

This copy of my presentation at the CNSA Congress is keyed (by the numbers in parenthesis) to the powerpoint presentation, should anyone wish to use them together. It also has the discussion points used by the small groups after the presentation.

PREPARING TO BE A SPIRITUAL ASSISTANT (1)

CNSA Congress Presentation by Sylvia Paoli, SFO

Materials

You have heard the characteristics of a spiritual assistant to the Secular Franciscans, but, as is true with all types of positions, a spiritual assistant doesn't just "happen." Having a background in theology, being a professed religious, or an ordained priest does not a spiritual assistant make. As with anything else, a certain amount of education and training is needed. The good news is that there is a fairly large amount of material available to help spiritual assistants attain the desired goal of being supportive of and helpful to the Secular Franciscans.

(2) Back in 1996, a Handbook for Spiritual Assistance was put together by the CNSA, the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants who serve the national fraternity of the SFO in the United States. In 2005, that book was revised and a second edition was published. In 2007 a manual for Spiritual Assistants written by the international General Spiritual Assistants was translated into English. (3) An international newsletter, known as Koinonia, is published four times a year by the Conference of the General Spiritual Assistants to the SFO and is available on line at www.ciofs.org/bka5eni.htm. All of those resources are specifically directed towards preparing men and women to serve as spiritual assistants to the SFO at all levels. In addition, there is a wealth of material in Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apotolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbiterorum Ordinis*, and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. (4) The CNSA authored a course to prepare lay spiritual assistants, called *Life-Giving Union*, which was first published in 2003(?). In 2007, a second edition of the course was published, called *Family Connections*. The CNSA holds an annual meeting of spiritual assistants, which all spiritual assistants should make an effort to attend, as it is an opportunity not only to expand your knowledge but it a great forum for sharing problems, issues and joys with other spiritual assistants. An outstanding book showing the background of the SFO in the early penitential movement in the church is *St. Francis and the*

Third Order, by Raffaele Pazzelli, T.O.R.¹

Besides all of these resources, since an active, supportive spiritual director should be taking part in a fraternity's formation process, working with formators and availing themselves of material used by formators further helps prepare a spiritual assistant in all the areas in which he or she should be acting. The spiritual assistant should, in fact, be a resource for the formation director, which means the assistant should be totally up to date on what formation material is available, and be familiar with it.

The Secular Franciscan vision (5)

The vision of a life lived as a Franciscan secular encompasses many things. First and foremost is the focus on Jesus as the center of Franciscan life. (6) We are all called to live the Gospel life, and in the SFO, our Rule specifically charges us with going from Gospel to Life and Life to Gospel. Close behind is the need for us to identify with and remain close to Mary, the Mother of God. She was prayerful, humble, loving, forgiving and above all, self-giving, qualities we should be trying to emulate. In remembering that we are seculars, not religious, we have a responsibility to be faithful to whatever the duties are that come with our individual circumstances of life, at home in the family, at work, in our communities and certainly in our parishes. Probably the most counter-cultural aspect of being a Christian, and most especially a Franciscan Catholic Christian, is looking at and accepting all people as each being a gift of God.

(7) Our Rule calls upon all Seculars to dedicate themselves to building a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively. We are to be in the forefront of promoting justice, both as individuals and collectively as an Order, by the testimony of our lives and by our willingness to undertake courageous initiatives toward promoting justice. The choices we make in public life should be made in harmony with our faith. We should be bearers of peace, constantly seeking out ways of promoting unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, through trusting the Divine presence, and through the transforming power of love and pardon.

¹ The book, subtitled *The Franciscan and pre-Franciscan Penitential Movement*, was translated from the Italian in 1982, and published by Franciscan Herald Press.

Seculars are to esteem work, as a gift and as a sharing in creation, redemption and the service of the human community. Within our families we are to cultivate the Franciscan spirit of peace, fidelity and respect for life. Husbands and wives in particular should bear witness in the world to the love of Christ for His Church.

