

## Chapter V Franciscan Youth, Little Heralds and Heralds

### 1. Saint Francis and youth

Saint Francis began his journey of faith during his youth. He was always seeking something greater. He had plans and projects for his life, he was a youth with great desires, and he sought answers to his questions about the meaning of life. Growing up, however, Francis felt that something was missing, especially after his experience of war and the terrible illness that struck him. And so Francis began to listen, seeking a response that could calm his heart.

We could say that he was a young man like so many others who in our times seek answers to the many questions they bear in their hearts. In the field of pastoral ministry to youth we find many young people who are attracted to Saint Francis and wish to deepen their faith by following his example.

#### **“Lord, what do you want me to do?”**

At the beginning of his conversion, following a mysterious dream at Spoleto, the Lord made him return to Assisi, and, with internal expectancy, he repeated many times with his whole heart the question: Lord, what do you want me to do? This question is also the question of many young people today.

With this question in his heart, Francis adopted an attitude of profound listening, trying to perceive what the Lord wanted of him. This could be the starting point for all of us. Lord, what do you want me to do? What do you want from me? These are the questions that many young people put to the Lord, seeking His will. To seek the will of God, as in the experience of Francis, means to adopt an attitude of listening—listening and waiting until the Lord speaks.

One day, before the Crucifix in the chapel of San Damiano, Francis heard the Lord saying to him: “Francis, go rebuild my house; as you see, it is all being destroyed.”<sup>1</sup> For Francis this was a real encounter with Jesus Christ, risen and alive. It was an encounter that gave new direction to his life. Not immediately understanding the meaning of the command, Francis became a restorer of churches, seeking only to respond to the Lord’s wishes.

This second powerful moment in the personal experience of Saint Francis could help us to understand that a profound journey of faith cannot be ours without a real encounter with Jesus Christ. The fundamental question for young people is: Is it possible to meet Jesus Christ even today? Where can he be found? How and in what way?

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 2 C 10; FA:ED II, 249

The response to questions like these could bring about a profound journey of faith. To have a real experience of an encounter with the Lord very often means, for young people, to enter into a more profound listening to the Word of God.

## **1.2. Living the Gospel**

Another moment in Francis's experience that could help us understand the second step in the service of youth is his encounter with the Word of God. Listening to the Word of God had a decisive importance for Francis. Not knowing what was the second step to be taken, Francis, in the little church of Saint Mary of the Angels, called the Portiuncula, listened to the excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew where the Lord was telling his apostles how they should go through the world preaching the Gospel. Then he fully understood that his vocation was go throughout the world announcing the Good News to all. After the priest explained the meaning of those words Francis exclaimed with great joy: "This is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart."<sup>2</sup>

Understanding their vocation is very hard for many young people today. However, many of them have found and are finding in the experience of Francis a possibility and a way to understand how one's vocation can be discovered by listening to the Word of God.

Sometimes, especially in the beginning when working with youth, we will need to go out to meet the young, to be where they are, and not wait for them to come to us. This means going out of our own environment and going among them, sharing their life. Later it will be they, once they are convinced of the beauty of being together, who will bring their friends along to share the same experience. We must help them to discover that God has a life project for each one of us. To discover such a project means entering into communion with God. And that means entering and living in true joy and love.

Many see all of this in Francis: a person full of joy, love and peace. But Francis found this interior peace, which he sought with all his heart, only through accepting God's project. For that reason his life became a hymn to the Most High God and a continuous act of thanksgiving to the Lord.

From the moment he experienced the full sweetness and power of the Word of God, the Gospel became for Francis his rule of life. He heard his Lord who spoke to him in the Gospel. How beautiful it is to have an experience of friendship with the Word of God, following the example of Saint Francis. How many young people need exactly this experience. How beautiful it is to hear a young person, who, after an authentic encounter with the Word of God, confesses: God has also spoken to me; he loves me; the Lord loves me greatly, he has forgiven me.

To make the Gospel the rule of life is the primary duty of all Christians. Young people, especially those attracted to Saint Francis because of his way of living and expressing his faith in Jesus Christ, can be a true sign of life for the world of today.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. 1 C 22; FA:ED I, 201-02.

To these young people who feel called by the Holy Spirit to live this experience together, in fraternity, we can propose the form of life of the Franciscan Youth Movement or of the Secular Franciscan Order.

## **2. A short history of the Franciscan Youth**

Franciscan Youth (YouFra) was officially born in Italy in 1948. Among the Friars Minor, the general minister Pacifico Perantoni joined together all the youth circles led by the friars of his Order into a single federation (at first it was called Franciscan Youth of Catholic Action). Among the Capuchins, Franciscan Youth was founded as a confederation of youth groups in Milan, Ascoli Piceno and Florence. The confederation gradually extended in the following years to other youth circles led by the Capuchin Friars Minor. In the 1950s, the Conventual Friars Minor also began to gradually promote YouFra among their youth groups. In 1958, after just ten years, there were already 453 YouFra groups throughout the entire country.

In 1954, the Capuchins approved the first YouFra statutes (accepted by the Conventuals in 1958). In 1968, the Capuchins began to draw up the second YouFra statutes (“Il Nostro Volto” approved in 1971), which were immediately applied to the groups led by the Friars Minor and later accepted, in 1974, by the Conventual Friars Minor.

In the late 1970s, the need for a new national document for all the youth belonging to the YouFra fraternities was evident. The national interobediential assemblies at Viterbo (1977), Nola (1978) and Seiano (1980) led to the drawing up of a first draft of what would become, after a few years, the *forma di vita* or third YouFra statutes.

The provisional text was brought to the attention of the International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order, which was also asked to formulate guidelines for Franciscan Youth throughout the world. Meanwhile, the experience of the Italian YouFra had spread to other nations. Various countries (especially Argentina and Brazil) were expressing the need for a common direction. To meet these needs, the International Presidency of the SFO issued a document with the “basic outlines” that would remain the basis of the Articles on YouFra contained in the SFO *General Constitutions*. The national interobediential assembly of the Italian YouFra, meeting in Paestum, approved the definitive text of the Statutes, adapted to the international nature of YouFra.

## **3. The Franciscan Youth: a Franciscan vocational journey**

### **3.1. Specific characteristics of the Franciscan Youth**

In the area of pastoral ministry to youth, we find young people attracted by Saint Francis who want to deepen their Christian and Franciscan vocation. To these young people we should offer the option of the form of life of the Franciscan Youth or the SFO,

respecting the needs of the world of youth with its crises, problems and questions.

Some essential elements of their vocational journey are:

- a feeling of being called by the Holy Spirit to experience the Christian life in fraternity;
- a gradual discovery of Saint Francis, his life project and his values;
- an ecclesial and social presence, as a condition for realizing concrete experiences of apostolate.

The Franciscan Youth, as understood by the SFO *General Constitutions*, is distinguished from other groups of young Franciscans:

- by acceptance of the SFO *Rule* as its document of inspiration;
- by personal and formal commitment, made before God and the fraternity, to live by this inspiration;
- by membership in the Franciscan Family as an integral part of the SFO;
- by spiritual assistance from religious Franciscans;
- by accompaniment and animation by the Secular Franciscans;
- by an organizational structure and specific formation methods for a vocational journey that normally, although not necessarily, leads to the SFO;
- by its own national Statutes, approved by the respective national council of the SFO or, if there is none, by the Presidency of the International Council of the SFO, which regulates the requirements for membership in YouFra.

### **3.2. What is the Franciscan Youth?**

#### **3.2.1. Spiritual characteristics:**

*a. The Franciscan Youth...is formed by those young people... (Const., 96.2).*

The Franciscan Youth is formed by young people, which means that it is intended to be a specific period of life, limited to youth, which starts at the beginning of adolescence and ends upon reaching personal maturity.

*b. ...who feel called by the Holy Spirit...deepening their own vocation... (Const., 96.2).*

The Franciscan Youth engage in a vocational journey, which presupposes an initial call developing into a lasting choice of life. The call solicits a personal answer from the young, confirmed by a personal promise before God and in the presence of the brothers and sisters.

*c. ...to share the experience of the Christian life in fraternity... (Const., 96.2).*

The Franciscan Youth is an experience of fraternity, that is, a community of young believers, children of the one Father, sharing their faith on the basis of love. This fraternity forms part of the ecclesial community in which it lives and works.

*d. ...in the light of the message of Saint Francis of Assisi, deepening their own vocation*

*within the context of the Secular Franciscan Order (Const., 96.2).*

The Franciscan Youth journeys in the light of the message of Saint Francis of Assisi, that is, it discovers and progressively assimilates this life-project and its values. The Franciscan Youth belongs to the Franciscan family as an integral part of the SFO and accepts the *Rule* of the SFO as its document of inspiration. It requests spiritual, pastoral and fraternal assistance from the religious superiors and from the competent Secular Franciscan leaders.

### **3.2.2. Organizational characteristics:**

*a. The Franciscan Youth has a specific organization... (Const., 96.5)*

The Franciscan Youth has its own organization, which can be specified in its Statutes. It has its own fraternities, its own leaders at all levels, and its own spiritual and fraternal assistance.

*b. ...methods of formation, and teaching methods adequate for the needs of the world of youth... (Const., 96.5).*

The Franciscan Youth adapts itself to the needs of the world of youth in its formation methods and content. This formation is organized in such a way that the young person develops mature vocational choices and enters fully into the world where he or she lives.

*c. ...according to the existing realities in the various countries (Const., 96.5)*

The Franciscan Youth is present in many countries and is extremely varied, defying uniformity. The socio-cultural situation determines what it is to be young, what responsibilities young people can assume and what possibilities of formation and action are open to them.

### **3.2.3. Relationship between YouFra and the SFO:**

*a. The Franciscan Youth (YouFra), as understood by these Constitutions and insofar as the SFO considers itself to be particularly responsible for it... (Const., 96.2).*

The Franciscan Youth presupposes a special commitment of the SFO as a part of its own pastoral and vocational youth work. For this reason the SFO needs to accompany the youth, help them develop a mature vocation and introduce them into the life of the fraternity.

*b. The members of the Franciscan Youth consider the Rule of the SFO as an inspirational document... (Const., 96.3).*

The Franciscan Youth accepts the *Rule* of the SFO as an inspirational document for the growth of its own Christian and Franciscan vocation, either individually or in a group. The relations between the Franciscan Youth and the SFO should be marked by a spirit of reciprocal life-giving communion. For this reason, the vocational journey of the Franciscan Youth leads generally, although not necessarily, to the SFO.

*c. The Franciscan Youth, as a component of the Franciscan Family... (Const., 96.6).*

The Franciscan Youth belongs to the Franciscan family as an integral part of the SFO, and will therefore be accompanied and animated by the Secular Franciscans. In addition, its leaders at the higher levels are to be professed Secular Franciscan youth (cf. *Const.* 97.3).

*d. A representative of the Franciscan Youth is to be designated by his or her council to form part of the SFO council... (Const., 97.4).*

At all levels of the SFO fraternity there should be a member of the Franciscan Youth, designated by his or her council, who will form part of the SFO council. The representative of the Franciscan Youth has a vote in the SFO council only if he or she is a professed Secular Franciscan. Likewise, a member of the SFO designated by his or her council forms part of the YouFra council on the same level.

