



Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee Walking Together

by Anne Mulqueen, OFS

It has been said that the existence of the Secular Franciscan Order is one of the *best-kept secrets* among Catholics. I submit that the ecumenical and interfaith teachings of the Church are as much of an undiscovered treasure as the existence of the Secular Franciscan Order. According to my recent survey, these documents remain unknown and unread.

In a recent issue of *U.S. Catholic*¹, the question was asked, “Will Pope Francis revitalize ecumenism and interfaith dialogue?” In answer to that question, I did a little research and came upon a book entitled, *Sobre el Cielo y la Tierra*², *On Heaven and Earth*,³ co-authored by Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka. I downloaded the kindle edition and found the following translation from the Spanish in which Pope Francis, then Cardinal Bergoglio, states:

*Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It supposes that we can make room in our heart for their point of view, their opinion and their proposals. Dialogue entails a warm reception and not a preemptive condemnation. To dialogue, one must know how to lower the defenses, to open the doors of one’s home and to offer warmth.*⁴

Pope Francis asks us to become aware of God’s goodness present in all people. Perhaps if we listen with the ear of faith we will find common ground to worship God, while adhering to our own faith tradition and respecting the faith traditions of others.

Further, Pope Francis states in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*:

The credibility of the Christian message would be much

greater if Christians could overcome their divisions and the Church could realize “the fullness of catholicity proper to her in those of her children who, though joined to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her.”⁵ We must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God’s face.

As I travel around the country presenting workshops with my fellow Franciscan Joint Committee Members on elements of Franciscan unity, I see evidence of Franciscan collaboration taking place. I see steps being taken toward fulfilling the supplication of Jesus’ prayer to the Father, *that all may be one... so that the world may believe that You sent me* (John 17:21). And this sense of hope makes my heart sing!

I would like to reword the question posed by *U.S. Catholic* at the beginning of this article. This time let me ask you, *Are Secular Franciscans, along with Franciscans of other faith traditions, willing to revitalize ecumenism and interfaith dialogue?* Judging from the responses I have received, it seems we are willing to enter into dialogue.

In my last articles, I asked you to let me know if you, your local or regional fraternities, your parishes, or your community churches participate in ecumenical-interfaith activities and, should there be participation, I asked for details.⁶ To my delight quite a few of you responded. I am summarizing the responses from both those who are actively involved in ecumenism and interfaith dialogue *and* those who have not yet dipped their feet in the *ecumenical-interfaith* waters. Some responses urged me to “set out into the deep” (Luke 5:4) and others were cautionary. Please be aware that

¹ <http://www.uscatholic.org>

² Published in Spanish 2010 by Editorial Sudamericana S.A., a division of Random House

³ Translation 2013, Image, division of Random House, Inc.

⁴ Location 103 Kindle edition [no page numbers on my Kindle]

⁵ Referring to Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4.

⁶ Fall 2013 Issue-77

for me, this is simply the beginning of a dialogue—not the end, and you can still respond to me at Amulqueensfo@gmail.com.

What follows below is an abridged version of the survey responses I received. Bear in mind that although many Secular Franciscans responded to the survey, these comments are a partial snapshot of what is actually happening in our Order nationwide.

- First, only one fraternity devoted a gathering once a year to ecumenical prayer and dialogue. About a third of the respondents engage in ecumenical-interfaith (“E-I”) activities apart from their fraternities. These actively engaged respondents seem to function on their own initiative or in conjunction with organizations such as Franciscan Action Network. However, for the majority of the respondents, there is no participation in E-I outreach, education or dialogue in their local fraternities, their regions, or their parishes. And most were not aware of any collective gatherings in the community.
- Second, from the responses received, E-I awareness does not seem to be a part of the formation process—initial or ongoing. Also, very few respondents were familiar with the two Second Vatican Council documents that speak to ecumenical and interfaith issues *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Christian Unity) and *Nostra Aetate* (non-Christian religions).
- Third, it is obvious from the responses that E-I involvement is not perceived as important in fraternal life.

Does this discourage me? No, it doesn’t discourage me, because along with the not so encouraging responses to my specific questions, these initial responders offered comments that pointed to a direction to follow in raising awareness of the importance of ecumenical and interfaith issues. I will share some of their comments with you.

- “... Begin to encourage the faithful in the Roman Rite Church to become familiar with the other Rites in the Catholic Church... we forget that in our own back yard there are Catholics... who acknowledge the Pope as their Head, and about whom we know nothing.”
- “I believe we have to make sure that Catholics exposed to other religions have sufficient knowledge and conviction of the Catholic faith,

and have [a] firm commitment to obey Catholic teaching even on sensitive issues.”

- “I am frankly embarrassed by [my] responses and thank you for taking on this work. I pray that we are able to move in a more ecumenical direction!”
- “... There are three of us who actively work in prison ministry in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Ecumenism and interfaith issues are HUGE in this ministry.”
- “Our ability to communicate meaningfully regarding our faith is compromised when we do not have a basic understanding of what others believe and what our Church teaches regarding ecumenism and interfaith relations.”
- “I believe I am the only one officially involved in this capacity. However many of the apostolates our members are engaged in require working side-by-side with people of various faith traditions (food pantries, meal programs, pro-life ministry, Walk for the Hungry, etc.”
- “... I and my late fraternity am/was Byzantine Catholic. We sit so close to the Tiber that our socks are always soggy. You can’t be any kind of Eastern Catholic in the U.S. without knowing about, and usually knowing lots of Latin Rite Catholics, and many of us have friends or family on the other side of the river, among the Orthodox who—unlike us—are not currently in union with Rome. (Not to mention a sea of Protestants.) They are FAMILY, and it profits none of us to debate which of us is the black sheep.”
- “I would rate ecumenical and interfaith outreach as a ‘9.’ I don’t know what my fraternity’s posture is but my guess is that it is not very important to them.”
- “I will be very candid, if we really want to walk together as Secular Franciscans, it must be more than just committees, gatherings, statements, (all of which are necessary). It must be prayer and real action for peace and justice.”

If you have reached the end of this fairly long article, I commend you and praise God for your perseverance. Remember, the dialogue has just begun. My thanks go to you who took the time to write. The Ecumenical-Interfaith Committee owes you a debt of gratitude for illuminating a path for us to follow.