

OUR FRATERNITY GATHERING: OUR LIFE!

by Francine Gikow, OFS

Why is being in a fraternity so important? Short Answer: because it is our brothers and sisters who support and challenge us to *live* the LIFE of a Secular Franciscan. We cannot do it alone! We learn about ourselves and our charism by living in fraternity. Living with the same people in fraternity for the rest of our lives (unless we relocate) challenges us to an ever deepening relationship with others in a new family of faith. As family, our Constitutions outline this responsibility when it states: ***“The brothers and sisters are co-responsible for the life of the fraternity to which they belong...The sense of co-responsibility of the members requires personal presence, witness, prayer, and active collaboration...”*** (GC 30, 1-2-) Therefore, fraternity is all about *relationships and responsibility*. Without relationship, we do not have fraternity. Without responsibility, we do not have fraternity. We are *co-responsible* and *co-accountable* for our fraternity life. We must be participating “in fraternity” as Secular Franciscans—there are NO isolated members. It is a part of our charism, and it is what we promised at profession. We owe our brothers and sisters our presence. It is VITAL to our vocation.

Our fraternity is canonically established, which means that we are officially an arm of the Catholic Church—so we should be a role model or example of a “little church.” Fraternity is not a prayer group, a business meeting, or a sodality. We are an Order in the Church and have a different goal than any other parish group: our goal is *to grow in holiness* through living the Secular Franciscan life in fraternity.

To grow in holiness means we need a stable, committed (permanently professed) community of like-minded brothers and sisters to encourage us in our journey, challenge us to conversion and to accompany us in our sorrows and joys. In other words, we need a family! Since fraternity, and the

ongoing Franciscan formation it provides, is crucial in our Secular Franciscan journey, we *prioritize* our attendance at gatherings before parish or other commitments.

There are four essentials that make up a Fraternity Gathering. They are:

- **A Communal Prayer Experience**
- **Announcements** (very short in length)
- **Ongoing Formation** (This is the most important part of the gathering and should be given the longest time allotment,)
- **Social**

(Please note: All four elements/parts should be present for most meetings except for an occasional celebration or feast.) A time schedule for the fraternity gathering ensures that all four elements are addressed and given their due. There should also be a balance between times for prayer, ongoing formation, business, and social interaction within the fraternity gathering.



The Fraternity Council is encouraged to develop a yearly formation plan or calendar of formation topics for each fraternity gathering. Topics and ideas can come from the CIOFS and National OFS websites, Papal encyclicals, Formation Fridays, TAU articles, Franciscan books, and the identified needs of the fraternity seen by the Council. The regional formation team can be invaluable in helping to locate resources and materials for a particular theme.

Let’s look at each element individually. The suggested

time schedule identified in each section is for a two-hour gathering. Of course, if there is additional time available, segments can be lengthened accordingly. Ultimately, the fraternity council is responsible for developing an appropriate schedule for the gathering and adhering to it.

Ongoing Formation: (approx. 30-40 minutes)

Ongoing formation is considered *the most important part* of a fraternity gathering and is *the only place* where we are fed Franciscan and lay spirituality, as well as the Franciscan charism. Ongoing formation offers study and practice in the Secular Franciscan Way of Life and through its discussions, reflections, and the sharing of relationships, we develop a cohesiveness of mission in the fraternity's ongoing formation. Attendance is crucial for each and every gathering, because we are, in a sense, feeding ourselves and others with "Franciscan food" in ongoing formation. When it's absent, we starve!

Communal Prayer Time: (about 15-20 minutes)

Communal prayer times should be Franciscan in focus and could be taken from a selection of the *Liturgy of the Hours* or the *Office of the Passion*, intercessory prayer, a decade of the Crown rosary, Stations of the Cross, Gospel meditation, words of St. Francis or Clare, and many others. Prayer time is NOT a time for private devotions, or the latest trend in pious practices/activities. Please Note: Attending Mass as a fraternity is nice, but it is *not* a mandatory part of a fraternity's prayer time.

Announcements: (usually 10 minutes or less)

Fraternity business should be the shortest portion of the fraternity gathering. Announcements of retreats, upcoming events, anniversaries, and deaths can be highlighted in the newsletter, with a short mention at the gathering. Fraternity apostolates and volunteer needs could be discussed with signup sheets available. CIOFS/NAFRA/Regional News can be listed in the fraternity newsletter and briefly mentioned at the gathering.

The Social: (usually around 30 minutes)

This, too, is an essential part of the gathering. It provides a way to deepen relationships through sharing of personal news within the fraternity in a casual but caring environment. Every gathering should include time for the brothers and sisters to informally share among themselves and encounter each other. From experience, I realize that this

element of the fraternity gathering is the most likely of all the elements to extend past its allotted time. It is important, however, that someone is assigned to monitor the time and announce the ending of the social in order to clean up and progress to another part of the gathering. Continued eating during prayer time and/or ongoing formation should be discouraged, because it distracts from prayer and the content of the ongoing formation.

Needless to say, having a loving, active, joyful fraternity does not simply happen. It takes a lot of work! Because we are a "gathering" not a meeting, we rely on the Holy Spirit guiding us. We are not a business, nor are we "run" like a business, but rather, we lead by consensus and by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is known as "servant leadership" in the Secular Franciscan Order. To be a servant leader in the order, is to first serve and animate (inspire) a fraternity. It is sacrificial in nature because it is a gift freely given to the fraternity with a generous spirit of service. The elected Council's style of servant leadership - is NOT directing, but rather listening deeply and with compassion.

It is NOT "My way or the highway" but rather being open to new ideas/concepts.

IT is NOT power and control but rather valuing and encouraging the growth of others.

The "Ideal" Fraternity has:

- the "anima" (or spirit) of the Franciscan Charism, which is JOY,
- a cohesiveness of fraternal spirit and sharing,
- a sincere love witnessed in personal interactions,
- acceptance and warmth,
- unity of purpose while accepting diversity in expression.

At our profession, we promised to "make the fraternity a genuine ecclesial assembly and a living Franciscan community"(OFS Ritual, p.22). Let us do what we have promised to do!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What inspired you in this article? Describe what inspired you and why.
2. What are some "take aways" or ideas you want to remember?
3. What idea or thought challenges you the most and why?
4. What will you change in your Secular Franciscan life as a result of this article?