

# Franciscan Living

## Fraternity: Who Is In Charge?

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*“On various levels, each fraternity is animated and guided by a council and minister (or president) who are elected by the professed according to the constitutions.” (SFO Rule III, #21)*

Ever come away from a fraternity election scratching your head, wondering what in the world happened? The people you thought would be elected weren't and people who were elected were not even on the ballot! The election seemed to progress like Topsy-Turvy without an apparent reason or direction!

The importance of the chapter of elections in a fraternity cannot be underestimated. The fraternity council animates and guides some of the most important aspects of our spiritual life - our ongoing Franciscan formation and our fraternal community. The Fraternity Council has a very important role in our life as a Secular Franciscan.

Let's take a look at the task of the local Fraternity Council. As the SFO Rule states, each fraternity is *animated and guided* by a council and minister. The word “animates” means to “make full of spirit.” It doesn't mean to rule or dictate or even direct. It means to encourage the *spirit* to grow within a fraternity and to guide its expression. This is the first and most important function of the council and the minister. Without a fraternity's animation or spirit, there is no fraternity! To gauge the health of a fraternity, see if it has the Franciscan spirit, commonly known as “Franciscan Joy.”

Notice the placement of the words, “council” and “minister” in the Rule. The council comes first; the minister is second. The minister is the servant leader who implements the guidance of the council. The council is lead by the Holy Spirit working through its members by discernment.

Our General Constitutions state that the office of minister or councilor is a “*fraternal service*; a commitment to hold oneself available and responsible in relation to each brother and sister and to the fraternity so that each one will realize his or her own vocation and each fraternity will be a true community, ecclesial and Franciscan, actively present in the Church and in society.”<sup>1</sup>

First, it is a *fraternal* service; one among peers in offering one's self in service to each other so that each fraternity member can reach his/her own full spiritual potential as a Franciscan. We minister to each other when we are not on the council but even more so when we are. The council also has a responsibility to ensure that the fraternity becomes a true ecclesial Franciscan community. The council animates a Franciscan identity in its members and fosters a unity of mission (but can have a diversity of expression in various apostolates). It is extremely important that the Franciscan charism hold a prominent place in the community, since it's only in fraternity where we can nourish our Franciscan identity.

So, what does “a true ecclesial community mean?” It means that the brothers and sisters should have a spirit of love for each other, which reflect the Trinity to others, and being united like the Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>2</sup> If dissension or discord is present, the council must address it for the health of the fraternity. The council, at times, must make difficult decisions, but if issues are left unaddressed, the fraternity spirit will be diminished, members will leave and the fraternity will slowly die. Courageous action by the council must be taken for the good of the fraternity. It is the role of the fraternity members to stand behind their elected council, believing that the Holy Spirit will be the council's guide.

How can we discern who would make the best servant leaders of our fraternity? We pray. We fast. We bring our concerns for the fraternity to prayer. We hold in our hearts the issues affecting our fraternity and pray for discernment. We do not lobby for our candidate. We do not debate. It is about love and service, not power or persuasion.

So why do the fraternity elections seem so haphazard? Why do they seem to take on a life of their own? Fraternity elections are not like normal political elections we know from our civic life. They are not popularity contests, based upon debates or good looks. Just because there are surprises during elections or changes in the fraternity council, it does not mean the Holy Spirit is not present. Our fraternity is actually directed by the Holy Spirit who whispers and inspires at will. The Holy Spirit is in charge, not us! We are only His instruments and pray that we do not get in His way. It is the Spirit who enlivens our fraternity and who works through the fraternity members. The Holy Spirit is in charge of the election and of the fraternity. It is His fraternity. It is His work. It is His Spirit...not ours.

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<sup>1</sup>General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order, 2000. Art. 31 #2

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<sup>2</sup> See the Winter 2009 issue of *Tau-USA* for a discussion of the concept of “Holy Unity.”