

CNSA

News & Views

Franciscan life in the Twenty-First Century
Lester Bach OFM Cap – Spring, 2016

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WELCOME TO 2016!

December 16, 2015 came and I finished a semester-long sabbatical of ongoing formation at the Franciscan School of Theology in Oceanside, CA. Among the classes was a class by Bill Short OFM on *Franciscan themes* and a class by Wayne Hellmann OFM Conv, *comparing the writings of St. Francis and Pope Francis* (Evangelii Gaudium and Laudato Si'). These Friars (together with Regis Armstrong OFM Cap) edited the three volumes titled: *St Francis of Assisi - The Saint / The Founder / The Prophet*.

I met with various Secular Franciscans in southern California, a blessing during my time there. I even attended a Christmas party with a hospitable Korean fraternity. During this time I also completed a book, written with Vinal Van Benthem OFS, entitled *WAITING FOR LOVE*. We're hoping it will be available at the "Q".

I will share ideas at the "Q" about the Trinity and implications for Franciscan life. They are not solutions but ideas to assist fraternities to prompt a rich level of dedication. In this issue of TAU-USA I am sharing some ideas that might help us engage in dialogue at the "Q".

A REALITY CHECK

Seculars model the vision of St. Francis and Clare in their lives. Such growth is ongoing for us. E.g. the work of the national formation team is an example of dedicated service. The insights of national committees and leaders around the country are clear in their workshops and articles in TAU-USA. Good material is available. Franciscans who absorb the ideas grow wiser as well as giving the ideas expression in their lives.

It would be a sad day for fraternity life if people follow a path known as *"We always did it this way!"* Fraternity life is less invigorating for such fraternity members since nothing changes. I hope your fraternity is not among them. Councils, do not presume the spirit of your membership without doing an evaluation of the members' dedication to and implementation of the 1978 OFS Rule!

Ideas that I share here and at the "Q" are meant to stimulate dialogue and enrich our dedication to the OFS way of life. Each fraternity does its own evaluation. If

something needs change, members engage in dialogue to find ways to make changes. The challenge supports both personal and fraternity *conversion*. The OFS Rule requires *daily conversion* (cfr. Article #7). At regular gatherings, fraternity members can share stories about their OFS life. Personal stories offer ways and insights that assist us in seeking *conversion* in our personal Franciscan lives!

The Trinity prompts Franciscans to proclaim, in their lives, a vision of the 1978 Rule of life. The Trinity calls us to model the message of St. Francis (Gospel living) for people. Failure is not an option. Nor is success easily achieved. *Love, persistence, prayer, conversion, learning, and trust in the Trinity* are normal tools of support for Franciscans on this journey.

Sharing experiences from daily life helps Franciscans bring gospel gifts to - the fraternity, spouses, families, organizations, cities, parishes, politicians, enemies and people who are *waiting for love!* It happens in supermarkets, malls, restaurants, car trips, people meetings, kitchens, schools, parishes, sick beds, at home, and everywhere we go.

Peace - Justice - Conversion - Mercy - Dialogue - Forgiveness - Love - Understanding - Relationships - Compassion - Solidarity - Bringing joy, are qualities expected of Franciscans. They are obvious signs of development in daily life. Fraternity gatherings can provide guidance to live these goals through shared life-experiences.

Devotions can be a healthy part of Franciscan gatherings. But they are expected to support actual change in our hearts. If we multiply devotions and make no personal changes, we become a bit unbalanced. Of course, it is easier to

add a devotion than to change a heart. We need balance in our lives. Check whether your devotions stimulate *conversion* and *growth* in Franciscan spirituality.

Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God; indeed, one who does not love others "walks in the darkness" (1 John 2:11), "remains in death" (1 John 3:14) and "does not know God" (1 John 4: 8). Benedict XVI has said that "closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God," And that love is, in the end, the only light which "can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage to keep living and working." (Benedict XVI) When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord's greatest and most bountiful gifts. Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the 'other' we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, we must constantly be missionaries. ... A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others. ... We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop living and lock ourselves up in our own comforts. Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide.

Evangelii Gaudium - The Joy of the Gospel
Pope Francis - #272

The words of Pope Francis challenge us to BE professed Franciscans. The Trinity calls us to live a gospel life through daily observance of the OFS Rule. Fraternity gatherings can *provide* ways and means to share insights and experiences with one another. It is one way to be involved with our brothers and sisters. At profession we promised to practice what we profess! The monthly gathering is one place to learn from one another. It requires effort by the members and local, regional, national and international councils to extend our ability to *BE Franciscans*. Otherwise why answer the Trinity's call?

Programs with guest speakers are fine. But we need to dialogue with the speaker and among ourselves to spell out how the

topic applies to Franciscan life. Attentive listening helps us learn. *Dialogue* helps us see how topics touch our hearts as Franciscans. Passivity, on the other hand, does little to stimulate *conversion* or *deepen relationships*.

United by their vocation as "brothers and sisters of penance," and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls "conversion." Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily!

OFS Rule - #7

People who dialogue listen to other's stories. We may recognize ourselves there. The same is true as others listen to us. Personal struggles seem easier to manage when another's human experience shares similar difficulties from personal experiences. *We are not alone*. Sharing experiences through dialogue can prompt fresh solutions as we share ideas. We get to know each other as we share common stories from living the OFS Rule. None of this happens if we are passive or just clap or quietly ponder good ideas someone shared. If we rarely invest in dialogue, many good ideas will likely remain stagnant.

Check the hours spent at regular fraternity gatherings. Gatherings support the creation of meaningful growth. Three or four hours a month is about 36 to 48 hours a year - about two days. We must make good use of these hours together. Councils and members support extra gatherings which may include regional and district gatherings, 'fun' times, professions, jubilees, workshops, special initial and ongoing formation sessions. Formation sessions can include members who never had solid formation. Other gatherings can offer support to parish programs, plan visits to shut-ins, or develop well-planned visitations. These and other efforts are important for fraternity life. They build *unity*. We dialogue when politics, violence, illness or terror challenge our way of living. *Conversion* is vital for Franciscans as is *unity* with our brothers and sisters - and the Trinity.

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The Lord's missionary mandate includes a call to growth in faith: "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Mt. 28: 20). Hence it is clear that the first proclamation also calls for ongoing formation and maturation. Evangelization aims at a process of growth which entails taking seriously each person and God's plan for his or her life. All of us need to grow in Christ. Evangelization should stimulate a desire for this growth, so that each of us can say wholeheartedly: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2: 20)

It would not be right to see this call to growth exclusively or primarily in terms of doctrinal formation. It has to do with "observing" all that the Lord has shown us as the way of responding to his love.

Evangelii Gaudium - The Joy of the Gospel

Pope Francis - #160 - 161