(8) Part of the Franciscan vision for Seculars calls upon us to respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, remembering that God created all, and we should strive to move away from the temptation to exploit creation. As members of fraternities, each person should show a ready and willing spirit to serve, remembering it is a responsibility to the members of the fraternity and to the community itself. Because the fraternity is our most intimate community, we are responsible for supporting it, not only with our service, but with our contributions, to be made according to each member's means.

Training and Understanding the Job (9)

Before any spiritual assistant can be of genuine assistance to the SFO, established by St. Francis as the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, (10) he or she must be completely familiar with the history of the SFO, its identity and its own special place in the Franciscan family. A fascinating history of the SFO in this country, clearly showing the early position of the friars as *directors* of secular fraternities, is found in *A History of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States, Vol. 1 1917-1942*, authored by Bill Wicks, a former national minister of the SFO. In addition, all of the general history of the Order is covered well in the first two chapters of the handbook published by the international General Spiritual Assistants, (11) and knowing the history includes being aware of the Rules that the SFO has operated under since its founding. (12) Further, a good spiritual assistant must be completely familiar with the present Rule of the SFO, its General Constitutions, its Ritual, and, in the U.S., its national statutes, and, for each region, the Regional Governance Norms. It is difficult to urge members of a fraternity to be familiar with these documents if you, yourself, are not. In addition, because the SFO is a *secular* Order, with all of its own documents, its requirements are not the same as yours if you are a First or Second Order Franciscan, and you cannot be of help to the SFO if you know only your own documents.

WHO ARE THE SECULAR FRANCISCANS? (13)

The SFO, according to the legislation of its Rule and General Constitutions, is autonomous because it is one Order, guided by responsible elected seculars and financed by the professed members.² From the beginning, there were three orders: the friars, the Clares and the seculars.³ One was never part of either of the other two. The SFO was established by St. Francis as the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, for married men and women, for clerics, and for singles not in religious life.

The key to the unity of the SFO - that is, to being *one* - is the regional fraternity, which is the “organic union of all the local fraternities existing in a territory or which can be integrated into a natural unity. . . It assures the link between the local fraternities and the national fraternity in respect to the unity of the SFO and in accord with the cooperative efforts of the Franciscan religious orders to provide spiritual assistance within the area.”⁴ (14) There cannot exist a totally autonomous SFO if it is not *one*, nor can there be a really *secular* SFO if it depends on the religious and identifies itself with friars who provide spiritual assistance.”⁵

The leaning on, and reliance on, members of the religious orders by the SFO is of relatively recent vintage, i.e., the 20th century. It was not envisioned by Francis to be that way. Instead of being schools of gospel life, as the Code of Canon Law of 1917 requested, the fraternities turned to devotionalism. Work began after the end of World War II, in about 1946, to bring the Third Order into the modern era. Pius XII, himself a Franciscan tertiary, in 1956 referred to what existed in the Third Order as an “organic stagnation” and “spiritual cooling” and

² Manual for Spiritual Assistants (“Manual” hereafter), published by international General Spiritual Assistants, Chapt 1.6.1.

³ Cf. *Lettera dei Quattro Ministri generali della Famiglia francescana* (4 ottobre 1978), on the occasion of the promulgation of the Rule of 1978.

⁴ *Rule SFO*, 25, Cf. *Const.*, 30.3.

⁵ *Report of the CIOFS Presidency to the elective General Chapter*, in *Ordine Franceseano secolare, VIII Capitolo Generale, Roma, 7-14 Inglio 1996, Atti*, Rome 1997, p. 65.

clearly designated the program of renewal and leap in quality that the secular fraternities had to make to become “a school of Christian perfection, or genuine Franciscan spirit, of daring and prompt action for building up the Body of Christ.”⁶ This work begun in the middle 1940s eventually resulted in the Rule of 1978 for the SFO, the one we follow today, that is referred to as the Pauline Rule, having been confirmed by Pope Paul VI.

