

# *Conference of National Spiritual Assistants*

## Secular Franciscan Order

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A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF JUNE 2021.

### **FAMILY – THE FIRST PLACE OF MISSION**

One of the most upsetting aspects of St Francis of Assisi story is the seemingly unresolved breakdown of his relationship with his father, Pietro di Bernardone. Thomas of Celano, describes his father as being “obsessed with recovering the money” beating and imprisoning him. Pietro led Francis to the Bishop to renounce his inheritance because he thought Francis would waste it on the poor and decaying church buildings. Perhaps he was insulted further that Francis was so willing to make this renunciation! The *Companions of St Francis* states that “shamed and feeling great sorrow for him” Pietro would from then on curse Francis every time he saw him. Francis’ relationship with his father Pietro, was never healed.

St Francis’ mother, Pica, released Francis from her husband’s chains and let him free. She did not approve of her husband’s attitude to Francis and Pietro, turned his anger on her. *The Kinship of St Francis* states St Francis also had a brother Angelo, who sided with his father, persecuting Francis at every chance meeting.

Maybe his relationship with his father was strained by Pietro’s absence. He may have been often away on trading trips. Francis as a young man was a handful. The youthful Francis is often portrayed as a leader of a gang of young men who like to drink, eat and make mischief. His access to funds for clothes, parties, and his ability to equip himself with military armor suggests that his parents were willing to indulge Francis’ whims.

Everything suggests that Francis’ family lacked little economically yet St Francis did not come from a perfect family. The rocky family relationships of Francis’ family are mirrored in our society today.

In Australia 33% of marriages end in divorce and almost half of them involve children. Many children experience growing up with a parent living elsewhere (over 20%). More adults than ever are living alone, not entering any form of committed relationship. (*ABS, AIFS*)

The idea of the family and marriage though has not lost people’s support. While more than half the people asked in an *Australian Institute of Family Studies* survey questioned that “marriage is for life”, over 80% rejected the notion that “marriage is an outdated solution.”

The same-sex marriage debate itself perhaps could have been an opportunity for the Church to look at how families and the institution of marriage could be better supported. The Catholic Church agencies run a series of well-respected marriage preparation courses. Perhaps we also need to create an open environment where difficulties in family relationship can be addressed. The Catholic Church may also need to look at how it can engage with society on some of the external factors effecting family relationship: the economic issues of work casualization, intensification of work and the virtual loss of the common “day of rest”.

The second half of the *Letter to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance* describes a man who has lost his way. Even when he leaves his wealth to his family they complain that he could “have given us more and acquired more.” They are left unsatisfied from the monetary wealth he shares. The “more” that they were seeking was wisdom and love. The more they needed was an example of “holy activity.”

In the same *Letter to the Brother and Sisters of Penance* Francis expresses a strong relationship with the Holy Family, maybe as a response to his fractured relationship to his own family. He invites Christians to see themselves as living in a web of familial relationship with each other and God: brother, sister, mother, spouse, child. Considering his own experience however I do not think he is idealizing these family relationships but viewing them through his own experience and Christ's Passion and Cross. The relationships in families are all too real for Francis. Families need to continuously seek harmony, peace and reconciliation in a very concrete ways otherwise they stop being life-giving.

The OFS Rule and Constitution highlight the strong focus that Secular Franciscans place on relationships and family. The family is seen as the "first place in which they live their Christian and Franciscan vocation" (Art 24.1) and calls on them to share "important moments in their family life" (Art 24.2). The Constitution calls on members to help support family relationship through open discussion and the sharing of experiences.

The Rule invites members to "joyfully accompany" their children on their life's journey and vocation (Rule 17). It does not call us to argue or judge their life choices! The Rule and Constitution are calling members of OFS to be good examples of life lived well.

Pope's have written endlessly about the family, Pope Francis most recently in *Amoris Laetitia*, and CIOFS has circulated many papers on family life. We have plenty of words on paper. The *Letter to the Brother and Sisters of Penance* invites us to share love, wisdom and knowledge, not only in words, but most importantly in "holy activity".

How do we put our families in "first place" in living our Franciscan vocation?

How do our fraternities share the Franciscan vision with their family members?

Does our fraternity invite and include family members to joyful celebrations and meals?

How do we connect the experience of our family life with our Franciscan fraternal life and vis versa?

What does our charism bring to the problems facing families in our society today?

#### Prayer to the Holy Family (from *Amoris Laetitia*)

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love;  
to you we turn with trust.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion  
and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection  
and division; may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and  
healing.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful of the sacredness and  
inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan.*

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Graciously hear our prayer. Amen.*

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