



OFS – Conference of National Spiritual Assistants - Australia

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Monthly Spiritual Message NOVEMBER 2015

CALLED TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY

Fr Norbert Pittorino OFM

“The Secular Franciscan is called by the Holy Spirit to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the spirit and heritage of St Francis of Assisi and St Clare.” (OFS Rule, art. 4)

We saw earlier that the evangelical vocation of a Secular Franciscan can only be properly and effectively fulfilled through life in Fraternity. In other words, Franciscan Gospel living is not an individual spirituality or value system, not just a personal piety. It is a communal experience – with its support and accountability – to live Jesus in today’s world.

For this reason, “Community” is our starting point for understanding and experiencing the Secular Franciscan way of life. A person does not live in a vacuum. Throughout the history of salvation from Adam and Eve to the present moment, every person is called to holiness – and thus every person is expected to strive for perfect charity and follow the Gospel – not just as isolated individuals, but together in community with other people. In community, we keep alive our growth in God’s presence and prepare ourselves adequately for communicating the Gospel and building the Kingdom of God.

Benet Fonck ofm, in his book *Fully Mature with the Fullness of Christ*¹, goes on to explain this concept of “community” which we saw previously: “Community is meant to be a lived experience of togetherness in which a person is recognized by others as having worth, dignity, and an essential contribution. In community a person is able to exchange ideas and aspirations, to develop interpersonal relationships, to share faith and life as well as goals and goods, and to take on responsibility with others for some common work project. Community provides the opportunity to participate in a deeper life of prayer and enrichment and apostolic expression without losing individuality and freedom. In a word, community for a Franciscan is that centre of faith and commitment where a person can invest his or her heart in the hearts of others in order to grow and become “fully mature with the fullness of Christ.”

“The enduring support and the concerted efforts for living the Gospel in a Franciscan way come through the local Franciscan community which, in Secular Franciscan tradition, is called the Fraternity. This life in Fraternity gives the Secular Franciscan **inspiration** (which provides a grander vision and new horizons for living the Gospel); **guidance** (which directs and clarifies the Secular Franciscan’s intentions and efforts) and **formation** (or instruction, which opens up new avenues for a common sense approach to living the Gospel.)”

“There are two basic attitudes which form the building blocks of Franciscan Fraternity: **a sense of community** and **a will towards community**. The first aspect means that a person is acutely aware that the community spirit is necessary and that the building blocks for community are

¹ Fully Mature. Candidacy: Period of Formation, Session 1 “In Community” Candidacy #1, page 07-1

within our reach, and also means that he or she is very attentive and receptive to what it takes to make community happen. The second attitude or aspect implies a conscious effort to actually be a ‘gatherer’: one who builds community and makes it work. And so, to ‘create’ community means to discover and implement the God-given gift of community which exists all around us.”

“In practice, Fraternity is an extended friendship. As in any solid relationship, community implies love, trust, support, affirmation, openness, sharing, and evaluation. Furthermore, this lived experience of togetherness is built upon a common faith in Jesus Christ, a common dedication to the Franciscan charism, a common commitment to evangelical vocation, and common ideas and goals to achieve it. Community, then, is an experience of being of ‘one heart and one mind’”

Having this sense of community helps us to pray together and share our experiences together so that we feel as one family together. Like the example that Saint Paul gives us when speaking about all the parts of a body working together for the good of whole body in 1 Cor 12:26 where he says, “When one of them suffers, all of them suffer; and when one receives honour, all rejoice together.” In this way, we can think of our Fraternity as a support to each member especially in times of need.

Benet Fonck then sums up the characteristics of the Franciscan way of living community:

1. **Christ is the Head and vital Centre** of this Fraternity. Hence the Word of God is primary in the life of the Fraternity;
2. **The norm for life in Fraternity is relationships and the oneness of persons** rather than common practices or structures. Mutual love, reference, and courtesy are the primary values of life in Fraternity;
3. **It is intimately connected with Gospel simplicity and detachment.** Evangelical poverty is the foundation of community while unity with each other is the support and guardian of holy poverty.
4. **Franciscan Fraternity has a basic apostolic quality.** It exists to make Christ known, to announce the Reign of God and to rebuild the Church; It is missionary.

There is a great deal here that we can ponder over and discuss in our meetings. How do our Fraternity meetings measure up to the ideals that we see presented here?

PLEASE distribute this Monthly Spiritual Message
to all members of the National OFS fraternity and Spiritual Assistants.

(There are approximately 870 words in this message)