*e. The representatives of the Franciscan Youth in the international council of the SFO are elected according to the international statutes... (Const., 97.5).*

The international statutes of the SFO determine the number of representatives from the Franciscan Youth on the international council, what fraternities they represent, and what their responsibilities are.

### **3.3. Vocational journey**

The Young Franciscans deepen their personal vocation in the light of the message of Saint Francis by a program of progressive formation. Vocational discernment will be the focus during the entire journey. This vocational journey will normally consist of the following periods:

#### **3.3.1. Initiation**

This is a period of seeking, of making contact, of approaching, of welcome, which ends with the decision to begin the period of formation for the promise in the Franciscan Youth. For the young person this is the first experience of the Franciscan Youth, centering on the question of what the fraternity means for him and what he can bring to the group. On its part, the Franciscan Youth informs the young person about the ideals and requirements, about the method and style that characterize the Franciscan Youth. The length of this period depends on the personal situation of each candidate and on the Franciscan Youth fraternity. If appropriate, the national statutes can determine the length of this period, e.g. between three and six months, taking into account the situation of youth coming from other Franciscan groups. The minimum age for entering the Franciscan Youth will depend on the development of the individual young person and on the cultural situation. One should, however, keep in mind that the Franciscan Youth is not for children. If appropriate, the national statutes can determine the minimum age to enter the Franciscan Youth, e.g. between 14 and 17 years.

#### **3.3.2. Formation for the promise in the Franciscan Youth**

This is a period of formation and full integration of the candidates into the life of

the youth fraternity. At the end of this period, they confirm this option with a personal promise before God and in the presence of the brothers and sisters. For the young person this is the time to discover and live the Gospel according to the example of Saint Francis from within this specific youth fraternity. This always requires a willingness and constancy to confront one's own life with the Gospel, to gradually acquire Franciscan values, lived in a spirit of dedication and service to others. On its part, the Franciscan Youth fraternity accompanies the young person on this journey of searching and spiritual growth. The national statutes of the Franciscan Youth can establish the minimum length of this period, which cannot be less than one year, nor more than two years. If it seems appropriate, they can also determine the maximum length of this formation for the promise in the Franciscan Youth. It belongs to the local council of the Franciscan Youth to admit candidates to the promise, according to the provisions established in the national statutes.

### **3.3.3. Deepening one's vocation**

This is a period for testing the call, in which the young person grasps and deepens the values comprising Secular Franciscan spirituality and its mission in the Church and society. For the young person this is the moment to assimilate the inspiration of the *SFO Rule* and to translate it into daily life, in order to test his or her true vocation in life and what answer to give to God's call. It entails lived experiences of communion and sharing with the brothers and sisters in the context of the Franciscan Family, and experiences of mission and service in the Church and society. On its part, the fraternity helps the young person to clarify and discern which vocation better responds to one's own abilities and desires. This period is temporary and cannot be prolonged indefinitely. The simple fact is that the period of initial life choices, the stage of discernment, is only a passing moment in any person's life. The national statutes must determine the end of this stage, according to the cultural and social situation of the place. In no case can it extend beyond the age of 30.

### **3.5. Spiritual assistance**

Spiritual assistance to the Franciscan Youth on the part of the First Order and the TOR (cf. *Const.*, 96.6) is also indispensable. The Franciscan Youth, as a component of the Franciscan Family, needs spiritual assistance in order to guarantee its fidelity to the Franciscan charism, communion with the Church and its union with the Franciscan Family (*Const.*, 85.2). The appointment of spiritual assistants belongs to the competent Franciscan major superiors, by analogy with what is laid down in the *Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the SFO* (cf. 5.2; 11.2). As much as possible, the service of assistance to the Franciscan Youth and the SFO should be carried out by the same person.

Sometimes the young people prefer certain assistants because they are more attuned to their problems. But this natural facility on the part of an assistant can also constitute a very subtle temptation to "command," to appropriate power to oneself and dominate the young people. For this reason, Francis often calls for the expropriation of

everything in order to be “subject to every human creature for love of God.” All good that the Lord accomplishes through the brother assistants must not be clung to, but placed at the humble service of the young people.

### **3.6. Form and content of formation**

*a. The Franciscan Youth has specific... methods of formation, and teaching methods adequate for the needs of the world of youth... (Const., 96.5).*

To be adequate for the needs of the world of youth, the methods of formation must be flexible in their form and content. Youth trends in all countries change continuously and develop rapidly. On the other hand, it is necessary to keep a sense of one’s own identity and not be swept away by passing fads.

*b. ... according to the existing realities in the various countries (Const., 96.5).*

Existing realities in various countries also present an element of diversity in the form and content of formation. On the other hand, this diversity should never invalidate the basic unity of formation criteria. To reach its goals, formation should incorporate human, Christian and Franciscan aspects.

### **3.7. Franciscan Youth organization**

#### **3.7.1 The local fraternity**

The local fraternity is the constitutive cell of the Franciscan Youth and the context in which the young share their experience of our Christian life in fraternity, in the light of the message of Saint Francis of Assisi. The fraternity should meet frequently, e.g. each week, to live together its relationship with God and with the brothers and sisters. It is important that the meetings integrate moments of prayer and formation with elements of action and recreation. The meetings should be organized in such a way as to favor the insertion of the Franciscan Youth fraternity into the Franciscan Family and into the local Church.

Official recognition of the local fraternity of the Franciscan Youth belongs to the Franciscan Youth council of a higher level in collaboration with the council of the local SFO fraternity, i.e. the two councils with which the new Franciscan Youth fraternity will be in relation. In the absence of YouFra structures, the interested SFO councils should provide. The competent religious superior from whom spiritual assistance is to be requested should be informed.

The local fraternity is animated and guided by a council of at least three members, elected, for a limited period, by and from among the members of that fraternity who have made their promise in the Franciscan Youth. The representative of the SFO and the spiritual assistant are also members of the council. It belongs to the local council of the Franciscan Youth to admit candidates to formation for the promise in the Franciscan Youth and, after completing formation, to the promise itself.

### **3.7.2. The regional fraternity**

If deemed appropriate, the national statutes of the Franciscan Youth can determine whether regional fraternities of the Franciscan Youth should exist in a country and how they should be established. In such a case, these statutes should also determine the composition and competencies of the regional chapter and council.

### **3.7.3. The national fraternity**

The national fraternity of the Franciscan Youth is the union of all local Franciscan Youth fraternities existing in the territory of the corresponding national SFO fraternity. The official recognition of new national fraternities of the Franciscan Youth belongs to the presidency of the International Council of the SFO, after consultation and in collaboration with the corresponding national council of the SFO. The national fraternity of the Franciscan Youth can draft its own statutes, which should be presented by the National Council of the SFO to the presidency of the International Council of the SFO for approval (*Const.*, 96.5).

## **3.8. Other Franciscan youth groups**

For a long time there have existed, in the context of the Franciscan Family, groups of youngsters or of children, who are called Heralds, Cordbearers, Franciscan Children, Little Flowers, Troubadours, Micro-Franciscan Youth, Mini-Franciscan Youth etc. Many of these groups are animated by members of the Franciscan Youth or by secular or religious Franciscans. Sometimes it is easier to start and to animate groups of children, mostly of Secular Franciscans, than groups of adolescents or youth.

The life of these groups will be very much linked to the local fraternity of the Franciscan Youth and the SFO, and its development will depend heavily on the presence of suitable animators. In any case it is important that the national councils of the SFO and YouFra, in collaboration with interested religious, coordinate this service of animation and prepare teaching material to support these groups (cf. *Const.*, 25).

## **4. Franciscan Youth from the viewpoint of vocational pastoral care**

### **4.1. Nature of YouFra**

In recent decades Franciscan Youth has discovered its own more distinctive physiognomy, accepting it as a real gift of the Spirit. It is not an association or a movement, but rather a fraternity composed of young people who have heard a call to live the Gospel in the ordinary situations of life according to the spirit of Saint Francis.

This statement lies at the center of YouFra's identity and calls for ever-renewed attention. From what premises does this picture of Franciscan Youth derive? From the fact, of course, that the vocational dimension is a key to understanding the very existence

of the human person. Persons, in fact, are dialogical beings, constituted by relationships, in a movement of call and response that accompanies human development on all levels.

Within their human reality, recognized as a gift, persons can recognize and accept the call to faith, addressed to them through the proclamation of the Word of God, which culminates in the Good News of Jesus Christ. He is the one called and the one who calls, unceasingly. In the power of the Spirit each person can listen to his voice, especially in the inner sanctum of conscience, and therefore in history and in others, all the way to explicit proclamation of the faith. The vocational dimension is truly constitutive of the person and the faith experience.

In this context we see that YouFra, as a fraternity that offers the young an integral life proposal, is naturally vocational. Indeed, it accompanies the young in the encounter with self, the world, creation and others, with the God of Jesus Christ. It is an encounter that awaits a response in the form a gift of oneself and one's life. It is not an intimate kind of experience that seeks only the person's well-being, but rather an encounter that blossoms fully in the creative gift of self.

#### **4.2. YouFra: an ecclesial experience**

Franciscan Youth can be an authentic place of growth and gradual maturing of the young if they are accompanied in this journey. This requires the development of educational programs that take into account the human and dialogical dimension of personal growth from the viewpoint of fraternity. Young people can grow and integrate their great energies so as to become fraternal persons in solidarity with others. At a time that fosters the growth of a mentality of violence and war, which tramples upon others under the pretext of lifting them up, it is even more urgent that the integral vocation of believers discover in their own hearts the dimension of justice, peace, reconciliation and care for all creation. It is an urgent and exciting task for the Franciscan Youth also! This is the first point of a process in a naturally vocational YouFra.

A young person who grows in this human dimension opens up to the proclamation of faith and deepens it. Franciscan Youth responds to its vocation and mission in the Church and in our Family if it accompanies this explicit growth in faith, without hesitation and without yielding to the fragmentation of individual experiences, which do not constitute a united and integral faith journey.

This care expresses itself in the development of programs of progressive growth, in the assimilation of faith experiences and knowledge of the faith, in harmony; faith as the heart of a life that recognizes in Jesus Christ the hope that gives light and color to existence, the very heart of the world, the glory that enlightens our exhausting pilgrimage; faith as a gift awaiting a response that is original because it is in close contact with the reality of the world and the history in which the young person lives. Cultivating the vocational dimension of faith in YouFra will then also be expressed in special attention to the lay and secular dimension of the human and Christian vocation of the young Franciscans. Today, faced by the risk of remaining on the margins of the life of all

people and the changes in history and cultures, this care is more urgent than ever.

Franciscan Youth will be an authentically vocational place if it becomes an environment of mutual acceptance, sharing of gifts, service in active and heroic charity. It will not be a fraternity turned in on itself, but rather ever more able to open up to what is different, to begin from within itself. A fraternity is served and cared for. Would training the young today to this dimension not be an authentic school of vocations?

