



National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order - USA

State of the Order October 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the National Fraternity,
Grace and peace to you in Christ Jesus! Happy Jubilee!

In joyful unity with our brothers and sisters of our entire worldwide Order we are celebrating a Jubilee Year (June 24, 2018 - June 24, 2019) commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Secular Franciscan Rule. I recently asked a group of Secular Franciscans to write three words to describe our Rule. Replies included, “conversion, prayer, humility” and “Gospel to Life”, but my favorite response was “*who we are*”. The Rule truly is “who we are.”

The National Fraternity has focused on the Rule during this past year. At our 2017 Chapter we chose the theme “Renewed and Confirmed: Live the Treasure!” Truly, our Rule is a treasure – and it is also a challenge! How can we live what we have professed? We have many helps. First and foremost, we have God’s grace, and we have each other. We must be open to both. We live the Gospel life *in fraternity*. The terms “brother and sister” have deep meaning for us. When we lose the deep meaning of those words - *brother and sister* - when we give up on the fraternity as *family*, then we simply become a group. When this happens, “we cease to be a family of God with Christ at its center and instead become a group with issues at its heart.”¹

During this Jubilee Year we have access to many new resources on how to study, love and live the Rule. The video “Forty Years of the ‘New’ Rule: A Treasure for the OFS” helps us appreciate how the Holy Spirit guided the wording of the 1978 revision of our Rule. The “Celebrate the Rule” cards from CIOFS highlight some of these words and call us to ponder their application in our lives. We have a collection of formation exercises from different Regions on how to celebrate the Rule.

As we began this Jubilee year we received a letter from our General Minister and brother Tibor Kauser. He describes the Rule as a Gift, a Call, an Inspiration, a Tool. Truly his letter is a beautiful reflection – worthy of close study.

As a National Fraternity we always look to the Rule to guide our efforts. Six years ago our National Fraternity Council identified six priorities – six aspects of living our Rule – on which to focus.

¹ Jamin Goggin and Lyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*, p. 118 (2017)

Let's look at the State of the Order with respect to these priorities. We have reported on progress in these areas throughout the year, and in the materials sent to you prior to Chapter - here we simply review the noteworthy accomplishments in each area.

Communication

News from the NEC is sent out regularly by way of emails, as well as in the TAU-USA. The launch of our new website assists greatly in communication, allowing local members to access information that is not always forwarded. Efforts are made to continually keep our email list serves up to date. Copying the Vice-Minister on certain emails has helped with our communication efforts. This year we have also expanded our Public Relations committee, adding two new members. We note that good communication is closely tied to good relationships – one builds on the other.

Vocations

The Vocations Toolkit is a great achievement, making it very easy to present a “Come and See” event. All materials in the Toolkit are available in English, Spanish and Korean, and the prayer card is also available in Vietnamese. Informing others about the Order is best achieved by way of personal invitation and elevator speeches, but the 1-800-FRANCIS line and our website reach a wider audience. Our new website has garnered, on the average, 6-8 inquiries each week. Various postings on the website also appear on social media (Facebook and Twitter) expanding our digital presence.

Formation

The National Formation Visioning Workshop set a new direction for formation. It was a very Spirit-led and graced event. Our Formation Commission is working closely with the National Executive Council (NEC) to develop the ideas that came from the workshop. Nationally, the TAU-USA newsletter remains a great formation tool.

Spiritual Assistance

Although it is too early to know the results, it was wonderful to see the great interest and attendance at our recent Regional Spiritual Assistant (RSA) workshop. The great majority of RSA's stayed for the Visioning Workshop which followed. The Conference of National Spiritual Assistants continue to work closely with the NEC. Fr. Jerome Wolbert is the newly appointed CNSA member representing the OFMs. We continue to ask and remain ever hopeful for an appointment of a Conventual Friar. Revision of the Spiritual Assistant Handbook is a project for 2018. Among her other duties, the CNSA secretary Miriam Kennedy is working on the RSA and CNSA email list serves. Mary Frances Charsky serves as the CNSA Treasurer.

Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC)

Last year (2017) our JPIC efforts focused on our theme of “O Breath of God, Unite us in Action” – noting the many ways that our fraternities and individual OFS members bring a Franciscan presence to the world. This past year (2018) our JPIC focus has been on formation, through such efforts as the special section on JPIC in the TAU-USA and our JPIC panel at this Chapter. We wish to thank Carlos Calderon for his service on the Franciscan Action Network Board of Directors. Unfortunately, he was unable due to health reasons to complete his term. David Seitz recently joined the Board as the OFS representative.

