Paola: http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010402_francesco-paola_en.html

⁴ Ephesians 4:13

⁵ cf. Luke 14:11

⁶ Cf. John 13:17

⁷ 1 Letter of John 4:17

⁸ See above OFS Rule 19.

⁹ Fr John Nguyen OFM Cap., homily for the 6th Sunday of Easter 2018.

leave all judgement to the Lord and fix my heart on *loving my neighbour as my self*.¹⁰ Only then will I stop making negative judgements about others and be able to focus on *loving them and praying for them*.¹¹

To achieve this, I must *get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger*¹² in my life. I must learn that the Franciscan school of fraternity in which we immerse our selves, at least once each month at our meetings, teaches that we are all brothers and sisters. It is this familial understanding that is the Gospel fraternity that St Francis taught; it is the heart of fraternal love. “*This is what I want; this is what I desire with all my heart!*”¹³ Gospel fraternity invites us into friendship.¹⁴ It calls us into **dialogue** with others so that we may share in the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The Commentary to the Rule number 24, mentioned dialogue in a list of things that give us the means to build up a strong and lasting spirit of friendship and fraternity in our lives:

Commentary 24. Paragraph #24 discusses the means to express a strong and lasting fraternity spirit. The regular and frequent meeting (ordinarily once a month) is **the**¹⁵ way to build fraternity with prayer, education, apostolic activity, **dialogue** and leisure. Continuing education in Franciscanism and Church life is also stressed as a means of spiritual growth and community building. Again, it is emphasised that the fraternity derives much of its life from a vigorous Council; hence, the Council should meet regularly to take care of ordinary business, foster gospel living and show concern for the growth of all its members.

In striving for friendship and fraternal peace and joy, we cannot ignore the very elements of dialogue: **clarity, meekness, confidence and prudence** which build up **friendship** and genuine **fraternity**. We cannot divorced truth from charity or understanding from love, or we become so self-righteous and dogmatic that **dialogue** cannot proceed. Charity then turns to anger and hate or embarrassment destroys all communication.

The very essence of fraternity is charitable and respectful **dialogue**. We need to begin every **dialogue** with a prayer to the Holy Spirit – the bond of love at the very heart of the Trinity. The very purpose of answering the call of the Holy Spirit to become a Secular Franciscan is to grow into the perfection of charity – love. It is the Holy Spirit that leads us to strive for that wholeness which begins in family and grows in magnanimity (largeness of heart) and strives to embrace a wider love – giving witness to the love of Christ in fraternity and the community of the Church.

Perhaps the most dangerous topic when it comes to **dialogue** for Franciscans is legislation versus charism. The purpose of legislation is to clarify our way of life. It often doesn't clarify things simply because legislation is not held in much regard by most of us. We don't read the Rule very often; we tend to live by our own personal lights. Legislation is the fruit of hours and hours of study, care for others and seemingly endless **dialogue**. Legislation, hammered out in **fraternal dialogue** is then submitted to higher authority for approval. Without ongoing formation on Secular Franciscan legislation as found in the Rule, Constitutions and Ritual, our fraternities are always in danger of becoming anything but a Secular Franciscan Fraternity. Indeed, they can become more like a particular interest group.¹⁶ It is precisely in its legislation that the image of the true Franciscan Order is explained and only when charism and legislation dance with each other is harmony achieved.

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap
National Spiritual Assistant

Please distribute this monthly spiritual message to all members of your fraternity especially to those members who have withdrawn from fraternity.

¹⁰ Mark 12:31.

¹¹ Cf. Letter to a Minister 7. “And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians.”

¹² Ephesians 4:31

¹³ St Bonaventure. Major Life, Ch. “This is what I want,” he said, “this is what I desire with all my heart!” Immediately, *he took off the shoes from his feet*, put down his staff, denounced his wallet and money, and, satisfied with one tunic, threw away *his leather belt* and put on a piece of rope for a belt. He directed all his heart's desire to carry out what he had heard and to conform in every way to the rule of right living given to the apostles.”

¹⁴ St Aelred of Rievaulx: God is Friendship: “*Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.*”

¹⁵ In this text the word “the” is in bold letters because it is precisely in fraternity that we meet Jesus “For where two or three gather together in My name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:20).

¹⁶ A particular interest group or special interest group or pressure group is defined as: (Britannica.com) Any association of individuals or organizations, usually formally organized, that, on the basis of one or more shared concerns, attempts to influence public policy in its favour or it can simply be self serving.