Our main concern should never be that YouFra be a “vocational nursery” for the SFO or for the First Order. It is much more: it is a place of vocations where the young can mature in an integral way as persons, Christians and Franciscans. Franciscan Youth thus becomes a place of ongoing vocational deepening for the assistants also, especially if they are religious. Indeed, it is with the young that we ourselves can rediscover and live in an original manner today our one vocation and mission.

Youth is a transitional stage in life; it begins with adolescence and continues until one attains personal maturity. It is a rich stage, characterized by great vitality and a strong manifestation of individuality. It is a very positive period, with a great capacity for action. But at the same time, because of its vitality, its overflowing energy—and its desire to search for success, recognition and growth—it is a time life when one has a foot on the accelerator, so to speak. This makes the time of youth a period of great tension and instability, of temporary and brief commitments charged with altruistic feelings.

### **4.3. Identity and structure of the Franciscan Youth**

The general characteristics of youth described above are also those which describe the Franciscan Youth. YouFra contains certain distinctive features which identify and enrich its members. It is a vocational journey intended to develop and cultivate the seed of an initial call. It is an experience of fraternity lived within an ecclesial community. It is a following of Jesus of Nazareth in light of the life and message of Francis of Assisi. It also forms part of the Franciscan Family as an integral component of the Secular Franciscan Order with whom it shares an existential relationship permeated with a spirit of mutual and life-giving communion. As such, it considers the *Rule* of the SFO to be its inspirational document. Franciscan Youth “offers to this life project enthusiastic contribution of its youth, animated by the fervor of its ideals.”<sup>3</sup>

## **5. SFO Rule: inspirational document for YouFra**

### **5.1 The Rule as a “form of life”**

The drafting of the SFO *Rule* has meant a return to the Franciscan sources and the origins of the Order. This is attested in the prologue which, even though it does not form part of the *Rule*, is the text of the first version of Francis’s Letter to the Faithful. In

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<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, “La gioventù francescana un luminoso ideale di vita,” in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 10 May 1998, p. 5.

reality, it is as Kajetan Esser calls it, the Exhortation of Saint Francis to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. In it he presents two ways of life, something very common in the Church: the path of good and the path of evil, the path of those who do penance and the path of those who do not do penance.

The *Rule* presents itself, first of all, as a vocational proposal in which Christ is the center of the life project: “The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi.”<sup>4</sup> The *General Constitutions* make this more explicit: “The spirituality of the Secular Franciscans is a plan of life centered on the person and on the following of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Vocation is a following, a road to be followed. To the young man who asked Jesus: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mk10:17, 21). Saint Clare presents this very well in her Testament: “The Son of God has been made for us the Way, which our blessed father Francis, his true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example.”<sup>6</sup>

It is this plan of life which the SFO “ought to be ready to share...with the youth who feel attracted to Saint Francis of Assisi.”<sup>7</sup> John Paul II said to the Italian YouFra that this vocational proposal is “the ascetical and apostolic journey that characterizes you as Franciscan youth; it helps you to become adults in the faith, to be apostles in the ecclesial community and to conduct yourselves in society as responsible persons, capable of courageously assuming the role to which Providence calls you.”<sup>8</sup>

In this vocational journey, which contains, as St. Paul says when writing to the Church in Ephesus, an election and blessing of the Father for us in his Son Jesus (cf. Eph 1:3-4), YouFra considers “the *Rule* of the SFO as an inspirational document for the growth of its Christian and Franciscan vocation.” And the Young Franciscans confirm this call and blessing “with a personal promise before God and in the presence of the brothers and sisters.”<sup>9</sup> With this option begins a process of formation and growth for the members of YouFra using “methods of formation and teaching methods adequate for the needs of the world of youth.”<sup>10</sup>

The *Rule* offers not just a simple devotion to Francis of Assisi according to the many forms that exist. It offers a true program of gospel life, which commits one to be a credible witness because it demands fidelity to the Word that enables us to become children of God (cf. Jn 1:12) by “going from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel.”<sup>11</sup> This form of life is a call to holiness, in which the YouFra member is profoundly involved. As Francis of Assisi says: “We are mothers when we carry him [Christ] in our heart and

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<sup>4</sup> *Rule SFO*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Const.*, 9.1.

<sup>6</sup> TestCl 5; CA:ED, 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> *Const.*, 96.1.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Const.*, 96.3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.5.

<sup>11</sup> *Rule SFO*, 4.

body through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience and give birth to him through a holy activity which must shine as an example before others.”<sup>12</sup>

The *Rule* is for the youth a form of life leading to holiness, just as it is for the members of the SFO. Hence it is impossible to think of YouFra as a separate entity from the SFO. In this sense Pius XII described the Secular Franciscan Order as a “school of perfection, of a genuine Franciscan spirit and of decided and generous action,” pointing out that “the Third Order wants souls who, in their state of life, aspire to perfection.”<sup>13</sup> We must tend toward holiness with joy, for as Vatican II states: “It is... quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.”<sup>14</sup> John Paul II underlines this conciliar affirmation in *Christifideles laici*: “It is ever more urgent that today all Christians take up again the way of gospel renewal, welcoming in a spirit of generosity the invitation expressed by the apostle Peter ‘to be holy in all conduct’ (1 Pt 1:15)... Everyone in the Church, precisely because they are members, receive and thereby share in the common vocation to holiness.”<sup>15</sup>

The SFO *Rule* offers YouFra a path to perfection which Saint Catherine of Genoa, a lay Franciscan, saw very clearly. Responding to a religious man who suggested that he was in a better condition to live perfect charity, she said: “If I believed that your habit would kindle in my heart a spark of greater love, I would take it off of you if I could not obtain it in any other way. As for you having greater merit than I because of what you have renounced for God..., that is your path; but that I cannot love God as much as you, this you will never make me believe.”<sup>16</sup>

## 5.2. In order to live in fraternity

In the audience granted to the Italian Franciscan Youth in May 1998, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its birth, the Pope emphasized: “Franciscan Youth is by its nature a vocation to grow in fraternity.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the form of life offered by the SFO *Rule* is an invitation to live the Gospel as Francis did, that is, in fraternity. Life in fraternity is a common feature of the whole Franciscan Family. The *General Constitutions* describe the vocation of the SFO and of YouFra as a “vocation to live the Gospel in fraternal communion.”<sup>18</sup> This explains why there can be no Secular Franciscans voluntarily living in isolation. The members of the SFO and YouFra are called to live in fraternity. The Franciscan charism cannot be lived in isolation. As the Pope clearly points out in his talk to the above-mentioned audience, the fraternity is a “community of love and privileged environment in which the sense of Church and the Christian and

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<sup>12</sup> 1LtF 10; FA:ED I, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Pius XII, to the *Tertiaries of Italy* assembled in the Vatican Basilica, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2-3 July 1956.

<sup>14</sup> LG, 40.

<sup>15</sup> CL, 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Vita di Santa Caterina da Genova compilata per cura del suo confessore*, Genoa 1887, Tip.Archiv., pp. 60-61.

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Const.*, 3.3.

Franciscan vocation develop.”<sup>19</sup>

The great novelty of Francis is not that he invented something, but that he read the Gospel attentively and put it into practice. Fraternity is born from the very heart of the Word who pitches his tent next to ours and makes us brothers and sisters of the same Father (cf. Jn 1:14). The Italian Franciscan Youth highlights this founding aspect of the Franciscan vocation in its Statutes (“Il Nostro Volto”): “The young Franciscans live in fraternity as a visible sign of the Church... and as a place where the apostolic life of its members is naturally animated.”<sup>20</sup>

### 5.3. The Rule, a document of creativity

The *Rule* is a document of inspiration to live the Gospel as Francis did, without forgetting that, as the Pope reminds us, “each is called by name to make a special contribution to the coming of the Kingdom of God. No talent, no matter how small, is to be hidden or left unused.”<sup>21</sup>

It is impossible to imagine YouFra apart from the SFO, just as it is difficult to think of the SFO as being indifferent to YouFra. All SFO fraternities ought to feel this need to share their experience of gospel life with the young people who “make up an exceptional potential and a great challenge for the future of the Church”<sup>22</sup> and for the SFO itself, insofar as YouFra is the fruit of its own pastoral youth ministry and promotion of vocations. The future and creativity of the Church and the SFO is reflected in the depth of the source of its being. They keep themselves fresh and alive when they address the present culture of youth, unstable—yes, but capable of being molded to and converted into the hope of a mature and loving future. We must keep alive hope and trust in the young, as did John, when he was an old man. He said: “I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one.... I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one” (I Jn 2:13-14).

The SFO must present to young people the Franciscan proposal and help them to attain maturity in their vocation and in the project of fraternal life, with the joy with which Jesus looked at the young man in the Gospel (cf. Mk 10:21). It must try to help them discover new horizons and grow “in wisdom, age and grace before God and men” (Lk 2:52). The SFO fraternities should consider the members of YouFra not just as passive subjects in their vocation, but as active ones. They should create a spirit of welcoming acceptance in the life of the fraternity and allow the youth to be engaged and involved in its meetings and activities.

The SFO should be generous in offering options to YouFra. It must not forget that the one who really calls is the Lord. YouFra is not the nursery of the SFO from which it will take members to transplant when it feels convenient for the fraternity. This is short-

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<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Il Nostro Volto*, 7 a.

<sup>21</sup> CL, 56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 46.

sighted and stingy. On the contrary, the SFO should regard YouFra as a garden that can be cultivated and in which, with confidence, are sown the seeds of the many states of Christian life: family life, consecrated life, priestly life, SFO, Secular Institutes, and many other ways and forms in which the Franciscan Family expresses the same charism of its common Seraphic Father.

The broader and richer the options presented to the Young Franciscans, the better it will be. This will give them a greater ability to contemplate, reflect and decide, to become agents of evangelization and the Church's mission, and to be available for simple and dedicated service to the poor. We must go from theory to providing effective experiences in order to offer YouFra opportunities for human, Christian and Franciscan growth. As *Novo Millennio Ineunte* says, we trust that "if Christ is presented to young people, as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept his message, even when it is demanding and bears the mark of the Cross."<sup>23</sup>

#### **5.4. Presence and mission**

The Pope, in his address to the Italian YouFra, stresses that "a central element of your Franciscan identity...is the presence of the brother to be welcomed, listened to, forgiven and loved."<sup>24</sup> Using the identity of the SFO as its starting point, the *Rule* offers YouFra a wide field of presence and mission: building a more fraternal and evangelical world (Art. 14), promoting human dignity (Art. 14), promoting justice, with concrete choices in harmony with their faith (Art. 15), work as an extension of God's creating hand (Art. 16), the challenge of family values (Art. 17), universal kinship and respect for the goods of creation (Art. 18), building peace through dialogue, love and pardon (Art. 19).

The above-mentioned challenges implicitly contain others: the world of politics, social reality, finance, culture, arts and sciences, research, social communication, and suffering. All this points to the young Franciscan's need of new light and energy to carry out the mission, "without in any way losing or sacrificing their human content but rather pointing to a transcendent dimension which is often disregarded."<sup>25</sup> The general ministers of the First Order and the TOR trust, as they say in their letter, "Vocation and Mission of the Franciscan Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World" (1989), that the SFO and YouFra will be able to use, for a more creative and fruitful service, the spiritual and cultural heritage they have, and at the same time make use of the resources offered by the Franciscan tradition.

