

NATIONAL FORMATION COMMISSION CHAIR BOB FITZSIMMONS, SFO

LET US BEGIN SISTERS AND BROTHERS, BECAUSE
FOR UP TO NOW, WE HAVE DONE NOTHING!

BLESSINGS ALL!

Well it's been a long journey, two and a half years, since we undertook the U.S. version of the CIOFS Formation Project. A manual of foundational formation topics has been released to the Regions, a National Formation Workshop held, and I am happy to say the Regions are pressing on to get these materials into the hands of our local formators. WOW, what an adventure!

I would like to digress a moment to give a truly shameless plug, not just for our FUN Manual, but, beyond, to ask each of you the same question brother Leo asks of brother Francis, "Why after you? Why is the whole world chasing after you?" The FUN manual that evolved over time from the CIOFS "Forming the Formators" project is aimed at helping us cultivate, intensify and embrace our identity as Franciscans, whose Order has an equal seat along with our friars and sisters at the Franciscan Table.

Hoping to cast some light on the question of Brother Leo, I highly recommend our upcoming *Quinquennial* 2012 (next Summer, July 2012), the focus of which is this very same question, "Why after You?" It is our turn to define and embrace the core of our Franciscan identity and carry our Order into the next decade, insuring that our vision of a Loving Father continues to be offered in the Church. The coming "Q" will be a great opportunity to rededicate ourselves to this mighty task. See you there!

Now back to FUN, and what to write after the events of the past 2+ years.

I could do the back-ground again to show you how this project evolved from the will of our General Chapter, unfolded within our International Presidency, (Minister General) and how it was developed and presented here in the United States.

This; however, is a story we have been telling for more than two years now, and yes it has finally arrived. AND you cannot believe my joy at seeing so many Regions embracing the Project and entering into the adventure to infuse our local fraternities with the same enthusiasm at being called to be Franciscan People!

Perhaps a better use of the TAU-USA space might be to answer some of the questions Regions have been asking about this manual and its contents. Here are just a few of the issues:

**HERE IS THE FIRST MAJOR REQUEST/ISSUE:
HOW CAN WE USE THIS MATERIAL?**

From the get-go, and we re-emphasized this at the Workshop: this Manual, first and foremost, was put together to highlight the essential topics that must be emphasized in both initial and ongoing formation and to provide all our formators with a solid background. It is a chance to fall in love again with being Franciscan so we all can transmit who we are with great confidence, love and passion!

Initial, since here is where the Franciscan Person and vocation are identified and cultivated. Ongoing, so all the professed members can better understand and identify with their own Profession and also to better collaborate in the formation process of their inquirers and candidates.

The Manual can be the basis of the actual formation sessions, it can be an essential reader, it can be background for the formator, and it can be reference, support & focused reinforcement for any and all of the formation materials we currently use.

FOR
UP TO
NOW

In other words, it can be what you need it to be to ensure that however you structure the formation process and whatever materials you choose to use, you can ensure that these topics get covered, discussed and comprehended by all in formation, before they seek profession.

I am exceedingly appreciative of the regions beginning to share ideas on suggested methods of use, sample curricula, cross-referencing of existing materials (I hope to have us discuss some of these various options at Chapter this October); the list goes on and I am grateful for your willingness to share with each other. This FUN project has very much become a community-wide adventure.

HERE IS A SECOND MAJOR ISSUE:

SUBSIDIARITY AND RESISTING CHANGE

This issue has appeared in a number of cases, in one form or another, from local fraternities wanting complete self-autonomy (one end of the spectrum) all the way to a Spiritual Assistant directing the fraternity to ignore it (the other end of the spectrum). Both ends of the spectrum are difficult and dangerous, especially since they call into account the very nature of who we are as an Order of global proportions with a charism that is lived in a local fraternity.

THIS QUESTION IS REALLY A TWO-PARTER.

SO HERE IS PART 1 –

SUBSIDIARITY

The General Chapter of the SFO (N.B.: this is our highest authority in governance in the Order) has, beginning in 2002 and again in 2008, determined Formation to be the highest priority within the Order and charged our Minister General and her Councilors to develop a more uniform formation approach for an Order of our magnitude. This authority comes from our General Constitutions and also the reality that the will of the General Chapter becomes the will of the whole Order.

