

Method of Joint Reflection and Collection of Proposals

In response to CIOFS' request, the National Fraternity of the OFS in the United States surveyed our membership regarding the proposals by CIOFS, asking members to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each proposal, with space for any comments. We also asked the following open-ended questions: Do you think these proposed changes will be effective? Are the anticipated costs a concern? Can you suggest another solution? Is there something not mentioned in the survey that you think is needed to fully develop the Order? What can we do as an Order to bring about this development? What, if anything, would you change? Also included in the survey were questions on our members' experience of leadership (7), formation (3), fraternal life (6), spiritual assistance/visitations (4), communications (2), vocations (1), and what is needed to enhance their fraternity's relationship with the Church (1) and the various levels of the Order (1), and their JPIC (1) and Franciscan Youth (1) programs, as well as demographic indicators (3). The survey was done electronically, with hard copies distributed to members without ready access to a computer. All professed members, spiritual assistants and people in formation were invited to complete the survey. There were 2009 responses (of a total of 13,500 professed + candidates) for a ~15% response rate.

A Perspective on the OFS in the US

The survey revealed that our membership is mature and rich in life experience, but virtually half have come very recently to their Franciscan vocation. Barely half (51%) of those who responded had been professed for > 10 years, while 41% had been professed ≤ 10 years and 8% were in formation. Two-thirds (66%) of our professed members are between the ages of 56 and 75, with an additional 21% aged 76 or older. Only 2.6% of us are under the age of 45. An even more telling statistic is the age distribution of those in formation and the newly professed. Again, 65% of our newly professed (<5 years) are between 56-75 years of age, and 15% are 76 or older, meaning 80% of the newly professed are over the age of 55. Only 5.6% are less than 45 years old. Of those in formation, 74% are over the age of 55, and fully 90% are over 45.

National OFS Priorities

The priorities of our national family were reflected in people's reactions to the CIOFS proposals. When responses to the open-ended survey questions were categorized by theme, the most frequently mentioned topics were: the need for more vocations and more visibility in the wider Church (25%), along with more care in vocational discernment and stressing the depth of commitment required; a concern for simplicity and an emphasis on the basics (18%); a desire to strengthen formation (16%); improving the quality of fraternal life (15%); prioritization of goals while minimizing bureaucracy (15%); and more communication between all levels of the Order (11%).

Overview of Responses to the CIOFS Proposals

All of the ten permanent structures proposed by CIOFS garnered substantial agreement on an individual basis. In general, those proposals dealing with formation and preparation issues were viewed most favorably, with people appreciating the importance of a unified and coherent formation, and the need to prepare newly elected leaders for their responsibilities. Proposals which were perceived as unnecessary, or as setting up layers of bureaucracy, were viewed less positively. The three most strongly favored were (in descending order, with % of responses which agreed and strongly agreed): Annual Courses of Formation for Recently Elected Ministers and International Council Members (91%), Pool of Persons of Great Experience in the Order (89%), International Formation Office (89%). The least favored proposals were International Area Coordination Organisms (78%), Office for Financial Matters with Stable Personnel (77%) and Office for the Postulation of the Causes of Saints (74%).

General Concerns Regarding the CIOFS Proposals

The cumulative effect of listing the ten recommended proposals may have skewed peoples' impression that every problem in the Order is being addressed by adding more structure to the upper levels of the Order. Many respondents viewed the newly conceived structures as a bureaucracy that may concentrate power in the hands

of a few while not really addressing issues of primary interest to them, besides being costly to maintain. People missed an emphasis on prayer and reliance on the direction of the Holy Spirit. It seems to many that what is most needed to develop the Order is more members who understand in depth what it means to be professed in the OFS, and who commit to it fully. Adding more structural components (except possibly those for formation) does not seem likely to be effective in promoting this, nor does it fit their image of the Order being a family of simple followers of St. Francis. Even with projects that most people supported e.g. a Formation Office, their enthusiasm was tempered by concerns that we may lose the flexibility to tailor formation to particular fraternity or cultural needs. However, despite their concerns about the advisability and efficacy of some of these “structural” solutions, people were generally in favor of the Presidency getting the help and support they need. Delegating some elections, visitations, and the performance of *ad hoc* studies to capable OFS members seems to be a reasonable way to reduce the workload of the Presidency.

Possible Projects

Very few concrete projects were suggested for international consideration. They included

- production of videos (or other materials) to be used for promotion of the Order. [vocations/visibility]
- better use of technology, including a way for individual seculars to communicate directly with other seculars around the world, share ideas, and inspire other ministries. [communications]
- international gatherings like the NAFRA Quinquennial Congresses that would be open to all seculars [fraternity]
- a joint disaster relief program similar to the one that NAFRA is beginning in the US, only for seculars in all parts of the world. [service/outreach]
- development of retirement communities for seculars. [fraternity]

A Final Recommendation

CIOFS (the Presidency) seems to be saying that our current structure is not working well for them, so we should incorporate some additional structural elements, hoping that this will relieve some of the pressure on the leadership, unify our formation activities, and improve communications both within and outside the Order. We suspect that the real issue is more fundamental than that.

Perhaps we all need to consider the situation of our Order a bit differently. The truth is we are a huge Order, vastly larger than any of the individual Orders of friars and sisters. Due to our very recent unification after a long history of being divided along the lines of the Friar Provinces, we haven't had much time to consider how best to organize ourselves, but have attempted to work from models which have been successful for much smaller groups of vowed religious. We haven't directly addressed the issue of whether our size---not to mention our language, national and cultural differences---renders those models somewhat impracticable (although CIOFS proposals suggest that this might be the case).

There are other indicators of our fundamental differences from other orders. Because we do not take vows nor do we live in community in the same way as the vowed religious do, our current structure is necessarily much more loosely organized than theirs. We more closely resemble a 'movement' rather than a more rigorously organized 'order'---a movement that recalls the early days of the Order of Penance.

We all recognize the necessity and the advantages of having a firm and sufficient structure: it organizes, maintains, facilitates, focuses, unifies. But it can also limit flexibility and perhaps tend to hamper the action of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe it's time to consider and work with the advantages of having a very minimal structure. Maybe we should wonder why, after so many centuries, our Order has successfully become one. Might it be because God sees a need for a very large multicultural brotherhood spanning the globe, all living the gospel in fraternal communion? Maybe we should be thinking of how best to facilitate a group like that, looking at our size, our multicultural identity, our loose structure and our flexibility as distinct advantages willed by God for his purpose.