#### **5.5. Formation**

If the young Franciscans are to carry out the creative and demanding mission presented to them by the SFO *Rule*, they need much formation. It must be an integral and solid formation: human, Christian and Franciscan. Formation is one of the priorities of

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<sup>23</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> EN, 70.

the SFO and YouFra. The former general minister, Emanuela De Nunzio, was asked in an interview what was the most important priority for the SFO. Her answer was formation. The journalist asked her what the second priority was. Her answer once again was formation. In response to the question about the third priority she responded a third time: formation. This is because without formation, the vocation, prayer and mission of the SFO and YouFra are lackluster. But if formation reaches to the base of the YouFra fraternities, there will be a vocational springtime and an authentic osmosis between the living spaces of the lay Franciscan vocation. The young Franciscans will be formed with a capacity for self-giving, for deciding, and for giving a Christian and Franciscan witness. In this, the YouFra council has an important role to play, along with the fraternal animator and the spiritual assistant.<sup>26</sup>

It is very interesting to cite the exhortation given in *Christifideles laici* on formation, which corresponds very well to the concerns of YouFra: “The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever-clearer discovery of one’s vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfill one’s mission.”<sup>27</sup>

## 5.6. The Rule, a document of co-responsibility

Through the details provided by the SFO *Rule* we can enter into the life of the YouFra fraternity: its organization, animation and direction, communion among its members etc.

It is an urgent task, not to be done hastily. But after each SFO fraternity has reflected and shared, it should look at itself in the mirror of the Church, which “sees her path towards the future in the youth, beholding in them a reflection of herself and her call to that blessed youthfulness which she constantly enjoys as a result of Christ’s Spirit.”<sup>28</sup> The SFO must show the same sensitiveness. It is time to go out and meet the youth and hold an open dialogue that favors an encounter and exchange between generations, in such a way that the riches of both—SFO and YouFra—may benefit, revitalize and strengthen both.

The Franciscan Family in general, but the SFO specifically, has a host of opportunities to relate with today’s youth. This is provided, first of all, by the person of Francis of Assisi, his life and spirituality; second, by the heart of the SFO *Rule*, which beats in unison with the heart of youth who seek fraternity, justice, harmony with creation, peace, ecology etc..., always studying the living and acting person of Christ, aspiring to become his witness by their life and words;<sup>29</sup> third, the Franciscan Youth expects the SFO to “see to the vitality and the expansion of the Franciscan Youth fraternities.”<sup>30</sup>

This demands effort on the part of the SFO, which the *General Constitutions*

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<sup>26</sup> *Const.*, 97.2.

<sup>27</sup> CL, 58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Rule SFO*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Const.*, 97.1.

describe as accompaniment of “the youth in their journey of human and spiritual growth with proposals for specific activities and contents”<sup>31</sup> Accompaniment includes completing vocational promotion and taking care of the life that is being born, without neglecting the young person’s own personality. In accompaniment, one must pay attention to the person’s feelings and listen to the person. One must know how to care for the seed, watering it as well as protecting it from the heat, so that too much water will not drown it or too much sun suffocate it.

The one who accompanies, who is usually also the “fraternal animator,”<sup>32</sup> must become a companion. While he is accompanying the young Franciscan, he is growing at the same time. He identifies with the youth, without mixing up or breaking down the roles of each, which are different. The fraternity as well as the fraternal animator must meet frequently, not only with YouFra, but also with one another to evaluate the progress that has been made.

The fraternal animator must create a close communion between the SFO and YouFra. Formation is the principal task of the animator, along with the YouFra council and the spiritual assistant, so that the Young Franciscans may grow as Christians and Franciscans, convinced of their identity and belonging.

## **6. Call and mission in YouFra**

### **6.1. YouFra in the SFO Constitutions**

The Franciscan Youth, “as a component of the Franciscan Family,”<sup>33</sup> seems to have little place in the SFO *General Constitutions*, which devote only two Articles to it (96, 97). But what is not in the *Constitutions* and *Statutes of the International Fraternity of the SFO* is left to the creativity of YouFra in its own international or national statutes, and its “specific organization, methods of formation, and teaching methods adequate for the needs of the world of youth, according to the existing realities in the various countries” is recognized.<sup>34</sup>

The aspects we want to discuss here—call and mission—do appear in the SFO *Constitutions*.

The *call* of youth to YouFra is described in the *Constitutions*, which say that these young people are “called by the Holy Spirit to share the experience of the Christian life in fraternity, in the light of the message of Saint Francis of Assisi, deepening their own vocation within the context of the Secular Franciscan Order.”<sup>35</sup> In these statements we find the elements of a vocation: a call to live the Christian life in fraternity, in the light of the charism of Francis, and with a deepening of one’s vocation.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 97.2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.2.

The *mission* of YouFra, like that of the SFO, is marked by its secular nature, in accord with its spirituality, inasmuch as its members are called to contribute “to building up the Kingdom of God by their presence in their life-situations and in their temporal activities.”<sup>36</sup> It goes on to say that they are “inspired by the gospel options of Saint Francis of Assisi, committing themselves to continue his mission with the other components of the Franciscan Family.”<sup>37</sup> The areas of mission are sufficiently described in the *SFO Rule*<sup>38</sup> and *General Constitutions*.<sup>39</sup>

## 6.2. Call and vocation

It is opportune to begin the discussion with some general observations. Even if these things are already known, they will help us enter fully and more easily into the subject matter.<sup>40</sup>

In salvation history and in the following of Jesus, a vocation is a gratuitous call from God. When God calls, he creates. We see this in the change of name. When God makes a covenant with Abram, he says to him: “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham” (Gen 17:5). Jacob, after he has struggled with the angel of the Lord, will hear the words: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel” (Gen 32:28). When Simon is introduced to Jesus, the Teacher says to him: “You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)” (Jn 1:42). And Saul changes his name to Paul (cf. Acts 13:9).

God acts and saves by calling. Among the calls in the Old Testament, we can read about that of Abraham (Gen 12-25; Heb 11:8-19; Rom 4; Gal 3), Moses (Ex 2:23-4:18; 6:2-12; 7:1-8), Joshua (Josh 1:1-18), Gideon (Judg 6:11-24), Isaiah (Isa 6:1-13), Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-19) and Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1-3, 15). Important and well-known vocations in the New Testament include that of the Twelve (Mk 3:13-16), the first four disciples (Mk 1:16-20; Mt 4:18-22; Lk 5:1-11), Matthew (Mt 9:9), Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael (Jn 1:35-51), and Paul (Acts 9:1-30; 22:3-21; 26:9-23; Gal 1:11-24; 1 Cor 15:8-11).

God’s call is always a free choice, and his blessing extends to all others. The call and blessing of Abraham also includes a blessing for him and his descendents (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). Mary’s vocation and her response carries with it a blessing and joy for all people: the birth of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus (Lk 2:10-11).

A vocation in the Bible does not present us with perfect men or women. All have some faults. Abraham, in order to save his skin in Egypt, allows Sarah to become part of Pharaoh’s harem (cf. Gen 12:10-20). Sarah herself laughs when she hears talk about her future pregnancy (cf. Gen 18:9-15). Jacob deceives his brother Esau (cf. Gen 25:29-34).

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 3.2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Rule SFO*, 14-19.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 17-27.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Uribarri, Gabino, *La vida cristiana como vocación*, Revista de Pastoral Vocacional: Todos Uno, n. 149, genero-marzo 2002, pp. 40-62.

David seems to be a man without too many scruples (cf. 2 Sam 11:1-27, 12:1-25). The disciples themselves betray, like Judas (cf. Mt 26:14-16; Mk 14:10-11; Lk 22:3-6; Mt 26:48-50; Mk 14:44-45; Lk 22:47-48; Jn 18:2-3); they deny, like Peter (Mt 26:69-75; Mk 14:66-72; Lk 22:55-62; Jn 18:15, 18:25-27); all of them flee (Mt 26,56; Mc 14,50); they leave for Emmaus (Lk 24:13-14); they persecute, like Paul (Acts 9:1-2,13-14). In a vocation the most important thing is not the qualities of the one called, but the graciousness of God.

A vocation to be a disciple of Jesus can be understood as a kind of following that requires a response to the call and invitation to follow him (Mt 8:21-22; 9:9; Mk 10:17-22; Lk 9:23).

Jesus still calls today, and the quality of discipleship and Christian life lies in the response each of us gives to God's personal call. Each of us is called, and gathered together we form the Church, the community of those who have been called, chosen, and gathered together.<sup>41</sup>

Seculars, lay people, are called by the Lord to live the Christian life in the ordinary situations of the world, family, secularity and work. In their Christian vocation they discover their own particular way: in their choice of profession, their involvement in politics, in leisure and the use of free time, in managing money, in participating in their parish, in volunteer work, in the university and teaching, research, culture and the fine arts. Seculars are called to live their faith in the world, which is called to be transformed into the Kingdom of God.

In responding to a vocation, the greatest enemies are fear, comfort, haste (craving for security, certainty), an inferiority complex (lack of self-confidence), indecision, disillusionment (lack of hope), self-sufficiency (the person is unwilling to be accompanied, helped), habit, mediocrity, and lack of faith (a personal, living and adult faith). We must take part in the celebration; often we are just spectators. Being a spectator is not the same as participating. Let us remember that at the wedding at Cana it is the servants who fill the stone jars, and it is they who know where the *new wine* comes from. Not so the chief steward, who had not participated in the work (cf. Jn 2:6-9). A vocation requires reflection, study and prayer.

By following the different steps in the vocation of Francis of Assisi, we can get some pointers for the vocation of the young Franciscans. Francis, too, was a youth who needed a rather long time, with various stimuli, to bring his vocation to fruition. Even though they appear as a series of steps, they could have been taken either gradually or simultaneously, and their relationship is dialectical.<sup>42</sup>

### **6.3. Entering into oneself**

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. LG 9.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Uribe, Fernando, *El proceso vocacional de Francisco de Asís: los seis encuentros que determinaron su vida*, Revista de Pastoral Vocacional: Todos Uno, n. 151, julio-septiembre 2002, pp. 5-31.

Francis led a normal life, with the more-or-less clear goals of a member of the middle class in a city like Assisi, where he wanted to make a place for himself in society and make a bid to take over. Everything seemed clear in his life until the day he was taken prisoner in the battle of Collestrada, near the Ponte San Giovanni, and transported to the prison in Perugia. There he began to reflect on himself and his future. Fundamental changes in his personality began to show themselves, a result of the internal struggle he endured for a long time.

In conversation with his prison mates, dispirited by the loss of freedom, by the chains and darkness, Francis was joyful and said to them: “What do you think will become of me? Rest assured, I will be worshiped throughout the whole world.”<sup>43</sup> He was thinking of human greatness. What greatness? To move up socially and become a knight and a noble?

The illness that accompanied him after he gained his freedom forced him to look at and examine his own limitations more closely. But it also gave him the ability to face life more realistically. He entered into himself and began “to regard himself as worthless and to hold in some contempt what he had previously held as admirable and lovable, though not completely or genuinely. For he had not yet been freed from the bonds of vanities.”<sup>44</sup> Imprisonment and illness, with their discomfort and suffering, had managed to help Francis take a more serious look at his future.

