

Musings on the Chapter



and Fraternity

By Patrick Mendés, SFO
National Minister

From October 14th to 19th the National Fraternity gathered for our Annual Chapter in Nashville at the Scarritt-Bennett Center. I want to express our thanks to the host Region, Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis, whose attention to every detail and immediate help with last minute requests made our entire agenda run smoothly. The famed “Southern Hospitality” was very much in evidence! What a treat it was to be entertained in our evening socials by the brothers and sisters of the Region who are such gifted musicians and the wonderfully wise and very funny story teller, Barbara Freeman, SFO. If you ever have the pleasure of meeting our sister, Barbara, ask her to tell you the “peanut butter” story. Truly a classic!

A quick review of the post chapter evaluations reflected that the Regional Ministers would like more time for their geographic group meetings, even though they were the most blocks of time allocated for geographic groups in recent history. What a wonderful message their comments were! They so much appreciated and valued their time spent discussing their concerns, sharing their successes and building fraternity!

National Chapter is just like fraternity chapter at any level and consists of the 4 elements of a fraternity gathering: prayer, formation, business and fraternity/community time. Our liturgies were well planned and beautiful. The sacred space was thoughtfully created by Kathy Taormina, SFO, of our FYYA. Kathy has extensive experience in art and environment ministry. It helps that she is a florist by profession!

Our opening mass was celebrated by the Most Rev. David Choby, Bishop of the Diocese of Nashville, who joined us for opening evening dinner. Bishop Choby is a native of Nashville. He is warm and welcoming and very approachable and has visited Assisi numerous times. How blessed are our brothers and sisters who live in that diocese to have a bishop with such a Franciscan heart!

Our formation sessions presented by Teresa Baker, SFO, Bob Fitzsimmons, SFO, Pat Brandwein-Ball, SFO and outgoing President-in-turn of the CNSA, Fr. Steve Gross, OFM Conv., were timely and special. The NEC and National Fraternity thank them for their generous contributions to our life and the building of fraternity.

While it is very important that the National Fraternity take care of the business of the Nation, in your name, and they attended to this task diligently and with careful thought and attention to the matters before them, the hallmark of our gathering was building fraternity.

How do we build fraternity at any level? The elements of prayer and on going formation are the basis for true intimacy. The sharing of our stories, our difficulties and our successes and the acceptance of one another where we are in our journeys from Gospel to life and life to Gospel, with encouragement and without passing judgment, essentially, with our unconditional love for one another.

While it is often difficult for folks outside our Order to see the importance we place on the “social” part of our gatherings, it is exactly this informal setting that fosters the building of community and fraternal love that is so much a part of our charism.

The lesson to be learned – be sure to make enough time at our monthly gatherings and take other opportunities such as shared retreats, formation days, special liturgies to reach out to the larger Franciscan family and include ample time for the “social” part of our gathering. As our Holy Rule tells us, “Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters...”

As Christmas nears, may you spend Advent in peace filled reflection and prepare for the celebration of the birth of our Lord. The mystery of the Incarnation is central to who we are as Franciscans, and our spirituality.

May the Sacred Heart of Jesus surround you with His love and fill your lives with His abundant blessings!