Youth

Our Franciscan Youth and Young Adult Commission has focused this past year on implementing the directives set at our 2017 Gathering on the Topic of Youth. This has been a year of building the commission, setting the foundation and initiating contact with those OFS already involved, or who are interested in working with Youth. There is certainly a renewed interest in this priority.

Multicultural Councilor

The position of Multicultural Councilor was added to the NEC after our 2016 Visitation from CIOFS. The NEC has maintained a strong awareness of multicultural challenges. A Spanish version of Essential Documents is ready to publish. Translations are only part of our work to reach out to various language groups. Further means to encourage interaction and outreach were generated during the Formation Visioning Workshop.

Administration

In addition to their work with the various Commissions and Committees to address the above-named priorities, the NEC attended to many administrative tasks. These include Visitations and Elections (including visitations of Guam and Hawaii); National finances; the writing of many reports and articles; the appointment of Commission and Committee Chairs; oversight of database, website and social media; development of National Guidelines (still a work in progress); securing venues for national events (3 this year); preparations for the 2021 Quinquennial; and preparing for this Chapter. The NEC has met 3 times during the past year, has connected on 9 conference calls and maintains daily contact via emails and phone calls.

Evaluating how we are addressing our priorities is one way to look at the State of the Order, but it doesn't tell us everything. There's more to the State of the Order than this. Let's step back a bit.

The Hope of Renewal - The Rule of 1978

The movement of the Holy Spirit at Vatican II, and the subsequent revision of our OFS Rule in 1978, launched a great renewal in our Order, the impact of which was *two-fold*. We were called to re-examine our identity as individual Secular Franciscans, as well as the entire structure of our Order. On the occasion of the Rule's approval, the four Ministers General of the Franciscan Family wrote:

"The hope of renewal hinges upon returning to the origins and to the spiritual experience of Francis of Assisi and of the brothers and sisters of penance who received from him their inspiration and guidance. This renewal also depends upon openness to the Spirit in the signs of the times."²

Now, 40 years later, we must ask ourselves, are we accomplishing this renewal as an Order? There have certainly been milestones along the way:

² Letter of the Four Ministers General of the Franciscan Family, October 4, 1978, excerpts of which can be found in the front of the "little red Rule book."

- The unification of the Order, which required years of tough commitment and absorbed the greatest part of the energy of the leaders of the Order,
- Juridical codification of the OFS own Law, General Constitutions, International and National Statutes, etc., and its enforcement,
- The effort to amalgamate, to give a common base and a sense of belonging to the thousands of Fraternities scattered in the whole world,
- Integration into the various organisms of the Franciscan Family, of the Church and establishing our presence in the world
- Monumental efforts to provide solid formation – both initial and ongoing – to bring realization of the unique nature of the Order, our identity, our call and sense of belonging.
- ...and all of this, while dealing with the daily management of the fraternities at the different levels (Chapters, Fraternal and Pastoral Visits, Congresses, etc.)

We marvel at the progress made in this relatively short span of four decades *but agree with the International Council (CIOFS):*

“Structurally, unification has occurred, but we still experience problems on how the sense of unity and belonging are perceived. We have not fully embraced the implications of our Rule and Constitutions; have not fully understood our vocation, identity and mission; and have not yet lived up to what the Church expects of us.³”

We would suggest that the majority of the work for the past 40 years has been structural (organization and administration). The full renewal of our Order has not yet occurred.

In their study and reflection on the current situation CIOFS has identified some fundamental problems which prevent the Order from fully developing into what it should be:

1. Lack of understanding and awareness of the commitments made with our Profession to fully correspond to God’s vocation for us.
2. Lack of commitment of many members to enter into a serious conversion journey.
3. Substantial ignorance of the Sacred Scriptures, of the writings of Saint Francis, of the essential texts of Franciscan spirituality, of the OFS Rule, of the General Constitutions, of the Ritual.
4. Absence and/or lack of implementation of organizational structures and projects of the Order, consistent with its nature, which may allow a satisfactory spiritual and apostolic development.

³ CIOFS *How Should an Order Like the OFS be Managed at All its Levels* can be found on the OFS-USA website (secularfranciscansusa.org) under Key Documents / 2017 General Chapter Conclusions / Working Documents in Preparation for 2017 General Chapter.

Although we would like to be able to say differently, there are signs that some of these problems are pervasive within the National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order - USA (OFS-USA.)

Consider your own experience. You probably know many holy Seculars yourself, and that's great. But ask yourself: How many times have you seen members disappear shortly after profession? Have you noted an increasing unwillingness to serve the fraternity, or a lack of responsibility on the part of those who serve? Do members give priority to every other activity in their life before attending to Franciscan responsibilities, e.g. time for daily prayer; study of the Gospels; participating in fraternity gatherings; building relationships within the fraternity; tending to the duties they have agreed to perform? Are there struggles with members who lack a Franciscan disposition (humility, minority, poverty, service, courtesy, a spirit of unity and fraternity)? What is their attitude towards conversion? One Regional Minister puts it this way, "They seem more focused on changing the Order than on changing themselves."