The dream about the palace full of arms, which he had in Assisi,<sup>45</sup> made him think even more about becoming a knight and a noble. Francis “thought he would become a magnificent prince.”<sup>46</sup>

The dream in Spoleto,<sup>47</sup> together with news of the death of John of Brienne, which he learned about upon his arrival in the city, made him reconsider his personal plans. He gave up the idea of going to Apulia and went back to Assisi. There are also overtones of Saint Paul that cause him to go from the merely personal “listen to yourself,” to asking and acting in such a way that the Lord enters the picture: “‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ ‘Go back,’ [the voice] said, ‘to your own land to do what the Lord will tell you.’”<sup>48</sup>

Francis went back to Assisi. Again he spent time with his friends, went to the feasts, was chosen king of the group. But in all this Francis reflected and pondered. Although he had the leader’s baton, the scepter, Francis remained alone. He was out of step with his companions, who were surprised and concerned “at seeing him already changed into another man.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> L3C 4; FA:ED II, 70.

<sup>44</sup> 1 C 4; FA:ED I, 185.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. AP 5 [FA:ED II, 35]; 1 C 5 [FA:ED I, 185]; 2 C 6 [FA:ED II, 245]; LMj 1, 3 [FA:ED II, 532]; L3C 5 [FA:ED II, 70].

<sup>46</sup> AP 5; FA:ED II, 35.

<sup>47</sup> AP 6 [FA:ED II, 36]; 2 C 6 [FA:ED II, 245]; LMj 1,3 [FA:ED II, 532]; L3C 6 [FA:ED II,71].

<sup>48</sup> AP 6; FA:ED II, 36.

<sup>49</sup> L3C 7; FA:ED II, 72.

After that, Francis gave up external things, but “since he was not entirely detached from worldly vanities, this change was not yet perfect.”<sup>50</sup> He began a gradual process of praying and entering into himself. His first biographer says that he retired often, almost every day.<sup>51</sup> This would enable him to go through a process of inner liberation and descend to the very core of his being.

Self-encounter, as we see in Francis, can also be experienced by the young Franciscans. It is slow and sometimes painful as well, because it requires changes in our personal project, in which our situation and our life require a correct reading of the signs of the times. Self-encounter requires entering into oneself, much prayer and reflection, and encountering the basic values of life, in order to attain inner freedom.

#### **6.4. Going out of oneself**

After gaining knowledge of ourselves, we must go out to meet others, open ourselves to others, especially the poor. This means a new openness to our surroundings, and sometimes there are prejudices that have to be overcome. In Francis this process manifested itself in his meetings with the poor, whom he received courteously, with good manners, with joy and generosity. And so, for love of God, who is most generous in rewarding, he was generous and kind to the poor: “From that day he looked on poor people generously and provided them affluently with alms.”<sup>52</sup>

When, through forgetfulness, he failed to give alms to a poor man who had asked him for the love of God, he resolved in his heart “from then on, not to deny a request to anyone asking in the name of so great a Lord.”<sup>53</sup> Saint Bonaventure adds: “Immediately turning back to his heart, he ran after him, and gently with extravagant alms, he promised God that from that moment, while he had the means, he would not refuse those who begged from him for the love of God.”<sup>54</sup> Francis opened himself to others by being generous, with the resolve not to refuse alms to any poor person. If he had no money, he would give his belt or his shirt.<sup>55</sup>

In going out of himself, Francis goes out to meet others, especially the poor. And here the terms of his relationships are reversed. Once he had shown solidarity and been conscientious in spending time with his friends: “Now, however, his whole heart was intent on seeing the poor, listening to them, and giving them alms.”<sup>56</sup> His respect and love for the poor led Francis to identify with them on the steps of Saint Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, a major and radical change was taking place in his social horizon because of his option for the poor.

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<sup>50</sup> L3C 8; FA:ED II, 72.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. 1 C 6; FA:ED I, 187.

<sup>52</sup> L3C 3; FA:ED II, 69.

<sup>53</sup> L3C 3; FA:ED II, 69. Found also in AP 4 [FA:ED II, 34]; 1 C 17 [FA:ED I, 195]; 2 C 15 [FA:ED II, 253].

<sup>54</sup> LMj 1, 1; FA:ED II, 531.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. 2 C 8 [FA:ED II, 247]; LMj 2,6 [FA:ED II, 539]; L3C 8 [FA:ED II, 72].

<sup>56</sup> L3C 9; FA:ED II, 73.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. 2 C 8 [FA:ED II, 247]; LMj 1, 6 [FA:ED II, 534]; L3C 10 [FA:ED II, 73].

In his encounter with the poor, Francis also began his encounter with the suffering Christ: “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). From there it was only one more step to meeting the leper, the social reject. The saint’s biographies tell us that one day, getting off his horse, he gave alms to a leper and kissed his hand.<sup>58</sup> Francis, before the beginning of his conversion, would flee and avoid meeting lepers: “When I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers.”<sup>59</sup> When he went out of himself and tried to meet others, especially the outcast, the poor and the lepers, he tells us in his Testament that “the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, for Francis the meeting with the leper meant an effort to overcome himself in the vocational process and an embrace of the outcast.

After this first meeting, Francis returned to meet with them and spend time with them at the leprosarium in Assisi. He gave them alms and kissed their hands,<sup>61</sup> becoming “a servant and friend of lepers,”<sup>62</sup> so that his biographies often contain passages telling us of the meetings of Francis and his companions with lepers.<sup>63</sup> Saint Bonaventure writes: “From then on he clothed himself with a spirit of poverty, a sense of humility, and an eagerness for intimate piety. For previously not only had association with lepers horrified him greatly, so too did even gazing upon them from a distance. But now, because of Christ crucified, who according to the text of the prophet appeared despised as a leper, he, in order to despise himself completely, showed deeds of humility and humanity to lepers with a gentle piety.”<sup>64</sup>

From this meeting with the leper, Francis deepened his vocation and began his *fuga mundi*, that is, remaining *in* the world without being *of* the world. Francis’s kissing the leper, by which the leper, without ceasing to be a leper, was admitted into society and into the company of Francis, was like a social and moral resurrection for the leper. This meeting with the leper and service to the needy resulted in Francis’s taking a step forward in his vocational process and in his encounter with the Church.

## 6.5. Meeting the Church

Meeting the Church would take place through meeting Christ crucified. Passing over a text in the *Major Legend*, which tells how Christ appeared to Francis as fastened to

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. 1 C 17 [FA:ED I, 195]; 2 C 9 [FA:ED II, 248]; LMj 1, 5 [FA:ED II, 533]; L3C 11 [FA:ED II, 74].

<sup>59</sup> Test 1; FA:ED I, 124.

<sup>60</sup> Test 2-3; FA:ED I, 124.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. 1 C 17 [FA:ED, 195]; 2 C 9 [FA:ED II, 248]; LMj 1, 6 [FA:ED II, 534]; L3C 11 [FA:ED II, 74].

<sup>62</sup> L3C 11; FA:ED II, 74.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. 1 C 39 [FA:ED I, 218], 103 [FA:ED I, 272]; 2 C 66 [FA:ED II, 291], 122 [FA:ED II, 327]; LMj 2, 6 [FA:ED II, 539], 10, 2 [FA:ED II, 606], 14, 1 [FA:ED II, 640]; L3C 55 [FA:ED II, 99]; AC 64 [FA:ED II, 166], 65 [FA:ED II, 167], 9 [FA:ED II, 123]; 2MP 44 [FA:ED III, 290], 58 [FA:ED III, 303], 59 [FA:ED III, 304].

<sup>64</sup> LMj 1, 6; FA:ED II, 534.

a cross,<sup>65</sup> let us highlight the meeting that we know and the conversation Francis had with the image of Christ crucified at San Damiano. It is a biographical text that appears in Celano's *Second Life*.<sup>66</sup> Francis enters the church of San Damiano to pray. Christ crucified asks him to do a job: "Francis, go rebuild my house; as you see, it is all being destroyed."<sup>67</sup> And Francis answers: "I will do so gladly, Lord."<sup>68</sup>

The mystical impressions described by his biographers—"From that hour, therefore, his heart was wounded and it melted when remembering the Lord's passion. While he lived, he always carried the wounds of the Lord Jesus in his heart."<sup>69</sup>—lead us to Francis's mystical embrace of Christ crucified and to the impression of the Lord's wounds in his servant on Mount LaVerna.

The conversation with the crucifix of San Damiano also has an ecclesial meaning. Francis needed time to grasp the step he still had to take, from the material rebuilding of the chapel of San Damiano to the rebuilding of the Church as a community of faith acquired with Christ's own blood.<sup>70</sup>

This text emphasizes the importance of prayer for Francis. It leads him to interior joy and complete openness to the voice of the Spirit. Francis would encounter the Church as a material building, which he would always venerate,<sup>71</sup> and as a community of faith, at whose feet he wanted himself and his brothers to be "steadfast in the Catholic faith."<sup>72</sup>

## 6.6. Meeting the Gospel

In the Church Francis met the Gospel. It would illuminate, clearly and decisively, his vocational journey and would be for him a constant point of reference. From that moment he would be a conscientious observer of the Gospel.

This step in Francis's vocational journey took place while listening to the Gospel about the sending of the disciples.<sup>73</sup> He did not understand it and asked the priest to explain it. In this entire journey Francis senses the presence of an accompanier who helps him discern his call. So, filled with joy, he cries out: "This is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart."<sup>74</sup> He hastens to change his hermit's clothes and put on the garb of an apostolic missionary: barefoot, without staff, one tunic in the

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. LMj 1, 5; FA:ED II,

<sup>66</sup> Cf. 2 C 10-11 [FA:ED II, 249]; LMj 2, 1 [FA:ED II, 536]; L3C 13 [FA:ED II, 75].

<sup>67</sup> 2 C 10; FA:ED II, 249.

<sup>68</sup> L3C 13; FA:ED II, 76.

<sup>69</sup> L3C 14; FA:ED II, 76. "From that very hour his soul melted as the Beloved spoke to him. A little while afterward his heart's love showed in the wounds of his body" (2 C 11; FA:ED II, 250).

<sup>70</sup> Cf. 2 C 11; FA:ED II, 250.

<sup>71</sup> "And the Lord gave me such faith in churches that I would pray with simplicity in this way and say: 'We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, in all your churches through the whole world and we bless you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world'" (Text 4-5; FA:ED I, 124-25).

<sup>72</sup> LR 12, 4; FA:ED I, 106.

<sup>73</sup> We find the account in 1 C 22 [FA:ED I, 201]; LMj 3, 1 [FA:ED II, 542]; L3C 25 [FA:ED II, 84].

