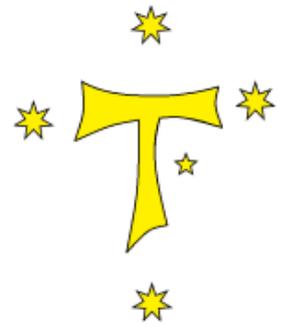


OFS – Conference of National Spiritual Assistants - Australia

Guardian Angel's Friary
182 Bay Terrace
Wynnum Qld Australia 4178

Friary Phone: (07) 33934980
Br John Cooper OFM Cap: 0412 162 946
johncap@ozemail.com.au



Monthly Spiritual Message DECEMBER 2015

Caring for Each Other in Fraternity

This message applies to the leaders in our fraternities, but there is also a message for all the fraternity. The danger is that we can point the finger at the fraternity ministers and forget that we are also part of the fraternity with responsibilities towards each other as well.

There has always been great emphasis in the Franciscan Order upon personal relationships. Francis probably recognized this from St John's Gospel where Jesus proclaims "*By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you show love for one another.*" (Jn. 13:35) and again, "*Love one another as I have loved you...*" (Jn. 13:34). This was the command that Francis insisted on in his Rules right from the beginning: there must be an intimate love amongst his friars as true spiritual brothers. While this was said by St Francis to his brothers, the same may be said of Secular Franciscans.

This is supported by stressing that Franciscans "*are to have among themselves, to the highest degree, a family spirit and mutual friendship practising courtesy, cheerfulness and other virtues in such a way, that united in real fraternity and encouraging one another unceasingly to hope, peace and joy, they may achieve full human, Christian and religious maturity.*"¹

True leadership in the Order is to be found in service; in imitation of Jesus, who said that he came not to be served, but to serve. This joyful, grateful attitude will drive away many temptations and overcome a lot of difficulties in our fraternities. St Francis frequently exhorted his brothers to rejoice and enjoy each other's gifts. A good leader always appreciates the gifts of others; a naive leader may not even recognize the talents of others. A good leader does not fear the gifts of others, but rather welcomes valuable input and sees his/her role as one of coordination and collaboration for the benefit of the whole fraternity. This ability to rejoice in each other was the grace that drew many men and women to the Franciscan ideal and probably one of the reasons why the Order spread so quickly in those early years.

As one Secular Franciscan lady recently said, "*I think the secret of being a Franciscan is how happy we are when we meet and recognize each other, the easy smile, the joyful sparkle in our eyes, a hug, a kiss, the happiness of being together.*" St Francis' spirit, so full of joy, was contagious. This was a comment made about Franciscans right from the very beginning of the Order. Friendship is the first rung on the ladder to a deeper understanding of our vision of universal fraternity.

Francis himself had many natural gifts and he shared them unselfishly with his brothers and all who came into contact with him, he treated them like family. So we need to understand that our gifts are not just for ourselves; they are to be shared with others too, if they will allow us to do so. Franciscans must always extend a welcoming smile to everyone and be aware of the difficulties of others, particularly in our own spiritual brothers and sisters.

Francis' reading of Scripture would have taught him the rules of hospitality that we find expressed in the Old Testament. So too would his sense of chivalry, the art of social exchange in his time. It was characteristic of Franciscans to show every kindness firstly within their fraternities and then to all members of the Franciscan family. Loving concern and compassion for each other, is the sign of a true Christian which was noted earlier cf. Jn 13:35. It is the essence of Franciscan fraternity.

¹ General Constitutions OFM Chapter 3 "You are all Brothers" (Mt 23:8; RnB 22.23) Title 1. Article 39: 5-7.

In a particular way Franciscans have always been mindful of the sick, the elderly and the poor. Most parishes have times when there is a community “Anointing of the Sick” where the elderly and infirm come to the parish church. In many places the Secular Franciscans take this opportunity to make these people struggling with old age and infirmity welcome and even provide a cup of tea afterwards, if there are the facilities for this. The poor and the sick were of great concern for St Francis.

However visiting the sick and caring for them often makes demands on our time and energy. It can also be frustrating when a person is so sick he/she shows no apparent appreciation of what is being done for him/her. All of us would probably know of cases where relatives or friends have developed dementia and we may feel our visit is a waste of time. But it is particularly at these times that Franciscans should try to encourage and cheer the sick, helping them to accept their illness, and come to realize what St Paul tells us about “*making up in our bodies what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.*” (Col 1:24f) This too is the grace of perfect joy. Sometimes a simple phone call to support a person or their family in caring for a sick person, especially if that person is/was part of our fraternity is much appreciated. Send them a card for their birthday; include them in what is going on in the fraternity. We must try to remember those who belong to our fraternity and remember that if the person is so sick that they cannot respond, at least their family will appreciate your kindness.²

The work of counselling also applies to our brothers and sisters besides others who may come to us for help. But we should also remember that where there is genuine love, one does not count the cost, all is offered to God. It is a privilege and a pleasure for a genuine Christian to serve the sick and helpless. Just think of the example of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who gained strength from her care of the weak and marginalized members of society.

Another area that is often regarded as the work of a local Minister is that of fraternal correction. However, I see this as part of the pastoral care of the fraternity as well as the task that must be carried out by every brother or sister when it is necessary. If we truly care for our brothers and sisters, we will do all in our power to preserve peace and tranquillity in our fraternities. At times, this may demand our acting, when the occasion arises, on our own initiative with due regard to the norms laid down in our Constitutions. Often times it could be our actions which will be of greater help to a brother or sister than acting otherwise. Some people have a natural gift of caring concern for others and this is something all of us must cultivate. Learn to be inclusive. It may not come easily at first, but it is a gift that can grow in us. The more we give to others through our loving concern, the more we receive in return in one way or another from God.

Just as Francis used the Word of God to learn how to behave, so we can use the Word of God to comfort the needy. Daily reading of Scripture can help us to become more familiar with those passages that have helped ourselves and could be applied to other situations that our brothers and sisters could find themselves in. This could be a fruitful exercise we can do by ourselves or in our meetings to follow a theme of “caring for each other” especially in this year of mercy.

Fr Norbert Pittorino, OFM

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

(There are approximately 1419 words in this message)

² **Canticle of Exhortation for the Ladies of San Damiano:** “Those weighed down by sickness, and the others wearied because of them, all of you: bear it in peace, for you will sell this fatigue at a very high price and each of you will be crowned in heaven...” Also, see: **The Canticle of the Creatures** 10 & 11 “...and bear infirmity and tribulation. Blessed are those who endure in peace for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.”