Rather than the reliance on the religious, then, the fraternities of the SFO are to be autonomous, to manage and support themselves, with duly elected councils who animate and guide each fraternity. (15) The secular Franciscans are not an appendage to the first and second orders, but an integral part of the Franciscan family,⁷ called to live the charism of Francis within the secular dimension. By reason of the close bonds with the First Order and the TOR, the Church has entrusted to the superiors of the Franciscan religious Orders the *altius moderamen* mentioned in Canon 303⁸, that is, the spiritual and pastoral care of the SFO.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS AND THE FRATERNITY (16)

Just as you need to know who the Seculars are, spiritual assistants and the fraternities they serve need to know what a spiritual assistant is NOT - not a director, not a leader, not in charge of all spiritual teaching, (17) not the secretary or treasurer, not a “name” only on the roster. Rather, a fraternity is to ask for a spiritual assistant who is “suitable and well-prepared”.⁹ A spiritual assistant cannot have a proper concern for the secular Franciscans, their spirituality, their mission and their task in society and the Church unless he or she is well grounded in the

⁶ Manual, 1.6.1 & 2.

⁷ *Rule SFO*, 1.

⁸ Canon 303 states: “Associations whose members lead an apostolic life and strive for Christian perfection while living in the world and who share the spirit of some religious institute under the higher direction of that same institute are called third orders or some other appropriate name.”

⁹ *Rule SFO*, 26; *Constitutions*, art. 87.3.

history of the SFO, and can show the seculars that concern and knowledge - all of which is part of being suitable and well-prepared, a requirement for spiritual assistants listed in the SFO's Rule and Constitutions.

(18) According to the Rule, the role of a spiritual assistant is to provide "spiritual assistance," which contains two main elements:

(1) witness of Franciscan spirituality and of the fraternal affection of the religious;¹⁰

(2) collaboration in the initial and continuing formation of the brothers and sisters.¹¹

These elements are shown to the members of a council if the spiritual assistant is living the Gospel life, is a witness to it, and is ministering pastorally to the council members. It is not expected that any spiritual assistant will tell the Secular Franciscans *how* they should live, unless, of course, they actually adopt and propagate actions obviously contrary to the teachings of the Church, or not in conformity with the directives given to the SFO in their Rule, Constitutions, and the Ritual. (19) Thus, the goals of the Spiritual Assistant, especially if you were a "director" in the earlier days, is to go from "director" to "assistant," from "commanding" to "serving," from being "Father with the last word" to being a member who collaborates with the council and the members of a fraternity, to be fully aware of the SFOs own identity, and to help them to be aware of their international family.

There may be resistance on the part of older seculars and often on the part of the religious to the position of spiritual assistant, rather than director, all stemming from the pre-Vatican II days. One of the ways to overcome this resistance is by constant interaction between the spiritual assistant and the members of the fraternity, and especially its council, always emphasizing that we all belong to the same spiritual family and we are all called to carry out the mission of the Church in the charism of Francis. A major aspect of that interaction is involved in the vision we spoke of earlier of how the SFO can and should be working in the world to spread the Gospel message.

¹⁰ *Constitution*, art. 89.3.

¹¹ *Constitution*, art. 90.1.

In this interaction, the primary thing to keep in mind, as you heard in the previous presentation, is that one should always act in a pastoral manner. It goes without saying that a spiritual assistant should be a model of the gospel life, for a peacemaker can only be effective where he or she has the respect of the members. “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”¹² In being pastoral, however, that does not mean to be passive, but rather, to be responsible and committed, always avoiding being a “director”, as in former times, where the spiritual assistant was the de facto leader of the fraternity.

(20) The spiritual assistant should be at every meeting of the council of which he or she is a member, equal with the other members of the council, having a voice and a vote on all matters before the council except financial ones. The proper formation of leaders in the SFO is seen as a priority in the Order. A constant dialogue must be maintained between the spiritual assistant and the council of the fraternity. And of course, if the spiritual assistant is a friar, he is responsible for the animation of liturgical celebrations.