<sup>74</sup> 1 C 22; FA:ED I, 202-02.

form of a cross, a cord around his waist. And he begins to preach penance. Francis takes important steps through his assimilation of the Gospel, as Saint Bonaventure says: “Hearing, understanding, and committing this to memory...to carry out what he had heard.”<sup>75</sup>

The Gospel is decisive in Francis’s vocation, and he acts in such a way that this vocation is not just evangelical but also evangelizing, as we have seen: “He then began to preach penance to all with a fervent spirit and joyful attitude.”<sup>76</sup> Thomas of Celano says that when finished repairing the little church of the Portiuncula, he was “in the third year of his conversion.”<sup>77</sup> This tells us that the process Francis went through in his vocational journey was a long one.

### 6.7. Opening up to his brothers

Francis’s vocational journey, which at this point is characterized by a shift from “I” to “we,” enables him to meet his outcast neighbor, the Church and the Gospel. It also makes it possible for him to be approached, that is, to be close to those who want to live his form of life. Francis is transformed into a point of reference, a witness to the Gospel.

“Almost everyone considered him mad. But he did not care, nor did he answer them; instead, he strove with all eagerness to fulfill the task God had shown him... When they saw and heard these things, two men from Assisi, inspired by divine grace, humbly approached him. One of these was Brother Bernard, and the other, Brother Peter. They told Francis simply: ‘We wish to live with you from now on and do what you are doing. Tell, us, therefore, what we should do with our possessions.’ Overjoyed at their coming and their resolve he answered them kindly: ‘Let us go and seek counsel from the Lord.’”<sup>78</sup>

Francis accompanied them to the church of Saint Nicholas in Assisi, and there they opened the Gospel three times in order to learn the requirements for following Christ. After reading the gospel texts, “they were filled with great joy and exclaimed: ‘This is what we want, this is what we were seeking.’ And blessed Francis said: ‘This will be our rule.’ Then he told both of them: ‘Go and may you fulfill the Lord’s counsel as you heard it.’”<sup>79</sup>

Afterward, slowly, others came to join the brothers:<sup>80</sup> the priest Sylvester,<sup>81</sup> another citizen of Assisi named Giles,<sup>82</sup> Brothers Sabbatino, John de Cappella and

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. LMj 3, 1; FA:ED II, 542.

<sup>76</sup> 1 C 23; FA:ED I, 202.

<sup>77</sup> 1 C 21; FA:ED I, 201.

<sup>78</sup> AP 9-10 [FA:ED II, 37-38]. Cf. 1 C 24 [FA:ED I, 203]; 2 C 15 [FA:ED II, 253]; LMj 3, 3 [FA:ED II, 543]; L3C 17 [FA:ED II, 78].

<sup>79</sup> AP 11; FA:ED II, 38.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. 2 C 15 [FA:ED II, 253]; LMj 3, 4 [FA:ED II, 544].

<sup>81</sup> Cf. 2 C 109 [FA:ED II, 319]; LMj 3, 5 [FA:ED II, 544]; AP 12-13 [FA:ED II, 39-40]; L3C 30-31 [FA:ED II, 86-87].

<sup>82</sup> Cf. 1 C 25 [FA:ED I, 204]; LMj 3, 4 [FA:ED II, 544]; AP 14 [FA:ED II, 39]; L3C 32 [FA:ED II, 87].

Morico the Short,<sup>83</sup> Brother Philip the Tall and another anonymous brother.<sup>84</sup> They would increase in number with the missions the brothers undertook after being instructed by Francis,<sup>85</sup> who gave them faculties to receive those who wished to live the same life, and they were brought to the Portiuncula.<sup>86</sup>

The biographies of Francis never say that he ever went looking for brothers. Francis lived as a penitent, and it was the brothers who came to him, sent by the Lord, as he writes in his Testament: “And after the Lord gave me some brothers....”<sup>87</sup> Francis welcomed kindly and with gratitude the brothers the Lord sent him. The brothers were a gift from the Lord. They were the fruit of Francis’s witness of gospel life.

When they had become a group of twelve, Francis decided to go to Rome so that the Pope might approve this fraternity: “Brothers, I see that the Lord intends to make of us a large congregation. Therefore, let us go to our mother, the Roman Church, and inform the Supreme Pontiff about what the Lord is doing through us so we may continue doing what we have begun by his will and command.”<sup>88</sup>

## 6.8. Call of the Franciscan Youth

The call of the members of the Franciscan Youth may have all these steps we have seen in the life of Francis of Assisi, and even more or fewer. But more than the steps themselves, which always change according to the persons and the vocation to which they are called, it is the process and inspiration we can take from a thirteenth-century Umbrian youth, as was Francis of Assisi.

There are vocational values that seem to be common to Francis, to the brothers and sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order, and to the young Franciscans. These include the call to holiness,<sup>89</sup> observance of the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ after the example of Francis of Assisi,<sup>90</sup> going out of themselves in order to live in fraternity,<sup>91</sup> “deepening their own vocation within the context of the Secular Franciscan Order.”<sup>92</sup>

The vocation of the young Franciscans is to “share the experience of the Christian life in fraternity, in the light of the message of Saint Francis of Assisi.”<sup>93</sup> It is to “chose a life rooted in Christ and completely dedicated to the Church.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. AP 17 [FA:ED II, 41]; L3C 35 [FA:ED II, 88].

<sup>84</sup> Cf. 1 C 25 [FA:ED I, 204].

<sup>85</sup> Cf. 1 C 26-28 [FA:ED I, 205-06]; LMj, 3, 7 [FA:ED II, 546]; AP 18 [FA:ED II, 41-42]; L3C 36-37.40 [FA:ED II, 89-90.92].

<sup>86</sup> Cf. AP 24 [FA:ED II, 45]; L3C 41 [FA:ED II, 92-93].

<sup>87</sup> Test 14 [FA:ED I, 125].

<sup>88</sup> AP 31 [FA:ED II, 48]. Cf. 1 C 32 [FA:ED I, 210]; LMj 3, 8 [FA:ED II, 547]; L3C 46 [FA:ED II, 95].

<sup>89</sup> Cf. LG, 40; *Const.*, 1.1; 96.1.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. *Rule SFO*, 4; *Const.*, 1.2; 96.1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ecclesia in Europa*, 40 (= EE).

<sup>92</sup> *Const.*, 96.2

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.2.

<sup>94</sup> EE, 40.

In order to give strength and roots to the Christian and Franciscan call, and in order that this call might take form and be well expressed, the Secular Franciscan Order and the Franciscan Youth must favor and “promote opportunities for encounter among young people, so as to foster a climate of mutual listening and prayer.... The way of holiness *should be pointed out to them* and they should be encouraged to make demanding choices in their following of Jesus..., and become *young Franciscans* capable of demonstrating a Christian *and Franciscan* approach to every sphere of life, including entertainment and leisure.”<sup>95</sup>

## **7. Mission of the Franciscan Youth**

### **7.1. From call to mission**

Going from call to mission means giving great importance to gratuitousness, commitment and solidarity in one’s life project. It means, as Karl Barth says, “Listening to God with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” When God calls, it is always in connection with a mission. We see this in the great heroes of salvation history: Abraham, Moses, David, Mary, the apostles, and Francis and Clare of Assisi. The response to the call is directed toward mission. For this reason the call needs to be constantly reaffirmed.

Mission invites us, through the affirmation of justice, to love, trust, solidarity and commitment to human dignity, to give life where nothing seems able to grow. The one called and invited must have a compassionate heart in order to be God’s spokesperson, for God loves passionately and deeply. The one invited must be able to grieve with those who grieve, rejoice with those who rejoice, hope with those who are doubtful and anxious.

Mission—done through and in the name of the one who has called us, Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the Father—shows us the value of service, of being yeast that leavens the mass of injustice and feels the birthpangs of the new reality that is appearing on the horizon. It enables us, like sunflowers, to keep turned toward the sun, toward the source of our life.

Mission makes us trust in God and place ourselves in his hands, like clay in the potter’s hands (Jer 18:4), letting ourselves be formed by him in the course of our life. In her *Magnificat*, Mary presents us with a whole message of proclamation for the work God is doing in and through her. Mary teaches us to look to God, and at the same time teaches us to let ourselves be looked upon by him (cf. Lk 1:46-49). This is followed by a denunciation (cf. Lk 1:51-53) in which she speaks for all who are hoping for God’s salvation: the poor, the humble, the outcasts. We are placed in a subversive paradox, in which God takes sides and shows the strength of his arm to all who oppress the defenseless. She ends her song by again praising God (cf. Lk 1:54-55), who shows his

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*, 62. Emphasis mine. Cf. *Const.*, 97.1.

faithfulness from generation to generation. God, who is the Alpha and the Omega, reaches all. His promise is fulfilled and will be fulfilled, because God's love does not depend on the fidelity of the person but on the depth of his heart.

## 7.2. Serving the Gospel

Let us look now at some steps we must take in order to enter into mission, for “serving the Gospel of hope by means of a charity which evangelizes is the commitment and the responsibility of everyone. Whatever the charism and ministry of each individual, charity is the royal road prescribed for all and which all can travel: it is the road upon which the whole ecclesial community [*and therefore also the Franciscan fraternity*] is called to journey in the footsteps of its Master.”<sup>96</sup>

We need clear vision to be able to distinguish the wheat from the weeds. Often we must ask for the gradual healing of our sight, as we are told in the healing of the blind man (Mk 8:23). We need time in order to see. We must learn to focus, to have the sharpness of vision that enables us to see human beings as wounded companions along the wayside: derelicts, immigrants, drug addicts, people with AIDS, battered and exploited women, children forced into delinquency. Seeing with eyes that are healed and made well means removing the faces of our brothers and sisters from anonymity and bringing them into the light of recognition. The look of these eyes does not dissemble, does not avoid reality; it gives hope. This look is humanizing and healing, because the crucified Christ goes before us, and he is the pledge of our hope.

We need to ask the Lord to open our ears to hear (cf. Isa 50:4). If we plunge deep into our hearts, we will find—locked in the trunk in the attic—words, gestures, silences, fears, worries..., because someone refused to enter into our personal story. We can think of so many people who lack bread, a roof, those whose bodies are exploited as objects of pleasure to be used and thrown away. Coming into contact with these people, listening to their stories, their desire for freedom, their falls and their longing to get up again, their fears and anxieties, leads us to a knowledge of the mysteries hidden in the deepest corners of our person.

Hearing must go with seeing, because it surpasses words. Actions are added, eyes meet, hands touch.... Seeing and hearing give us a chance to be missionaries of the Kingdom on Samaritan roads, where it does no good to pass by, as did the priest and the levite in order to get to the temple quickly. We must approach the brother or sister we find lying on the ground on the world's road, which goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho and is a physical and existential sacrament of Jesus.

Time for silence, time to keep quiet. Job asked his friends not to crush him with their words (Jb 19:1), not to comfort him with empty nothings (Jb 21:34). Many times, when we find ourselves in difficult life situations, with problems that overwhelm us, we must remain in silence before giving answers that are vague or do not respond to the real situation.

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<sup>96</sup> EE, 33.

Mary is a sign and example of silence, a silence we can feel in the Gospels. Silently she goes through the mountains of Judah, carrying in her womb Jesus, concerned for her elderly cousin who needs her. Silently she accompanies her Son. Silently she remains beside the cross. Silently and prayerfully she waits for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Silently she dies and is taken up to heaven, body and soul.

