

Comments on "Life-Giving Union – Discernment and Discussion Focus Statements"

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These comments constitute stream of consciousness on the quotations offered. Please go to the letter below on the following page to read a summary of suggestions and thoughts.

1. Regarding the duty of Ministers General and Provincials. What the OFS Constitutions state in 85.2 seems to get to the heart of issues facing the Seculars and the Friars: the connections between the seculars and the friars while essential for guaranteeing the fidelity of the OFS to the Franciscan charism, communion with the Church, and union with the Franciscan family, values which represent a vital commitment for the Secular Franciscans, nevertheless, the distinctiveness of the OFS charism in a vital presence of Franciscan values among laity in the Church must be fully owned by the Seculars themselves. They are not attempting to be a lesser form of Franciscan life in the world after the friars and sisters, but a leaven in society that only they can carry out or achieve. The issue for Provincials comes from seeing the OFS as another claim on the limited personnel of the jurisdiction. Is it possible to conceive of another model for carrying out the exchange of key aspects of the charism sought by the OFS that engages the friars and sisters while not proposing an onerous burden increasing difficult to fulfill? Coddling accomplishes little and simply builds an unhealthy co-dependence.
2. Regarding co-responsibility with laity. OFS have an opportunity to step up to a new way of being Church here, instead of seeing themselves as stepchildren to clergy and professed religious men and women. Is it possible that we first order/TOR Franciscans might afford laity due regard and respect as collaborators and contributors of import? Can the OFS become more than a faithful devotional body or even more than a fringe element in social justice advocacy alone? They might really model for others how an authentic vocation serves and carries out a mission for Christ. As a starting point, they might be challenged to express how they have witnessed to the key Evangelical values in their lifetimes; then they might express how what they have would contribute something essential that first order/tor cannot offer. Might there be an opening granted us through the current mistrust that many persons have of clergy and hierarchy after the sexual abuse crises and cover-ups.
3. Immersed in the world. Lino's comments point to a new way of thinking and acting. Collaboration for the sake of Christ's Mission is essential – what would a deeply committed lay Franciscan look like? The person would not be a "helper" to the First Order/TOR friars but would seek to take the charism to her/his peers without prejudice or preconceptions.
4. "Being rather than doing." Finding the way to be a Secular Franciscan means conceiving of ways the fundamental values can find expression in persons in their states in life. The common expressions may require a bit more thought to find something that doesn't mimic existing ways. I suspect that references to the early sources that reveal a movement with strong impact on their peers would be a good place to begin. A new vision would need a well-thought out plan that could be brought into practice incrementally.
5. The charism offered to the world. "A brotherhood of solidarity" makes perfect sense to a Franciscan since the bond of brotherhood/sisterhood needs no translation. As long as Christ is shown to be the inspiration and source for all, then the service rendered the world is to accomplish a bond of unity.
6. Laity as competent and contributing. The type of reform sought will not happen without some outreach directly to those who pastor the church at large. Those pastors may be the greatest obstacles where they have not come to understand a new way of being church. In fact, the obstacles are as many

as the current stumbling blocks to vibrancy: tired leadership in the OFS and in the first Orders/TOR; insufficient mass to generate passion; uneducated and unprepared persons on all sides; traditional OFS fraternities that are dying but still need assistance; lack of visionary leaders for the emergence of something new. Those proposing a new model will need to win over the first order/tor leadership. Those leaders will need to risk losing the old model and the people associated with it without certitude that the new model will grow quickly. Can the orders work together to create a pilot program in which members of the various orders would truly collaborate? For example, could the laity take charge and urge the friars to contribute what would best assist the efforts?

Dear Christopher,

Yesterday I spent some time attempting to articulate my concerns regarding the six points on "Life-Giving Union - Discernment and Discussion Focus Statement." Re-reading my notes this morning, I think that I may summarize the concerns with the following points:

1. Essential Rebirth of the Seculars. *Altius moderamen* works from the four noble intentions you quote: "[1] to guarantee the fidelity of the OFS to the Franciscan charism; [2] communion with the Church and [3] union with the Franciscan Family, [4] values which represent a vital commitment for the Secular Franciscans." It seems to me that the onus of presenting and articulating the charism for seculars rests upon the first orders/TORs which represent a Franciscan life that has become institutional for the sake of their outreach and mission and which largely have become the domain of clerical members. I offer that this is the lens through which the first order/TOR people view anything Franciscan, while my suspicion is that the birth of the movement in general came through a shared experience of a Church in need of reform to which lay and clerics all had something to contribute from their encounter with Christ. I am suggesting that the best persons to move towards a new articulation of the Franciscan charism in secular life are the seculars themselves.
2. Co-responsibility among the supporting Orders. Experience has taught me that at this moment major superiors are addressing survival issues in so far as they must attend to the aging population of their members and their quality of life; to the paucity of youthful vocations; to the abandonment and/or radical reconfiguration of traditional apostolates; to the mission of Christ in a new way. I suggest that given the number of significant issues superiors are facing, only by way of exception will the OFS take its rightful place in the deliberations of any leadership conversations. Add to this that a significant number of OFS fraternities are coming to conclusion. It would seem to me that simply implying guilt for a failure to make the OFS a priority will not lead to a change. I believe that only a visionary think-tank of Seculars with TORs, OFMs, Conventuals, and Capuchins has a chance of bringing about a change for rebirth. Note, I do not favor diminishing the particularities of each expression of Franciscanism, but rather a surrender of self-defensive posturing, competitive spirit, and domineering directions in favor of a beloved expression of evangelical life as old as Francis himself.
3. Passionate Conviction that Franciscan charism speaks the Gospel strongly to new generations is a *sine qua non*. If all are convinced that the glory days associated with large numbers have passed there is little hope of new birth. The glory of Christ is not equal to nor limited by numbers of persons generated by and carried largely by a cultural Catholicism. The Gospel is not dead.
4. Competence of laity. Perhaps never before have we in the United States had as many highly educated Catholics and a population still searching for Jesus (why do former Catholic compromise a large percentage of members in evangelical churches?). At the same time, the discouragement of the extent of sexual abuse and of the failures of leaders to strongly

respond to its scourge has set up a moment in which Seculars may have most credible leadership to exert in calling their church leaders and their peers to not abandon Jesus who invites repentance, judges, washes clean of sin, and seeks to do the will of the Father. Note that the movement never succeeds when it descends into severe ad hominem judgement, but only when it addresses the good to be embraced.

- A Way Forward. I see two areas to address: the first is a strategic plan to accompany the existing aging, traditional fraternities. A model of service to them ought to be endorsed so that a major superior knows what he must do. Service to the OFS in gratitude for peoples' faithfulness should characterize this plan. The second area is the convening of a small visionary summit to propose a new model for OFS that grows organically from the OFS and seeks a new "life-giving" relationship to the first orders/TORs. The OFS might look to those rebirth communities begun successfully in Italy, France and Spain among first order Capuchins under the hermeneutic of live simply the basic charism and it thrives; once thriving, others find it and embrace it. Begin small. What have we Franciscans got to lose?

Chris, these are my thoughts for the moment.

I will be praying for your meeting in St. Louis.

In Christ the Savior,

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