Expectations of a SFO council (21)

The word “assistant” is from the Latin verb *assistere*, which means to stand beside, to stand near, to be present, to protect, to support, to help by means of one’s own active participation. A spiritual assistant, then, is one who is called, because of his or her competence, to especially help the minister and the council, as well as the other fraternity members. Since the entire fraternity is responsible for the spiritual life of each of its members, the role of the spiritual assistant must be evidenced in the “assisting” that he or she provides, being a servant leader along with the rest of the elected council members, not by means of “directing” as was the case at one time. That is not to say, however, that a spiritual assistant shouldn’t provide a few minutes of spiritual reflection at a meeting, if asked to do so. A council can also ask their spiritual assistant to provide longer periods of spiritual reflection, such as a Day of Recollection, or a retreat. But there are many parts to the interaction with the other council members. The spiritual assistant works with the council to give life to our Franciscan vision. All servant

¹² *Evang. Nunt.* 41, taken from *Koinonia*, 1997-2, Year 4, p.2.

leaders should be proclaiming the Franciscan spirit by word, action, prayer and example, and all share their gifts for the good of the SFO and the Franciscan family.

(22) The spiritual assistant is a very integral part of a council's responsibilities in determining the suitability of candidates for admission to profession. He or she should participate equally with other council members in the interview of a candidate who is seeking to be professed, in the discussion which follows, and, of course, in the secret ballot by which a decision is reached.

As a spiritual assistant to the entire fraternity, a council can rightly expect the assistant to be on the lookout for signs that a fraternity is closing in on itself, becoming only a "prayer group," or becoming merely another "parish group", rather than acting as part of a larger family. Above all, the spiritual assistant, if a priest, is not to limit his presence to celebrating the Eucharist or Benediction and administering the sacraments. He or she has a duty to serve as best he can. (23) The assistant is pastor, guide and teacher, and needs to get to know all the brothers and sisters in the fraternity individually, in order to help them form a single, united group, at one with the entire Order. One of the frequent difficulties encountered in fraternities is the reluctance of all but a very few to serve the fraternity on the council, or even to take part in sharing, and the spiritual assistant can help the council work with fraternity members to totally live their Franciscan life by serving one another. All servant leaders participate actively in all the work of the council, and all help with formation. All should be a living witness of the Franciscan life and should be peacemakers. (24) The spiritual assistant can also remind fraternity members of their profession, that it is a life-long commitment, and help them to prioritize their other activities. He or she, as , an equal member of the council, can help them seek solutions that maintain a good relationship with each other, the other fraternity members, and the whole Franciscan family. He or she can share meaningful experiences of justice and peace, and in general, be a resource for the council. (25) The spiritual assistant can help the council understand the principle of subsidiarity and their own responsibilities to their fraternity. He or she can encourage them to set up meaningful ways of being present to sick and elderly members unable to attend meetings, and help guide them in dealing with members who are frequently absent from fraternity gatherings.

(26) A council can rightly expect true assistance in a pastoral visitation, where the pastoral visitor can evaluate the balance between time for contemplation and time for social commitment of the fraternity members, the apostolates of the fraternity, the way formation is carried on, and, in general, the Franciscan life of the fraternity, all of which the spiritual assistant to the fraternity has guided and supported. A spiritual assistant encourages councils to be creative in resolving difficulties. Above all he or she is a good listener. He can and should help revive the evangelical Franciscan spirit of the fraternity members, including those in initial formation who are still discerning their vocation, and can be of help in developing prayer formats for the fraternity so they don't get stuck in a rut doing the same thing meeting after meeting.

Formation (27)

The role of spiritual assistant has much in common with the role of formation director, and the persons occupying those two positions need to be working very closely with one another. (28) Perhaps of even greater importance than all of the above responsibilities is that the spiritual assistant is not only a member of the council to which he or she is attached, but is, in many senses, the "formation director" of that council, working with the elected fraternity formation director to provide ongoing formation for the council. The leaders, "those to whom the animation and guidance of the members is confided, can carry out their mission only when sustained by 'a many-sided and complete training.'"¹³ Thus, as in every other area, a spiritual assistant needs to continually update himself or herself, by taking annual formation courses, reading periodicals and informational material that speak of what is happening in the SFO at all levels, and by the exchange of information with other spiritual assistants at all levels. A spiritual assistant must never lose sight, however, of the fact that he or she is working with a *secular* Order, and needs to help the leaders have the experience of secularity, knowing that each has been sent out on the mission of Jesus, sent out into the world of family, political life, business, to educational institutions, to trade unions, into the world of culture, of the sciences, of international life and of the mass media. Leaders are to be animators, and they need to understand that they are called not only to animate the fraternity by whom they were chosen, but through their secular

¹³ *Apost. Act.* 28, taken from *Koinonia*, 1997-2, Year 4, p.2.