In silence, reflection and prayer we rely on the God of life and hope, and the consolations we receive from him enable us to console those we meet on our journey (cf. 2 Cor 1:4).

In the story of the woman with hemorrhages (Mk 5:25-34), the hemorrhages, which made the woman religiously and socially impure, stopped when she touched Jesus' cloak. The Teacher was pressed by the crowd, but the touch of the woman with hemorrhages caused a flow of grace to go out from him. His question, "Who touched my cloak?" and his looking around restored the woman to the synagogue and to society.

The body is important. It is our way of being present in and to the world. The body is a sea of feelings and relationships. We should not be afraid to let ourselves be kissed, hugged, touched by tender and meaningful action that goes beyond words.

Letting ourselves be touched has much to do with vulnerability. There are many outcasts, many vulnerable fringe groups in our society. Contact with our complex society makes us vulnerable and shakes our view of the future. Mission requires letting ourselves be touched, making people and today's reality the center of our lives, allowing what is best in us to blossom, as in Jesus and Francis, in order to overcome those areas of vulnerability and help to heal—socially, psychologically and spiritually.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah there is a text that shows God's anger and irritation, his concern for his People and the lack of available persons. A cry is heard: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" To this question from God an answer is heard: "Here I am; send me" (Isa 6:8).

Today, as then, God needs prophets, messengers for the mission. He needs people who are trustworthy and faithful, who can speak in his name, who will collaborate in the Father's mission by accompanying his People, even though trembling, like Isaiah, or not knowing how to speak because one is a child, like Jeremiah (Jer 1:6-7). An available missionary is "fire by night and cloud by day, to show you the route you should take" (Dt 1:33).

### **7.3. Poverty**

In setting out on mission we should travel light, with neither bag, sandals, purse or staff (cf. Lk 9:1-6). Francis understood and was exultant. Thomas of Celano says that, once he understood the Gospel reading of the sending of the disciples, "he immediately exulted in the spirit of God. 'This is what I want,' he said, 'this is what I seek, this is what

I desire with all my heart.”<sup>97</sup>

Having too many things with us, like the young man in the Gospel (Mk 10.7), prevents us from setting out. We can follow Jesus only if we sell our things. That is why getting rid of things is stressed in the Secular Franciscan mission project: “Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs.”<sup>98</sup> And again: “A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ.”<sup>99</sup>

In order to be close to the lesser ones in society and the Church we must become lesser ones ourselves. We can help others to rise only if we stoop down and support others in their rise from the bottom. The best experience in this regard is that of God in Jesus, who in order to save us is not afraid to become human. More yet, he stoops even lower than human beings: to death, desolation and non-being, to the hell of our world, to the disfiguring of his face (Isa 53:2). All of this to help human beings rise and give them a face. In other words, we must live the *kenosis* of Jesus that Paul has described for us (Phil 2:5-11).

In the Creed we say that Jesus “descended into hell” in order to bring light and begin from there “the ascent to life.” God is found because he descended into hell, where life was violated, dignity trampled upon, hope denied, hunger unsatisfied, thirst unquenched, where one becomes a slave, inwardly and outwardly. That is his place, because life cannot exist with death.<sup>100</sup> This is the place of the young Franciscan if he or she wants to experience resurrection and the hope of life.

Francis of Assisi’s true and perfect joy, insofar as it fulfills the request of Paul to the Philippians (Phil 4:4) and is full of hope, must adorn the missionary and the mission environment.

Joy must have deep roots and long branches that are able to cover conscious concerns, deep happiness, sincere compassion and sympathy, personal involvement in transforming our society and proclaiming the good news to those suffering the challenges of the moment and the malaise of injustice.

For mission we must extend the ladder of prayer between heaven and earth (cf. Gen 28:12). We must go to our inner room, close the door and pray to the Father (Mt 6:6).

Jesus, sent by the Father, was always in relationship with his Father. He prepared

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<sup>97</sup> 1 C 22; FA:ED I, 201-02.

<sup>98</sup> *Rule SFO*, 11.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

<sup>100</sup> López Alonso, Marta, *Sintonizar con la frecuencia del Reino: diez actitudes bíblicas para vivir la llamada del Dios de los pobres*, Revista de Pastoral Vocacional Todos Uno, n. 151, julio-septiembre 2002, p. 42.

for his major decisions—choosing the apostles (Lk 6:12), his passion (Mk 14:32-42)—with prayer. Often he would withdraw to the mountain to pray (Jn 6:15). He would leave the crowd in order to discern with the Father, in prayer, what path he should take so that the presence of God’s Kingdom would be living, real and effective.

To be missionaries dedicated to the mission, we must be tuned in to the frequency of the Kingdom. We do this by praying and not losing heart (Mt 7:7-11).

#### **7.4. YouFra: hope for and in the mission**

After some of these points, which complete and shape our way of being in mission, let us spend a moment on the mission of the Young Franciscans in the Church and society. Throughout the world the whole Church is committed to inspiring hope. In this mission “the contribution of the *lay faithful* to the life of the Church is essential: they have an irreplaceable role in the proclamation and the service of the Gospel of hope, since ‘through them the Church of Christ is made present in the various sectors of the world, as a sign and source of hope and of love.’”<sup>101</sup>

The SFO *Rule* describes the mission of the Secular Franciscans and the Franciscan Youth as the faithful fulfillment of their duties: “Let them faithfully fulfill the duties proper to their various circumstances of life,”<sup>102</sup> because “modern man ‘listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.’”<sup>103</sup> The *General Constitutions* emphasize that mission is like the mature fruit that comes from life in fraternity: “Fidelity to their own charism, Franciscan and secular, and the witness of building fraternity, sincerely and openly, are their principal services to the Church, which is the community of love. They should be recognized in it by their ‘being,’ from which their mission springs.”<sup>104</sup>

Young Franciscans, conscious of having a place in the Church and society, are invited “to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the Kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively.”<sup>105</sup> Mission requires that all the faithful, including the Secular Franciscans, be active in promoting justice: “Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith.”<sup>106</sup> To carry out this mission, continuing formation is suggested, along with the foundations of a deep spiritual life and prayer, so that they may continue to be fearless witnesses “of charity and forgiveness, values which bring the Gospel to the vast frontiers of politics, social life, the economy, culture, ecology, international life, family life, education, professional life, the world of labor and the caring professions.”<sup>107</sup>

Also invited into all these aspects and mission fields of the Seculars are the

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<sup>101</sup> EE, 41.

<sup>102</sup> *Rule SFO*, 10; Cf. *Const.*, 17.1, 20.2.

<sup>103</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 41.

<sup>104</sup> *Const.*, 100.3.

<sup>105</sup> *Rule SFO*, 14.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, 15; Cf. *Const.*, 23.1.

<sup>107</sup> EE, 41.

Franciscan Youth, “the true hope of the Church and of the world and an eloquent sign of the Spirit who unceasingly causes new energies to arise.”<sup>108</sup>

## 7.8. Characteristics of the mission of YouFra

To conclude this topic, it may be useful to point out some characteristics of the call and mission of the Franciscan Youth. The mission springs spontaneously from the call.

The call:

- brings with it an exodus, a going out from the familiar homeland to a land that is new and unknown;
- involves a change of life;
- is accompanied by:
  1. *Joy*, because every vocation is gratuitous, a gift and good for the whole community, the fraternity;
  2. *Gratitude*, because a vocation is a blessing and involves finding a way to respond to God, to serve one’s brothers and sisters,<sup>109</sup> to testify to a Christian and Franciscan life,<sup>110</sup> and to to commit oneself “to continue his [Saint Francis’s] mission with the other components of the Franciscan Family”;<sup>111</sup>
  3. *Freedom*, openness to the call, a free response, obedient and open to God’s plan, because the one called has been invited, not forced, and finds fulfillment in otherness, in freely trusting in God, Jesus, the Kingdom, the Church, the poor;<sup>112</sup>
  - 4 *The power of the Spirit with his gifts and fruits*, for he is “the source of their vocation and the animator of fraternal life and mission;<sup>113</sup>
  5. *Discernment*, with the necessary factors for living as a Christian and Franciscan.

The mission that accompanies the call:

- is always for the good of people and is not carried out with one’s own strength and personal qualities, but rather with the help of the Spirit and the grace of God;
- gives rise to and involves a close, personal and non-transferable relationship with God, with Jesus, through prayer: “Let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do”;<sup>114</sup>
- involves renunciation and trust in the One who calls;
- requires maturity in one’s faith and Christian commitment;<sup>115</sup>
- demands sincerity and transparency;
- calls for generosity and detachment;

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*, 62.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. *Rule SFO*, 14.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 15.

<sup>111</sup> *Const.*, 3.2; Cf. *Const.*, 20.1.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. *Rule SFO*, 13.

<sup>113</sup> *Const.*, 11; Cf. *Const.*, 12.1.

<sup>114</sup> *Rule SFO*, 8.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. *EE*, 62.

- requires service<sup>116</sup> and availability;<sup>117</sup>
- demands an ability to deal positively with failure.

## **8. Spiritual assistance to the Franciscan Youth**

The spiritual assistant of YouFra is normally the assistant of the SFO. His or her function is that of spiritual assistance. The assistant will strive to work in close collaboration with the fraternal animator and the YouFra council.

### **8.1. Concept of assistance**

The specific goals of the spiritual assistant are to be a witness of Franciscan spirituality, fraternal affection for YouFra, and communion between the religious Franciscans and the members of YouFra. This does not mean just giving, but being able to receive, to let oneself be drawn in by the mutual communion and fraternal affection of the Young Franciscans. At the same time, this makes them a bridge of communication and exchange of goods between the religious fraternity and the YouFra fraternity. Spiritual assistance to YouFra demands that the assistant be an active member in the formation process of the young Franciscan. His or her duty is to collaborate in the process of formation and discernment with the fraternal animator. The assistant must not forget that the role is one of collaboration, and must leave room for the Secular Franciscans.

The spiritual assistant must know how to listen, wait, be patient and be faithful. Faithful, especially in the hard times of discouragement and dejection. The assistant must live with the Franciscan Youth, sharing and offering content, always bearing in mind that the starting point and goal is the same for all YouFra members, yet mindful of the fact that not everyone travels the course at the same speed. Hence the assistant must keep an eye on those most in need. Having a spiritual assistant and fraternal animator in no way diminishes YouFra's responsibility to accompany its members. The two figures complement, but do not replace, the YouFra's work as a council, as a fraternity and as individuals.

YouFra, using categories and teaching methods suited to the world of youth,<sup>118</sup> presents to its members fraternal life. Its goal is to develop in them an ecclesial sense and a Christian and Franciscan vocation; insertion into the life of the local Church; service as a mission in the Church and society; integration of prayer, contemplation and the sacraments into the spiritual journey; dialogue and collaboration with the Franciscan fraternities and other ecclesial groups; formation suited to the youthfulness of its members; celebration of moments of recreation, so that they themselves will become "capable of demonstrating a Christian approach to every sphere of human life, including entertainment and leisure."<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, YouFra is also co-responsible in the

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<sup>116</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 17.1.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 32.2.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 96.5.

<sup>119</sup> EE, 62.

