



NAFRA-USA

NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER-USA

National Minister's Message

by Jan Parker, OFS

Two events this past October made quite an impact in my life, both personally and in my role as National Minister. The first of these events was our National Fraternity Chapter at Mount St. Francis, Indiana. The second was the Korean Congress in Huntington, New York. Each of these large gatherings of Secular Franciscans from across the country had its own unique purpose, and each also presented some particular challenges. To be honest, I headed to each of these events with some anxious concerns, but prayer was answered and love won the day! I came away filled with such joy, wonder and thankfulness that my heart is still dancing as I think about it. What struck me to the point of amazement is the fraternal love I witnessed and experienced when it could have so easily gone another way. My sisters and brothers, you were shining like stars! And that is exactly the point.



We are all too aware of the darkness of sin in our world. Controversial issues can polarize us. Difficult discussions can become contentious. Hardheartedness can obscure our vision. Language and cultural barriers can cause mistrust and isolation. This darkness can affect each of us, and our fraternity gatherings are not immune. Yes, evil is invasive, but there is nothing to fear. Darkness can never overcome the light of Christ which has come into the world (cf. John 1:1-18).

Light breaks into the darkness when kindness and courtesy abound; when someone thinks of your needs ahead of time and provides for them; when you are new to a group and receive a great welcome; when you do not know the language and willing translators are ever at your side; when a forum is established so that every voice – even the newest, and even the least – is heard and respected; when deliberations are filled with active listening; when we really do seek to understand more than to be understood, and when joy and laughter fill a room. This was my experience at each of these events.

At the Chapter it was a joy to hear convictions expressed with gentleness and humility; and heartwarming to see tender concern shown to those who struggled with a majority decision. There were differences of opinion but no discord. Bumps in the road were patiently tolerated as the Holy Spirit worked and we trusted the process. The Korean Congress was an example beyond compare of how to include those who do not speak the language, how to gently invite and encourage someone unfamiliar to enjoy cultural traditions. My feeble attempts at speaking Korean were warmly received.

Brothers and sisters, we know it's never easy to be away from home and in a strange place. It's not easy to create fraternity in a group where some have known each other a long time, and some are new. None of these challenges are easy to deal with, but you did it! Yes, there were a few inconveniences, but cooking breakfast together gave us an opportunity for team building and exploring culinary gifts; community bathrooms provided an experience of our common humanity. These hurdles were a source of joy as we gently and humbly helped one another over them.

It's an amazing thing to be around this kind of love. It can change you. It opens you up to what is real and true and good. It can fill you with wonder. St. Augustine says, "Love gives birth to unity, pride

gives birth to division.” I assure you neither pride nor divisiveness were to be found.

I can't thank you enough for showing me – loud and clear – what love is all about. It's not that these gatherings were any more special than so many others, but I was obviously at a place where I really needed to witness love in action. I needed an anchor of hope to keep me believing that our profession to live the gospel really does make a difference in our lives.

I pray this kind of love will always be seen when we come together, but our call is to also bring this love to the world. I believe that is happening. I also believe that what I experienced at these two events will make a big difference in the life of our Order and mold us in the year ahead. Love always points the way forward.

In a few weeks we will celebrate Christmas, and I will be gazing at the manger scene and all the lights

on my tree. As I look at each little light I will think of each of you, twinkling like stars in the sky above Bethlehem. You are bright with love as you look upon the Babe. The Light you reflect points out the way for others, as if to say, “I have found Love, and He is right here in the manger!”

Our love story with the Lord continues. He loves us and comes to us so humbly. Let us go to him humbly as well, eager to receive His Love.

*“Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full of accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation in which you shine like stars in the world.”
Philippians 2:2-4, 14-15*

P.S. Shortly after writing this article I found the following passage from The Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano. It describes those early gatherings of the Lesser Brothers. It is a fitting description of our gatherings as well:

“The noble building of charity rises *upon the foundation* of perseverance;
and in it *living stones*,
gathered from every part of the world,
have been built in to a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.
What a great flame of charity burned in the new disciples of Christ!
What great love of devout company flourished in them!

When they all gathered somewhere
or met each other on the road (which frequently happened),
in that place a shoot of spiritual love sprang up,
scattering over all love the seeds of real delight.

What more can I say?
There were
chaste embraces, delightful affection, a holy kiss,
sweet conversation,
modest laughter, joyful looks, *a clear eye*,
a supple spirit, *a peaceable tongue*, *a mild answer*,
a single purpose, prompt obedience and untiring hands.”