Is this not also a gauge of the true State of our Order? Viewed from this perspective, some of us are gravely ill and in great need of healing. We desperately need the help of the Divine Physician.

What is CIOFS doing about this? The Recent Work of the International Council – 2018

Beginning with the 2014 General Chapter, CIOFS has focused its attention on how to address these serious endemic problems in our Order, stating: "If, starting from ourselves, all of us shall be willing to tackle these problems, then, we will be able to face and resolve, together with the brothers and sisters of the whole world, the problem of the structures and management of our Order and, after adequate trial periods, find solutions which fully suit the nature of our Order".⁴

At the XV General Chapter held in Rome, Nov. 4-12, 2017 the International Council (CIOFS) voted to move forward with the following, now known as the "**Terms of Reference**":

1. **International Formation Office**
2. **Fraternal Life Proposal**
3. **Building a Fraternal and Evangelical World**
4. **Leadership**
5. **Communications**
6. **Finance**

Several of these proposals involve setting up new structures within the Order. Will these new structures address the fundamental problems? We have to wonder, "*If the real point is conversion of heart – can the answer be more structure?*"

⁴ *Ibid.*

A few years ago, at our 2015 National Chapter, our General Minister Tibor Kauser gave a presentation on the Order – and the place of structure.

Here is what he said:

We are living *in an Order*. This means a structure, and organization - an institution. Living a charism as a group needs an organization, and vice versa, each organization within the Church needs a charism. We need the Order, because “a charism without an institution is a daydream, an institution without charism is a nightmare.” (Fr. Lester Bach OFM Cap.)

The OFS has a specific juridical character. We are a REAL ORDER, according to CCL 303, among the Third Orders. We have a certain autonomy, but that does not mean independence!

We have our own structure, our own organization. OFS is of pontifical right - our Rule is given by Pope Paul VI. All our basic documents are approved by the Holy See. Juridically we belong to the Congregation for the Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. We are a Public association of Christian Faithful.

DO WE REALLY NEED ALL THIS?

The structural aspect of being a real Order supports us, much like the skeleton supports the body, giving it shape. If it weren't there, we would have a problem - the body would collapse. If it functions well, it is invisible. We only see the bones when there's an accident. Our structure works best if it remains in the background. Structure is always an instrument, not the goal.

The NEC agrees on the importance of structure. Does the structure substitute for conversion? No. But it can help support it.

The Terms of Reference that CIOFS has given us reflect the current priorities for the International Order. For our part, we must now set our own priorities.

We do so in the light of:

1. Our Rule
2. CIOFS priorities – The Terms of Reference
3. The signs of the times

We look to our Rule to guide us, for as Tibor says, “Before we will know what to do it is imperative that we know who we are.” Our priorities do not have to be the same as CIOFS’ but they should relate. And finally, we look to the signs of the times – as we did at the recent Formation Visioning Workshop where we asked: “What is God’s vision for our Order?”

In conclusion, we must look to the good and trust as we go forward. It is not all bleak news. Our Order is maturing and the renewal is happening. We praise God for the hard work and dedication of those who have gone before us. A great deal of progress has been made in the past 40 years. We have seen God at work in our Regions, in our local fraternities, within our Councils and in our outreach. We have seen this, and we marvel at the movement of the Spirit among us. Even in our struggles – even when times are dark and we feel like running away - we must remember that God is at work. Stay strong in faith, hope and love! All of us are clay jars, just earthen vessels, but God has filled us with his glory! Let us celebrate God's glory within us and among us. Let us celebrate our Rule – and who we are.

The renewal is happening. Yes, fundamental problems exist and are causing heart disease within the Order. Setting priorities will not bring about a cure, as they are insufficient in themselves – but setting priorities will help.

We look to Christ, the Divine Physician, and to the Holy Spirit, the real Minister General of our Order, to bring about the deeper conversion of heart that is so needed. God will give us a new heart, a new spirit – and the bones of our structure will support this new life.

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, on your own intelligence do not rely;
In all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes, fear the LORD and turn away from evil;
This will mean health for your flesh and vigor for your bones.*

Proverbs 3:5-8

I praise and thank God for each of you, and for the privilege of serving with you. I want to thank our Vice-Minister Mary Bittner who collaborated with me on this report. I thank the entire Council and our Commission Chairs who are always with us, for their love and dedication, and all the wonderful gifts that they have shared.

