

# Ecumenical



## Interfaith/Committee

### **OUR FELLOW FRANCISCANS: SOME SIMPLE SUGGESTIONS**

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In the past few articles, we've looked at some basic beliefs of other Christians, Jews and Muslims. Before we proceed further, I would like to offer some practical suggestions for ways to gather together with fellow Christians. After all, to use an analogy, no matter how much we read about Germany, it is not the same as sitting in a Biergarten in Heidelberg. The same goes with our fellow Christians: our goal is not just to know *about* them, our goal is to get to know *them*.

As with any friendship, the easiest place to start is our shared interests, so perhaps the most logical place for SFOs to begin would be to reach out to members of other secular Franciscan Orders: the Third Order Society of St. Francis (TSSF: Episcopalian) and the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans (OEF). Not only do we share a secular lifestyle and spirituality (like the SFO, some are clergy, and some are lay), but we also share a desire to walk the Gospel of Jesus in the footsteps of St. Francis. I have had the privilege of visiting these brothers and sisters on "their home turf," in their official gatherings, and I have always been welcomed as a brother. When we sit and talk, when we share our journeys, when we pray together, you cannot tell who is TSSF, OEF or SFO: we are Franciscans. I have been made an honorary member of the Texas Bluebonnets, the regional OEF community, and I receive all of their e-mailings, and am invited to all of their gatherings. Since we SFOs are, in a sense, the oldest sibling, it is really our responsibility and blessing to be the first ones to reach out to the TSSF and OEF. When NAFRA, or the OEF and TSSF equivalents, meet, representatives of the other Orders are invited. I am writing this on my way to the annual chapter of the national leadership of the TSSF. My friend, Deacon

Joan, won't be there, since she will be at NAFRA. I will, however, be able to visit another friend, Brother Leo, the liaison from the OEF. The same type of mutual visitation could be done easily for our regional chapters: an official representative from the TSSF and OEF could be invited, and someone could be asked to represent the regional SFO at their regional gatherings.

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But we shouldn't stop at inviting them to "our" gatherings; we should invite them as equals to plan and execute common Franciscan events. Think of what wonderful a witness it would be if OEFs, TSSFs and SFOs were seen working together with the homeless, or sharing a booth at a local peace and justice festival. We could pray together: the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an excellent place to start. The Greymoor Fathers have been promoting this for almost a century, and have published prayers, both for individuals and communities. The Joint Committee on Franciscan Unity has produced two common prayer services: the first is a common "Office" that can be prayed between the Feast of the Stigmata through the Feast of St. Francis (or for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity), and the second a shared agape service, since we cannot share a common Eucharist. Franciscans could agree to pray the common Office each day, either alone or in community, and celebrate the Transitus together. The agape service could be prayed during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, but could also be prayed together at other times of the year: once in Advent, to remind ourselves and the world, that we share a common belief that the Divine Word of God has, indeed, become flesh and dwells among us; once in Lent, to mutually repent of the terrible division we have brought to the Body of Christ; and once during Easter Season, to remind us of our hope that all things will be transformed in the Divine Light. Both suggested prayer services are available on the NAFRA website, and can be adapted to local needs.

Francis was called to rebuild the Church, which had "fallen into ruin." When Franciscans pray together today, the Body of Christ will begin to be healed. This is an essential part of our Franciscan vocation: SFO, TSSF and OEF, alike. Jesus said that it is by our love for each other that the world will know we are his disciples. And St. Francis reminds us daily, "Let us begin, for up to now, we have done nothing."