

Franciscan Novelty



By Bob Fitzsimmons, SFO, NAFRA Formation Chair
rlfztsfo@verizon.net
509-582-7606

First of all, please indulge me a moment for a formation update: As we rapidly approach the celebration of the 800th anniversary of Propositum Vitae (Life Project-1209), I would ask us to take some time to reflect on the new way of life that Francis asked the Pope's permission to follow. The simplest reflection we might undertake is to ask of ourselves and then of our fraternities "Do we dare to follow the Gospel?" I don't just mean do we follow the rules or commandments to live good upstanding moral lives. That is certainly a part of the equation, but in the spirit of Francis, do we actually dare to live the Gospel?

As you are becoming aware, we are entering into a period of change in our re-appropriation of our Order, its governance, stability, its future, and its ability to empower us to gospel living. Since 2002, our International Presidency has been focusing on formation and developing a universal plan of study. The first phase of this Formation Project is to assist our formators, at all levels of fraternity, but, most importantly, at the local fraternity level, which is our foundation. For that purpose, I will try to keep you all updated to this process and also ask each and every Secular Franciscan to give me feedback on how formation, both initial and ongoing has continued to fan the flame enkindled in you by the Holy Spirit that first led you to profess in the SFO. Think back on your own journey and story and dialogue with your sisters and brothers on how to enliven our fraternities and re-ignite the world for Jesus. Email me you comments: rlfztsfo@verizon.net

For Francis this desire for Jesus grew into the novelty of the Franciscans and into fraternity as the place where it was lived out.

So what is this novelty? I think it is 2-fold ideal. First, Francis received permission for a new venture or paradigm of Church (a model that will become a key element of Vatican II). The primary Church model in his day was based mostly on that found in the Acts of the

Apostles. It had definite hierarchical governance and definitive norms. Along comes Francis with the simple question, why could we not follow the example of Jesus and the Apostles in the Gospel? A loose gathering of people, held together around Jesus, by love of each other, living in equality, minority, service and committed to proclaiming by word and action the Love of God. This is what Francis believed going from gospel to life and life to gospel really meant. Innocent III gave his permission for this "experiment" of Francis, often, I think, feeling it would never grow beyond this tiny initial fraternal group.

The second half of the novelty is that this idea found three virtually simultaneous outlets, the original brothers (following the Apostolic plan), the women (St. Clare – monastic), and the Penitents of St. Francis (lay penitential movement). From our very inception, Francis sowed the seeds for people from all states and positions of life to embrace "religious" life. Francis' dream and preaching was not on great theological themes, but on the great love of God for all creation and our need to change our way of life to embrace this great Loving God. Spoken in the language of the common folk, this preaching and witness drew thousands into the Franciscan Spirit and the Church.

Fraternity was the place and way, mindset if you will, that this novelty was to be lived out, and while the groups were small, it worked well. As the numbers grew, fraternity gave way to a series of "Orders," more hierarchical in nature, but the basic part of this vast family remained fraternity, where the group was small enough to support each other as a family living the gospel life. The call to remain faithful to the fraternal way was seriously strained many times throughout our family history, but fraternity has always remained to call us back to the wisdom of our Founder. All branches of the Franciscan family continue to be called to live in love, equality, minority, service, and to live simply so we might be free to embrace the poor and humble Jesus.

All of us have the same charge, to Observe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But to observe it, we must dare to live it!

REMINDER: The National Formation Workshop for 2009 has been cancelled! This year members of the National Formation Commission will be contacting all the regions to ask you to help us discern the needs of your local formators. Since formation is the lifeblood of the Order and foundation for fraternity life, please be open and candid with us to help us formulate the best formation support for you that we can.