

Third Year Reflection

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I have been the chair of the Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee for three years, which brings me to the end of my term. I submit a report to the National Executive Committee several times a year, plus an end of the year report for NAFRA, but thought I'd take this opportunity to share some of the accomplishments and hopes for the future with you.

When I applied for the position as chair, I outlined a general plan: to continue to reach out to non-Catholic secular Franciscans, to reach out to non-Catholic Christians in general, and to reach out to non-Christians. The committee, under the leadership of Marcella Bina, had begun to forge relationships with Franciscans from other Christian lineages, and with them, had formed the Joint Committee on Franciscan Unity. I am proud to say that those relationships have continued, and I hope have flourished. Together with representatives from the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans, I have met members from the United Church of Christ, Methodists, Episcopalians, a couple of Catholics—including a deacon—and one Baptist deacon from Waco, TX and the Third Order Society of St. Francis (Anglican; I have met members from the U.S., Caribbean and South America), we have designed a small Franciscan Office (Morning Prayer), to be used during “Francistide” (between the Feast of the Stigmata and the Feast of St. Francis), and an *Agapé* service, which we could celebrate in common, but that would avoid the problems of intercommunion. These are available through the NAFRA website. The JCFU also hopes to compose a common *Transitus* service that could be celebrated jointly with each other. At our meeting in May, we laid plans for planning a mini-conference on our common Franciscan heritage, and to invite the leadership from the three representative Orders. This is a follow up to a similar conference held several years ago. I have also had the privilege of attending one TSSF and two OEF chapter meetings as the representative from the SFO. As a result, I have been made an honorary member of the Texas Bluebonnets, the Texas regional level of the OEF.

I have been professionally involved in interfaith dialogue for the past two decades, and have always gone in my Franciscan skin, animated by my Franciscan soul. However, for the past three years, I have had the privilege of bringing official participation of the SFO. I participate in an annual, by invitation, Hindu-Christian dialogue co-sponsored by the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference, have spoken in many venues on Zen-Franciscan encounter (and will hopefully soon have a book published on the same subject), and have given a paper, by invitation, called “Seeking the Lower Path,”

about Sufi (Islamic) mysticism and St. Francis. That being said, we are at a crossroads of the SFO/Ecumenical /Interfaith mission.

I am writing this three weeks before NAFRA will meet in Albuquerque, and so do not know what the future of my service or the Committee will be. However, I can share a few thoughts of where I hope it will go. I know that Secular Franciscan commitment to ecumenical and interfaith encounters cannot be left to the Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee, much less the chair, nor can we be satisfied with our participation in the JCFU. These are all important first steps, but they can only be first steps.

Currently, for the annual meetings of each Order, the ministers of the other two, or their representatives, are invited to attend. For this to bear real fruit, this has to begin happening on regional and local levels. Find out who is in your area, and invite their ministers to attend your annual regional meetings, or an occasional local meeting. But let's dream; let's take it beyond merely visiting each other. Let's begin to pray the common Francistide Office in union with each other (much like we already pray the Office in union with each other, even if not in the same place). Perhaps we could end Francistide with a common *Transitus*: This does not mean inviting them to *our Transitus* services; it means inviting them to help plan and execute common *Transitus* services.

If you have question about how this might be done, contact me. That's what this office and this Committee are for. We would be very happy to conduct workshops on regional levels or for gatherings of two or three fraternities. We, as the SFO, cannot congratulate ourselves for “having a committee.” Imagine how our efforts in the realms of peace, justice and the integrity of Creation (now, there's an idea for a committee...) might be enhanced if we began to truly work “together with all people of good will” (beginning with fellow Franciscans, then fellow Christians and eventually brothers and sisters of other Traditions) to “build a more fraternal and evangelical world.”

The Catholic Church is dedicated to building these relationships on a variety of levels: religious leaders to leaders, scholars to scholars, practitioner to practitioner. As Franciscans, we have a very specific role to play in building these relationships. Just as we have the audacity to believe that we have something specific to contribute to the universal Church's mission of peace and justice, we should also have the audacity to think we have a specific contribution in ecumenical/interfaith relations. Francis is loved by Catholics and Protestants; Francis is loved by Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus. The Franciscan way resonates with the spirituality of Eastern Christians; it predates the Reformation, and opens its arms to mutual understanding with the “sultans” of other religions. This cannot be left to friars and Third Order brothers and sisters: most people of the world live secular lives, as do we. Now is our time.