If you are unsure of this, read the statement from the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants, in *Koinonia*, 2009 Vol. 1, concerning the General Chapter, quoted in part here:

“The Conclusions of all Chapters are binding for the Presidency but also, and perhaps even more, for all the Fraternities of the whole world at all levels and for each and every Secular Franciscan. Therefore, they must be the object of a continuous and attentive consideration by all. The entire Order, as a single body, has to strive in every possible way to implement them. It is, therefore, requested to do everything possible at all levels to make known, implement and verify the objectives set by the Chapters.”

Following CIOFS' charge to the Nations, we at the National Formation Commission developed a manual of TOPICS that need to be fully addressed and explored in Initial Formation. We have left the materials and methods up to our Regions, but we have indicated what is needed to help form the Franciscan Person. If you think about it, it's not that drastic to want to form a person in a way that supports their identity as a Franciscan person and to foster understanding of our place as a fully autonomous partner within the Franciscan family. We should already be used to much of this Topical material.

But lets' acknowledge that change is difficult, even if we agree it is in our best interests.

As an Order we are "growing up," grateful for the years of guidance by the other branches of the Family (friars and sisters), but now realizing we are our own person (SFO), and we need to tailor our formation to serve our needs, accepting and expressing ourselves as a fundamental part of the Franciscan Trilogy.

It is time we begin to take ownership of our own Order and define how the Secular Franciscan infuses our Charism into both Church and society. My true hope is that we have just opened the door for our own SFO sisters and brothers to take greater responsibility for our formation and to continually update and renew our materials with the best of Franciscan Scholarship, so our Charism comes alive and radiates vibrant life for generations to come.

THE PART 2 QUESTION IS —

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF OUR SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS

This issue can be more difficult, due to our great love for our religious brothers and sisters of the First, Second and Third Orders Regular. We have always, and continue to, hold them in our hearts with great love and respect- as it should be for all members of the Franciscan Trilogy.

BUT, they are part of their Order; they are not part of our Order.

The respective fraternity COUNCIL is the decision-making body of the fraternity, not the Spiritual Assistant alone. In fact, if we all review the current formation program for SAs, including “Family Connections—Handbook for Spiritual Assistance (2005),” and the current “Statutes for Spiritual Assistance (2009),” it becomes clear that the role of the Spiritual Assistant is no longer that of the Director or Master, but that of a full collaborator along with the fraternity council in animating the life of the Fraternity. We are our own entity, grateful for the gifts our SAs share with us, but they are only one component of the fraternity council charged to animate and guide the whole fraternity.

A Spiritual Assistant cannot direct us to ignore our own Minister General or the directives of our General Chapter, anymore than the local fraternity council can ignore them.

If this shows us nothing else, it points out the need for real council formation. We have all experienced that moment after election when the outgoing congratulates the incomers, turns over the books and vanishes. What a transition — we all need to do better for the sake of our sisters and brothers. Councils need to be formed so they can all help animate and guide the fraternity. Hopefully with assistance from CNSA and our Spiritual Assistants, we can collaborate to set up a better method of fraternity transitions. You might want to begin with something very simple like “Care and Feeding of Councils.” If anything, all this formation points us to developing stronger relationships in our individual lives, family lives and fraternal lives.

Together, we can do this!
Now back to the FUN.

We are not done; we are still in the process of preparing DVD’s from the Workshop, which I am told will be finished shortly. Also in process is an Index of each section of the FUN Manual to help you cross reference materials. We are still editing and re-editing the original to tweak it and clean up some of our grammatical faux-pas. CHECK our website often for corrections and updates www.nafraformation.org



Lastly for the current National Formation Commission, we are exploring our last action as possibly recording a 20-to 25-minute overview of all the segments of the Manual and getting them down on a collection of additional DVDs for your use. We know this would greatly assist fraternities in on-going formation, but it would also help fraternities who are more geographically isolated.

On behalf of the National Formation Commission, it has been our blessing and privilege to be of service to you, and we thank you for your kindness and prayers both for us and for this Formation Project.

I must end this article with a paraphrased echo of the words of Tom Bello, SFO, our National Minister from his exhortation to the formators at the National Workshop:

**Receive this formation manual,
believe what you receive,
teach what you believe,
and live what you teach!**

If you bring these topics to your inquirers and candidates in a spirit of fraternal love, encouragement, passion and understanding with prayer and the Holy Spirit, our true formator, we can all assist in forming joy and wonder-filled Franciscan People.

Pace e bene,

Fitz