

THOUGHTS FROM AN RFD: FUN REVISITED

by

B.J. CHRISTENSEN, SFO
REGIONAL FORMATION DIRECTOR
TROUBADOURS OF PEACE REGION

As a student at Sacred Heart School in Lombard, Illinois, I read dozens of stories about saints. Our little “readers” took us into the lives of two little Catholic children, David and Anne, their parents, friends and pets; the Catholic version of the secular “Dick and Jane” books. Of the dozens of stories about saints I read as a student at Sacred Heart, only one remains in my memory. I even remember the title of the story: “Saint Francis and the Wolf.” Why did that particular story remain and the others not?

Now that I am a Secular Franciscan, I see more clearly Francis’ influence in my life through the years in ways I didn’t even notice as I was living those moments. I have felt drawn to St. Francis since I sat in Sr. Mynette’s second grade classroom those many years ago. Sr. Mynette and the other sisters at Sacred Heart were “School Sisters of St. Francis.” I didn’t even know they were Franciscan until recently.

At the time I only knew I was loved by them, and the feeling of acceptance I received from them was something I want to spread to those whose lives I touch and whose paths cross mine.

I want my life to have a palpable presence of Francis, just as my mentors had, and so in 2003 I was professed and began my new life as a Secular Franciscan.

This past May, I went back to my Illinois roots to attend the *National Formation Commission “Forming the Formators” Workshop* in Belleville, Illinois. I felt the characteristic Franciscan warmth immediately as I stepped into the Our Lady of the Snows Shrine Hotel and Complex and began meeting the other participants of the workshop.

The weekend began on Thursday evening with dinner, as participants reconnected with friends or added new ones to their collection.

Bob Fitzsimmons, SFO, the Formation Commission Chair, began the meeting with introductions of his team, the National Formation Commission: Jan Parker, SFO; Kathleen White, SFO; Rena Xuerub, SFO; and Fr. Richard Trezza, OFM.

Fr. Richard opened the session with prayer. The theme of the weekend and the title of the new formation manual are, “*Let us begin FOR UP TO NOW we have done nothing.*”

Bob (Fitz) Fitzsimmons, in his talk about Franciscan Theology/Spirituality, reminded us that we need to “see Jesus in each member” and “if your fraternity isn’t growing, see if it is loving.”

In speaking on Profession, Fr. Richard called us to get rid of the phrase, “We are in the world, but not of the world.” In his article in the “**FUN**” manual he stated, “The Order has not made you secular...you were BORN secular. It will be the duty of the Professed to seek out and find the ‘theological dimensions’ to that secularity.... Since our desire is to get to heaven, it stands to reason that the way to get there will be through what is familiar to us here on earth – other people, friends, our daily routine, the illnesses we bear, etc. Find your dimension in your secular condition.”

The “**FUN**” manual insures that no fraternity will settle for second best in their formation programs and that proper preparation is made on a uniform basis. Jan Parker, SFO, stressed to the workshop participants that the formators need to present the information in the manual with “passion” and “living faith.”

She emphasized the importance of not simply using words to express our faith; rather, our faith and Franciscan charism must be who we are and how we behave. We *should* be noticeably different.

The adage, “actions speak louder than words,” was implied several times during the weekend by the speakers including Fr. Richard, who stated, “there is power in how we behave, how we communicate Christ to others,” and that is a facet of Franciscan formation that isn’t accomplished with lectures and study.

The answer to Brother Maseo’s question “Why you, Francis?” is that Francis lived his faith with incredible passion; that’s what drew people to him, and we need to follow his lead in *doing what is ours to do with passion*.

The benefit of the new manual for the local fraternities is immense, in that all future Secular Franciscans throughout the United States and the world will experience the same elements that are necessary to understand their vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order.

There will no longer be the problem of local formators having to search for appropriate books and material for the formation of our future sisters and brothers. Everything they will need is in the manual. It allows each fraternity to structure its own programs, depending upon the needs of the people they have in formation and helps true vocations to the Franciscan Family flourish.

The fundamental goal of formators is to lovingly help candidates in their spiritual growth and deepen their understanding of the significance of the choice they are contemplating while allowing those who don’t have a vocation to the SFO find their own spiritual expression.

What the NFC stressed at the workshop was that the wheel has not been reinvented. The “new” formation is actually an enhanced version of “The Guidelines for Initial Formation.” The intention in instituting a new manual was to make sure that the quality of local formation, both spiritual and doctrinal, is raised to a higher level for all fraternities globally and that everyone is doing the same thing.

The manual truly is a labor of love. We are grateful to the members of the National Formation Commission for the many hours of work and sacrifice that they put into the manual to make our efforts as formators easier.

The National Formation Commission “Forming the Formators” workshop in Belleville proved that the legacy of Francis is alive and well in Belleville and throughout the USA through the love, sacrifices and hard work of many dedicated Franciscans.

With gratitude and respect, we thank all who put their time, love and effort into “*For Up to Now.*”

Sister Mynette would be proud.