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OUR IDENTITY

Recently I have been pondering my identity as a Secular Franciscan. It all began when our local Franciscan retreat center closed; an occasion, which unfortunately is becoming more and more common.

Because I was a regular kitchen volunteer at the retreat center, I felt the loss of contact with our First Order brothers acutely. I relished participating in a common Franciscan apostolate with my Franciscan brothers and grew accustomed to regular Franciscan exchanges of ideas and thoughts. Although I was originally professed in a fraternity that had no routine contact with the Franciscan religious and met at a local parish, when I transferred to my current fraternity, I discovered the joys of regular Franciscan presence! I quickly grew accustomed to a close relationship with the friars in our local retreat house! What a gift this was! How precious was the frequent interaction with our First Order brothers that helped me become more fully aware of what it meant to be truly Franciscan. Fr. Boni described this relationship among the three orders in his book, "Tres Ordines Hic Ordinatus"¹ as a three ply cord not easily broken (*Funiculus triplex difficile rumpitur*) but having independence and unity and a vital interconnection (reciprocity).

When the retreat center closed, I felt devastated not only because of the loss of my brother friends but also because I realized that my own identity as a Secular Franciscan was also entwined with the friar's apostolate at the retreat center. My identity as a Franciscan was strengthened but what about my role as a Secular Franciscan, which was to consecrate the world, by living in it?

By having the retreat center close, I came to understand that we, Secular Franciscans, must "stand on our own two feet" more and more. We no longer have the luxury of "letting Father" lead us or give us the identity as "Franciscan."

Through this forced independence, we might also come to realize how we might have seen ourselves as "helpers" to the First, Second or Third Order Regulars and not members of an order that has an "equal dignity," independence and vital interconnection.

We are not like other lay groups who are dependant on their founding religious and are formed to assist the religious order in their apostolate.

We are truly autonomous, begun at the same time of the other Franciscan orders, have equal dignity but a different focus as lay men and women.

Pope John Paul II, in his address to our General Chapter in 1988² describes us as an autonomous Lay Order, a *real Order*, with sacrifices in our secular condition, which are not lesser than those experienced in the religious and priestly life. We are called to consecrate the world by living in it:

"...you are also an Order, as the Pope said (Pius XII): A Lay Order, but a Real Order;" and after all, Benedict XV had already spoken of "Ordo veri nominis". This ancient term - we can say medieval - "Order" means nothing more than your intimate belonging to the large Franciscan family. The word "Order" means the participation in the discipline and actual austerity of that spirituality, while remaining in the autonomy typical of your lay and secular condition, which, moreover, often entails sacrifices which are not lesser than those experienced in the religious and priestly life."

Although our decreasing regular contact with our Franciscan brethren can be devastating to our morale and identity, let us remember who we really are:

We are Brothers and Sisters of Penance living the gospel in the world in the spirit of Francis!

We have a unique position as secular, lay apostles who have a vital role in the building up of the Kingdom of God. As Francis said on his deathbed:

"I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours!"

¹ A. Boni, OFM, *Tres Ordines Hic Ordinatus* (TOHO), Ed. Porziuncola, Assisi, 1999, page 27.

² Pope John Paul II, Address to the General Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order, June 14, 1988.