Franciscan form of life, to animate the world in which they live, bringing and communicating to it the gospel experience and the Christian-Franciscan way of life.

(29) Help is needed throughout the fraternities to revive the evangelical spirit in the members, and in doing so, to balance the prayer and the action parts of their lives. In helping them to remember and more thoroughly understand their profession, it is the spiritual assistant who can be of great help to a council in bringing them to better understand and have the experience of belonging both to a world-wide Order and to a much larger Franciscan family that encompasses all three Orders. That will also increase their experience of identity with their Order and with the family, brought about by daily conversion and by the experience of fraternity life itself.

(30) In initial formation, the assistant is both a counselor and a guide, helping aspirants to clarify their vocation, and accompanying them - as should the rest of the council members - along the way of living the Gospel. He serves as a guide to ensuring faithfulness to the Franciscan charism and the Church. Likewise in ongoing formation, the assistant works with the council and the formation director, helping the members in their journey of continual conversion, and helping them to experience the discernment necessary of each individual member throughout his or her life. It is in this continuing work of formation that the assistant can be the leader in helping the council, and through them, the fraternity, to understand and adopt the vision of Francis and of the Church for the seculars. Formation must be active, secular, communal, ecclesial, joyful, open-ended, and centered on Jesus Christ and His Gospel, living in a spirit of simplicity. Part of initial formation, in which all the council should be participating, is obtaining and checking all of the required documents for those in initial formation, participating in the interchange between the formation team and those being formed, and being aware of whether or not the material used is changing the lives of those new people. The spiritual assistant can be of great help in evaluating the documents of Vatican II and their influence on the lives of all Catholics. Emphasizing the God-given human dignity of each individual and the need for honest self-knowledge, the spiritual assistant can help the team not to diminish to new people the fact that the Franciscan way of life is a demanding one. That means getting priorities in order, and making discernment a regular and ongoing part of their lives.

And so, the minister and council of a fraternity - at any level - can expect a spiritual assistant to foster communion with the Church, to bear witness to Franciscan spirituality, to cooperate in formation and to nourish the Christian life of the fraternity.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. What training methods/manuals have you used in training spiritual assistants and what is your evaluation of them?
2. How can you best participate in formation - both initial and ongoing - at the fraternity level? What formation resources have you used/or are you familiar with, and what is your opinion of them?
3. How can you best participate in formation at the regional level?
4. What experiences as a spiritual assistant have you had and how do you evaluate them - positive or negative? If negative, how can the situation be avoided?

PROBLEMS FOR DISCUSSION

Hypothetical #1: A fraternity has only 10 active members, with 3 people in initial formation. Elections are in the immediate future, and all of the present council members are either termed out or do not want to run again for personal reasons. What should be the advice of the spiritual assistance? How would you handle a discussion with the group about this problem?

Hypothetical #2: A fraternity recently had elections, and the newly elected minister doesn't have very good "people" skills. As a result, a fracture is developing within the fraternity, which is too small to split into two fraternities. What should you as a spiritual assistant do to help resolve this problem?

Hypothetical #3: A newly elected council has been in office only a few months, but it is already apparent that the minister is "ruling" with a heavy hand. He is not delegating tasks to other council or fraternity members; he is essentially running the formation program, both initial and ongoing; to most questions, only *his* is the right answer, in his mind, as shown by his attitude and body language. How would you as a spiritual assistance try to resolve this problem?

Hypothetical #4: You are a regional spiritual assistant, in a region that has a mix of friars, Franciscan sisters, and SFOs serving as local spiritual assistants. In making pastoral visits to the fraternities in the region, you have observed that many of the spiritual assistants are not attending the fraternity council meeting. Some are not even attending the fraternity meeting except on special occasions. You have also observed one or two spiritual assistants who seem to be acting as spiritual "directors" of the fraternity. Is there anything positive you can do about any of these situations? How would you go about it?

