

~Impressions~

By Lester Bach, OFM Cap.

Sometimes I feel that we “beat around the bush” when dealing with profession as Franciscans. We may want our way of life and our gatherings to be “nice.” Should comfortable positions be upset, we say how awful “those people” are who stretch us to places we don’t want to go. We blame them for requiring a wholeness to our Secular Franciscan life. At times we ignore the reality of fewer friars and act as though there is no problem. We expect to have ordained spiritual assistants even as it becomes clearly impossible. Perhaps we are into a “silent denial” of reality so that we can act as though everything is the same as it was years ago. (It isn’t!)

How honestly do we evaluate fraternity gatherings? If we keep doing what we always did, we’re content. But fraternity gatherings are meant to: *challenge, animate, form, enrich our Franciscan spirit, give support to our way of life, enrich relationships, deal with world issues, find better ways of living the SFO Rule, affirm one another, have a bit of humor, deal with homebound members, talk honestly and respectfully about political situations, share different prayer forms to enrich our prayer life, as well as encouraging contemplation.* Doing this regularly is quite a program to achieve in a few hours each month!

Are these expectations possible with one gathering a month? Do members even talk about change? We can pray about it. But good prayer leads to growth and change and action. Does that happen in our fraternities? How different is your fraternity today from what it was last year at this time? Are members more dedicated? Are they more passionate in their commitment to our way of life? Do they offer more challenges to one another and support one another more lovingly? Are members passive? Active? Does anyone want to run for office? Does everyone want someone else to do council work? Do they live the Rule more passionately? Is there anyone out there who cares one way or the other?

At the very least, we need to initiate serious dialogue about topics like these. Such conversations can offer insights about the way our future will look. Unless we are a vibrant group, why belong? St Francis learned about gospel relationships and they changed him. One leper made all the difference,

when the leper became a brother rather than an “object” to be helped. When people become brother and sister to us we treat them differently. A fraternity gathering is the place where we learn how to relate and love and care and forgive and celebrate together and spill over with joy as brothers and sisters. Or am I being naïve?

Fraternities around the USA differ from one another. Much depends on local leadership. Seculars who plunge into a passionate dedication to our way of life and are fully-committed Franciscans, stimulate new life in a fraternity. When people surrender to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the fire of passionate love touches lives and transforms Seculars as they transform their world. What excitement they cause! How rich is their inspiration to others who feel less sure of themselves.

How sad if we simply complain that something didn’t go our way. How sad that we spend so much time with members who fail to follow the Rule. How sad that anyone would think they know all there is to know about the SFO Rule or our Franciscan way of life. How sad to be indifferent about our life! A probing look at formation practices (both initial and ongoing) seems to be in order!

I hope these words stimulate your own creative ideas about fraternity life. I hope you begin to say: *Maybe there’s something here that needs consideration.* Begin serious dialogue about making things more alive in your fraternity. The Spirit is always present. The Gospel is always available. The Risen Jesus is with us and we are NOT orphans. The “call” is present to us. We need not act as though the end is coming when reality says we are on the brink of new beginnings. Free up your imaginations and wander into new possibilities. We never professed to be “nice.” We profess to be passionate about living the gospel, loving people; bringing peace to our world; learning richer forms of prayer; helping one another when life knocks us down; having great celebrations when life brings delight; rebuilding our Church so it reflects the gospel of Jesus! *That takes surrender and readiness to make radical changes in life – everyday.* Each of us, and our fraternities, need to become passionate Secular Franciscans – or we’ll just be “nice.” Ughh! Have the kind of passionate, respectful dialogue that will bring our Franciscan charism so alive among us that everyone will know who we are. OK?