May God give us peaceful hearts, fill our souls with joy, and fill us with all the holy virtues. May God preserve in us the virtues of wisdom, patience and perseverance.

With God we will do bravely.

Peace and all good,

Jan Parker & Mary Bittner, in consultation with the National Executive Council

National Executive Council

Jan Parker, Minister

Mary Bittner, Vice Minister

Jerry Rousseau, Treasurer

Jane DeRose-Bamman, Secretary

Mary Frances Charsky, Councilor

Willie Guadalupe, Councilor

Joan Geiger, Councilor

Mary Stronach, International Councilor

Br. Alexander Escalera OFM Cap., CNSA President-in-Turn

<i>Number of Local/Regional Fraternities in National Fraternity</i>	December 31, 2016	December 31, 2017
Canonically established Local Fraternities:	593	593
Emerging Local Fraternities:	53	43
Canonically established but inactive Local Fraternities:		
Regional Fraternities:	30	30
<i>In the National Fraternity</i>	December 31, 2016	December 31, 2017
Number of permanently professed members:	12,053	11,807
Number of temporary professed members:	---	---
Number of members in the period of formation:	1,654	1,762
Number of Fraternities/groups of Franciscan Youth:	---	0
Number of members of Franciscan Youth:	---	0
Number of groups of Franciscan Children:	---	0
Number of Franciscan Children:	---	4
Number of OFS Fraternities of permanent deacons:	---	0
Number of OFS permanent deacons:	---	96
Number of Fraternities of OFS priests (Const. 35,2):	---	0
Number of OFS diocesan priests:	---	30
Number of OFS Bishops:	---	0
Number of groups of members with private vows (36 GGCC):	---	0
Number of members with private vows:	---	8
<i>Number of Local Spiritual Assistants in the National Fraternity</i>	December 31, 2016	December 31, 2017
OFM:	All friars combined: 188	96
OFM Conv:		33
OFM Cap:		54
TOR:		17
Poor Clares:	All sisters	7
3 rd Order Franciscan religious brothers and sisters:	combined: 74	64
Other religious brothers and sisters:	3	9
Diocesan priest/deacons:	47	46
Members of OFS:	95	95
TOTAL number of local spiritual assistants:	407	421
Number of Local Fraternities without Spiritual Assistants:	168	151

Visitations

Date	Region	NAFRA Visitor	CNSA Visitor
1/12-14/18	St. Joan of Arc Region	Awilda Guadalupe	Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR
4/13-15/18	Franciscans of the Prairie Region	Mary Bittner	Fr. Jerome Wolbert, OFM
4/27-29/18	O.L. of the Rockies Region	Joan Geiger	Br. Alexander Escalera, OFM Cap.
4/27-29/18	Five Franciscan Martyrs Region	Awilda Guadalupe	Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR
5/18-19/18	St. Katharine Drexel Region	Mary Stronach	Fr. Jerome Wolbert, OFM
5/19-20/18	St. Maximilian Kolbe Region	Mary Bittner	Br. Alexander Escalera, OFM Cap.
5/25-26/18	Tau Cross Region	Jan Parker	Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR
6/15-16/18	St. Clare Region	Mary Frances Charsky	Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR
6/21-24/18	Los Tres Companeros Region	Awilda Guadalupe	Br. Alexander Escalera, OFM, Cap
6/29-7/1/18	Lady Poverty Region	Mary Stronach	Br. Alexander Escalera, OFM Cap.
6/8-10/18	O.L. of Indiana Region	Mary Bittner	Fr. Jerome Wolbert, OFM
8/3-5/18	Brothers & Sisters of St. Francis Region	Joan Geiger	Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR

Elections

Date	Region	NAFRA Presider	CNSA Witness
1/12-14/18	St. Francis Region	Jan Parker	Br. Alexander Escalera, OFM Cap.
2/16-18/18	O.L. of Guadalupe Region	Mary Frances Charsky	Br. Gordon Boykin, OFM
2/17/18	St. Thomas More Region	Jane DeRose-Bamman	Br. Alexander Escalera, OFM Cap.
4/13-15/18	St. Elizabeth of Hungary Region	Mary Frances Charsky	Alice Aubuchon, OFS
4/14/18	Fr. Solanus Casey Region	Jerry Rousseau	Fr. Samuel Fuller, OFM Cap.
4/21/18	St. Margaret of Cortona Region	Joan Geiger	Anne Mulqueen, OFS
4/27-29/18	O.L. of the Rockies Region	Joan Geiger	Br. Alexander Escalera, OFM Cap.
8/10-12/18	Divine Mercy Region	Jane DeRose-Bamman	Br. Loren Connell, OFM