

# FRANCISCAN LIVING

## Don't Just Leave, Opt In!

By Francine Gikow, OFS, Staff Editor

In the last issue of the *TAU-USA*, Fr. Lester Bach, OFM Cap., one of our National Spiritual Assistants, touched on an area that is sensitive to life in fraternity. In it, he wrote, “some folks separate themselves from the OFS rather than engage in dialogue which could lead to understanding and healthy change.”

I am sure anyone who has spent time in fraternity has seen brothers and sisters either transfer to another fraternity or leave active participation in fraternity life because of some issue he or she did not like. It might be someone's personality, or how something was handled or run, or even the direction of the fraternity's expression of their vocation.

I often ask these questions: “Would you leave your family for this? Would you leave your marriage for this?” If we compare our involvement in the Order and in our particular fraternity as a family/marital union, things can be put in perspective. Have you unconsciously come into the Order with less of a commitment to it than you have toward your family or marriage? A family takes the good with the bad. It works things out. You may never see “eye to eye,” but you are there for each other. In a marriage, because you made that commitment, there is no turning back! You are forced to work things out, even if it means getting help! We need to have the same mindset in our Secular Franciscan life as we have toward our family and marital life. Too often this is lacking. When we leave ourselves with no choice but to stay in fraternity, then we are willing to do the “work” of dialogue...and I do mean, “work”! It is *not* easy or quick, and sometimes it can be excruciatingly painful. But we learn from it each and every time! We mature as spiritual individuals capable of showing great love as we persevere. A Spiritual Director is extremely important to assist you in discerning your thoughts and helping to grow in self-knowledge.

*Each of us, also, has a special responsibility to privately discuss with the person involved or a member of the fraternity's Council, our concerns for the well being of the fraternity. They need to hear from us! In the same way, we need to be open and receptive to their concerns as well. Things cannot change unless people hear about things. This is called dialogue. If we feel uncomfortable discussing our feelings or concerns, we should bring along a spiritual friend who understands and can help us express our feelings and concerns, using nonjudgmental “I” statements such as: “When this happens, I feel this way...”*

Every time I see someone leave, either a particular fraternity or the Order, I am left with great sadness, because an opportunity for spiritual growth has been denied. We have simply said “no” to God. We have decided it was *our* wants, *our* needs and *our* desires rather than His. After all, it is *His* will that we experience unity, love, spiritual growth and maturity. For as Francis said:

*“All my brothers [and sisters]: let us pay attention to what the Lord says: Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you for our Lord Jesus Christ, whose footprints we must follow, called His betrayer a friend and willingly offered Himself to His executioners. Our friends, therefore, are all those who unjustly inflict upon us distress and anguish, shame and injury, sorrow and punishment, martyrdom and death. **We must love them greatly for we shall possess eternal life because of what they bring us.**” (Early Rule 22: 1-4)*

So what *does* this martyrdom bring us? What *are* the fruits of perseverance in fraternity life? We can expect a greater awareness and knowledge of our own sinfulness, greater sensitivity and patience toward others, an increase of charity or love toward others, and eventually a building up of the Kingdom of God here on earth in the form of our fraternity. As Fr. Bach stated: *“If people avoid dialogue, their actions often bring division rather than unity. Their example fails to reflect the Franciscan spirit...achieving separation is not a Franciscan goal. Working for unity is!”*