



YOUTH-FRIENDLY FRATERNITIES LIKE A FAMILY MEAL

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The commission has spoken many times about the importance of creating youth-friendly fraternities. Why is this essential and what does this really mean? The simple answer to the first question is, it's essential because if a young person is interested in joining a YouFra (Franciscan Youth Fraternity), at this point they have nowhere to go with that desire, except to us—the Secular Franciscans. There are only a few official YouFra groups in the United States.

Many individuals and fraternities, however, are taking steps to reach out to youth and young adults. So until there are enough young people to form a YouFra, they need us to welcome them into our fraternities! Our Rule calls us to include our younger generation and “adopt appropriate means for growth in Franciscan and ecclesial life and encourage everyone to a life of fraternity” (Art. 24).

What does it mean to have a youth-friendly fraternity? That question is a little complicated. We all know the best way to draw people to us is by being present and visible; by living our charism authentically and with great joy; and by truly making our fraternity life vibrant and inspirational. This is especially true if a young person crosses our path or even walks through the door to join a gathering. Our younger Catholics live in a dangerous and sometimes depressing world. Our call is to spread hope, and to encourage them to see the good, beautiful creation around them and to seek Jesus in every face they meet. Our willingness to serve and sacrifice to make things better speaks volumes. Phew. That's a lot to ask, right? However, this is what we said “yes” to in our Profession Rite!

How do we build relationships with a different generation? We are an aging Order. Most of us at one time or another have expressed a wish that younger people would be joining us as Secular Franciscans. One of my Franciscan friends said recently, “I look around the table and the young people are missing.” I had to ask her, “When was the last time we invited them to a meal? Were they warmly welcomed? What did we serve? Most importantly, what was the conversation around the table?” Of course, she was metaphorically speaking of the Eucharistic table, but we can use the same analogy when defining a youth-friendly fraternity. We can invite them to our “family meal.”

When was the last time you invited a young person to a meal?

Our gatherings or other Franciscan events are like a family meal, right? Many friendships are forged or strengthened over a meal. Have we considered inviting others, including young people, to join us?



How visible are we? Do others, in particular the young people in our midst, know we are Secular Franciscans, or what that means?

Were they warmly welcomed?

Did we make an effort to connect personally with them? (As we do at a family meal?) Listen to their story? Let them know we were glad they came and invite them back?

What did you serve?

Was the content of our gathering nutritious, delicious, well balanced, and enough for everyone? (Like a plate of food?) Would they want seconds or trust it would be good the next time too? Would they want to invite a friend to come along?



What was the conversation around the table?

Was our gathering inspiring and meaningful? (Think of a conversation around the dinner table at a family meal.) Did we allow open, non-judgmental sharing and invite all to have a chance to speak? Have we learned how to dialogue respectfully when difficult subjects arise? Did we emanate joy and show how much we care about one another?

We all know that wishing doesn't just make something happen on its own. (I have often wished a family meal would just arrive automatically and that everyone would get along!) It takes creativity, determination, time, and initiative. Many fraternities around the country are setting goals in this area and really working to determine next steps.

We suggest you use this year's NAFRA theme as inspiration and simply "listen, discern, and go forth."

First, listen. Listen to the young people in your lives, and to one another in fraternity. Listen to the Holy Spirit. Is God calling your fraternity to have the courage and to take the time to reach out to our younger generations in some way? Remember—our mission isn't to grow our fraternities. Our mission is to share the gospel. How does the Lord want us to participate in this mission?

Next, discern. Start looking, as individuals and as a fraternity. Who are the young people to whom you have access? Are there young people in your Church? Are there already existing programs for youth and young adults nearby? Is there a college, Catholic school, or a catechesis program that is open to guests or outside speakers? Discern what age group you would best serve and who in your fraternity would be willing to take this on.

Finally, go forth. Once you determine who your young people are, you can brainstorm ideas for ways to immerse yourselves—even if it's only a few times a year—either into an already existing program as a support, or by planning an event of some kind that will give you the opportunity to mingle and build relationships with the younger generations.

Our Rule tells us in Article 24 that we are to foster communion among one another, especially with our youth and young adults, and it challenges us to "adopt appropriate means for growth in the Franciscan and ecclesial life." The commission is here to help. We encourage you to keep on moving forward. The fruit of your labor may eventually lead to the growth of the Secular Franciscan Order... but even if it doesn't, you can look back and know you've done what you were called to do. Enjoy your meal!