



Fellowship at its Best

By Tom Short, SFO

The timing is the first Sunday in February, 2008. The setting is a pseudo classroom on the campus of the Sisters of St. Francis of Perpetual Adoration, Mishawaka, IN. The participants include a Franciscan Priest, somewhere between six and ten Sisters from the local community, another six to ten members of the local Immaculate Conception SFO Fraternity (some pledged, some still in formation) and a couple newcomers who have been invited by someone else in the room.

The group is diverse, yet linked by a mutual desire to delve further into their Franciscan roots. Everyone hopes that what comes next will help them be productive in a world that desperately needs exposure to what the charism of St. Francis has to offer.

The occasion is the kickoff of a study group that will meet the first Sunday of the month for the next sixteen months, give or take. The study centers on the book *Franciscan Prayer* by Sr. Iliia Delio, OSF. Copies of the book, along with some additional study materials, have been procured for everyone by Sr. Agnes Marie Regan, OSF, the spiritual assistant for the Fraternity, as part of program sponsored by St. Francis University, Loretto, PA.

The meeting begins with prayer and song. Father gives a short presentation on the material in the introduction of the book.

And everyone in the room begins a process that will turn out to be life changing.

At the end, no one has been affected in exactly the same way. When asked to explain what they took from the process, everyone has a slightly different answer.

One speaks about insights into the nature of Franciscan poverty and a new appreciation for the need to love others, especially the others they are at odds with. Another speaks about gained intimacy with God, and the benefits of simply placing himself in God's presence. Yet another speaks to an intensifying of the ability to gaze upon "the Incarnate One" within prayer.

The materials are so rich that to summarize everyone's ~~outcome is impossible~~. One even starts a blog (www.emboldenme.com) in an effort to begin to

document the many blessings obtained in the course of the study.

But there is one overarching comment mentioned by all. Despite the diversity, the mutual link to St. Francis, enhanced by the presence of the Spirit, empowers and frees everyone who participates. The exchanges during the discussions are not intellectual, but powerfully personal and remarkably uninhibited. Everyone in the rooms trusts one another, and the love for one another is palpable.

The individual reading and contemplation is informative. But the confident fellowship is what is truly transformational. Yes, everyone takes away personal insights based on who they were and what they were seeking when they entered the room that first Sunday. But more importantly, everyone has learned the possibilities of fellowship within a community where the love for one another is so clear that sincerity is unquestionable.

Perhaps, in some small way, we learned what it was like at the beginning for Francis and his first followers.

Perhaps, in some small way, we will be able to take that to the other groups we interact with as we engage the world outside our Franciscan enclave.

Even so, we knew before we ever finished that a second session would follow. We just needed to give Sister enough time to assemble some new materials. Last Sunday was the first Sunday in January, 2010. It was a different room in the same building, but we were back together again, joined by some fresh faces, ready to continue what was started.

You see, we need the fellowship we found.

We crave it the same way we crave God.

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