SFO fraternity council of the corresponding level.<sup>120</sup> Both fraternities, SFO and YouFra, can be thought of as communicating vessels, through which both fraternities share in each other's values, including the responsibilities of each.

The YouFra fraternities take very seriously their use of the SFO and the spiritual assistance of the First Order and the TOR:

- *The Secular Franciscan Order*, because the young Franciscans want to participate in the Franciscan and secular charism. They are talents that cannot and should not remain in one's pocket, but should be used in the game. The SFO, which has received this talent, assumes a risk, and in the risk is life, and life, from a gospel perspective, is won only by giving it away. YouFra is the fruit of the donation and gift made by the Secular Franciscans, if they accept it as part of their pastoral activity among youth and vocational promotion.

- *The First Order and the Third Order*, because they have promised before the Church that they would provide spiritual assistance. Not only because of this, but also as members of the Franciscan Family, they should know and love YouFra and its vocational journey, in which it expresses, in forms and ways different from the religious, the charism of their common Seraphic Father.

In conclusion, the YouFra fraternities are invited not only to feel the assistant's human and spiritual warmth, but also feel themselves deeply part of the SFO fraternities, which are "particularly responsible" for the Franciscan Youth.<sup>121</sup>

## **8.2. Methodology of assistance**

To assist the Franciscan Youth means to immerse oneself in a method of experiential formation that helps the young person to arrive at his or her choice of life through lived experience rather than through theoretical knowledge. The Franciscan Youth is an experience of fraternity, where the young person deepens his or her vocation, under the inspiration of the gospel choices made by Saint Francis. The first and most important aspect is the life lived in fraternity by the young Franciscans among themselves and with their spiritual assistant. The assistant must be with the young people and, together with them, participate in the life of fraternity. He must be there in order to get a better knowledge of the young people themselves and their ideas, dreams, concerns, hopes, optimism and difficulties. He must be present primarily in heart and soul, full of idealism.

The presence of the assistant is necessary, not just because of what he does, but because of the person he is. He does not have to do much, but he must be there, take part in the discussions, share his own experiences, give expression to his ideas, dreams and concerns. The assistant must know how to listen, wait, have patience and be faithful. It is

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<sup>120</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 97.4.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.2.

not enough to be there on some occasions; he must be present regularly, without ever allowing himself to get discouraged. The young people need to know that the assistant is faithful and will be with them in moments of difficulty and disappointment. Actions speak louder than words (“*Do* it, don’t just *say* you’ll do it!”). Faithful presence is the basis of the whole ministry of assistance, because it is an unequivocal expression of the assistant’s good will towards the young people.

At times, especially in the beginning, we will need to go out to meet the young people, to be where they are and not wait for them to come to us. It means leaving our own place for the sake of being with them and sharing their life. Then, once they are convinced of how good it is to be together, the young people will start to bring in their friends to share the same experience.

Living together is not the same thing as letting people do what they want or go where they want. Rather it means knowing how to share, being able to give of ourselves, having something to offer. We need to have a plan and be prepared, know what we mean and how it should be said. However, there should be great flexibility in this approach, because there will always be times when other experiences surface, more important than the ones prepared in advance. Above all, we need to have clear ideas and values for our own sake and for the sake of the others, and distinguish between what is essential and what is secondary.

### **8.3. Journeying together**

Living together is the point of departure for journeying together. The experience of the Franciscan Youth is an experience of growth, both individual and in groups. It is a process, a journey, and must be understood as such by the young people. Things are done because they are part of a journey towards a clear and well-defined goal. The assistant must know where to go. Some doubts may arise regarding the road to be taken, but there must be no doubts about the goal to be attained.

In journeying together we take into account that not all can walk to the same rhythm. One sets a brisk pace while another needs more time. But the journey is undertaken together, where those in front wait for the stragglers, and the slower ones make an effort to keep up with the leaders. In this way, the more advanced have a chance to help the others, to hold back so that they can walk together with the others. All must advance; all must journey together.

This means that the assistant needs to have a flexible plan, whereby individuals find challenges they are able to meet. The assistant must accompany everyone, but with great attention to individuals. He must be with all, not just with the vanguard or the ones bringing up the rear. At one moment he must slow his own pace so that those trailing behind can catch up with him; at another moment he must up his pace so as not to lose sight of the leaders.

#### **8.4. Vocational discernment**

In the Franciscan Youth, journeying together is undertaken in order to deepen one's vocation in the light of the Franciscan ideal. The goal is to attain a clear vision of one's vocation, that is, an answer to the question, "Lord what do you want me to do?" The experiences of Christian life in fraternity should lead to this goal.

The lived experiences need to be evaluated so that one can derive some meaning from them and see what significance they hold for this young person. Each experience must be planned, prepared, lived, and evaluated. The assistant's role will be to help the young person discern whether or not what he feels in his heart is good and comes from God. The spiritual assistant needs the gift of spiritual discernment.

At the beginning, the question is posed in more unreflective terms: "What do I want to do with my life; what do I want to achieve with my life; how can I fully realize myself?" Little by little one grasps what the question is all about: fulfilment of the whole human person, body and spirit, natural and supernatural. Progress is made from "what I want" to "what God wants." We need to be able to listen, to explore together with the young person, to help him or her to understand the voices of the heart, to distinguish between suggestions, to make choices. There is a need to accompany young people, to be patient with them, to know how to wait, inviting them to open their souls to God, to help them in the process of conversion to God, of *metanoia*, of spiritual renewal.

Vocational discernment is a service we give to the young person, not to our Order. This is a new concept of vocational apostolate, that is, of helping a young person to identify his or her vocation. It is a genuine ministry in the true sense of the term. It means a great readiness and openness of mind to put young people in contact with the various expressions of Franciscan life. It will be for the Lord to choose whom he wants; we can only help young people discover the Lord's saving plan for them.

#### **8.5. Formation**

Vocational discernment relies on an integral formation: human, Christian and Franciscan. Basic to all is the need to form the young person to become mature, because only a mature person can make free and lasting choices.

Living the Christian life in fraternity requires a solid Christian formation. Young people need to know their religion, their catechism, the teaching of the Church. They need to feel at home in the Church, to know how to accept the Church as it is, not just as an ideal, but concretely with this pope, this bishop, this pastor, these priests, religious and lay people. The task of the assistant will be to help young people deepen their faith through the experience of faith lived in the Franciscan Youth fraternity, in the parish, and in the various pastoral activities of the parish and diocese.

The journey is undertaken in the light of the message of Saint Francis. We need to help young people get a better knowledge of the Franciscan Family, the ideal and the

gospel choices of Francis, Clare, and the other members of the Franciscan Family. It is a matter of getting to know the Franciscan movement and Franciscans who are both religious and secular, active and contemplative. Here too it is a question of an education that is practical rather than theoretical, based on contacts with living people and lived experiences with other Franciscans, religious and secular.

The assistant is a sign of the fraternal affection of the religious towards the young. The assistant's enthusiasm for his own ideal, lived personally, is very important. We have so much to give to young people, but we must be convinced that it is worthwhile to live it ourselves in everyday life. Franciscan formation is carried out through direct contact with members of the various branches of the Franciscan Family, inviting them to bear witness, participating in their life and activities. Often it will be for the spiritual assistant to expedite these contacts, by preparing and then evaluating together these experiences.

## **9. Children in the Franciscan Family**

Among the many references to children in the Franciscan sources, one of the most important is found in the Assisi Compilation, speaking of the friary at Greccio to which Saint Francis liked to withdraw: "Many of these people [at Greccio], with the grace of God, entered religion because of his example and preaching and that of his brothers.... For frequently, when the brothers of that place used to praise the Lord in the evening, as the brothers at that time were accustomed to do in many places, the people of that town, both the great and the small, would come outside. Standing on the road in front of the town, they would respond to the brothers in a loud voice: 'Praised be the Lord God!' Even children, who could not yet speak, when they saw the brothers, would praise the Lord as best they could."<sup>122</sup>

This passage is important for the history of the Secular Franciscan Order. Where it says that "many of these people...entered religion," it can be understood to mean that they became members of the Franciscan Family, either as friars or nuns or, more frequently, as seculars—including children. The reasons why they entered are said to be the example, preaching and liturgical prayer of Saint Francis and his friars. The grace of God is also stressed.

Children the world over are still attracted by Saint Francis and his friars and are happy to accompany their parents in the Franciscan Family. Anyone who has had contact with the groups of Franciscan Children that have sprung up spontaneously in many countries is struck by the beautiful presence of God among the children and by the impact of Saint Francis on their impressionable spirit.

Cardinal Daneels has made an important observation about childhood impressions. He said in an interview: "The big religious impressions are experienced before the age of six. At eight years of age, when the child is left to the tutelage of the school, it is already too late. An altogether different visible world will already be set in place: Martians, dwarfs and fairy tales. Educating tiny tots to pray and to be in touch with

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<sup>122</sup> AP 74; FA:ED II, 177.

God is therefore extremely important” (*L’humanité de Dieu*, 95).

### **9.1. Little Heralds (children)**

The purpose of the Little Heralds is to form Incarnational persons, in the footsteps of Saint Francis. The perfect model of a human being was realized in the Incarnate Word, Jesus of Nazareth. All of Saint Francis’s choices were inspired by this model. We are convinced that our life is fully realized through this same model. It is characterized by certain traits that constitute the outline of our formation methodology:

- an active and tireless search for God’s plan, and total availability to adapt to it gradually, deepening our understanding of it through prayer, reflection and experience, both personal and communal;
- full availability to our brothers and sisters in a constant attitude of service; a love that gives its all, even to “excess” (the death of a totally innocent man as a criminal).

These are the basic traits of Christ that Francis reproduced in himself. To these are linked others that together provide the means for revealing them and their consequences. These are the spirit of poverty (freedom from the influence of material things and goods in general, not by scorning them but by giving them their rightful place in the scale of values), minority (overcoming dominion over others so as to be with them instead, power understood as service), recognition of creation as the marvellous work of God given to everyone to use, without privileges (thus worthy of respect, care and promotion), a sense of relativity (all things, even the noblest values, find their place and their true value only in relation to God, who remains the only stable point of reference. He alone is the Lord of life).

An Incarnational person recognizes the law of love as the way to achieve all this. Love that urges us to seek God unceasingly and to love him as the highest good, from whom every other good comes. Love that passes through God and is poured out on our brothers and sisters and on all creation in the most authentic and sure way. The Son of God who became flesh out of love is the goal, the way, the model, encouragement and guarantee, all in one. This is why we make the law of love the foundation of education and propose it unceasingly and in every way, including naturally all those ways that help to overcome the daily expressions of selfishness (at times subtly defended even by some educators in the name of spontaneity and freedom, values to be promoted always with careful testing).

Summing up:

- God has loved us, loves us now, and will love us always, with an absolutely faithful love (1 Thes 5:23-34; 2 Tim 2:13; 1 Pt 4:19; 1 Jn 2:3-11; Jn 14:23-24).
- God in loving us arouses in us love for our brothers and sisters. Only from God can we draw the direction and the ability to love everyone without discrimination,

fully and consistently (1 Jn 4:7-21).

- God's love for us urges us to "excess" (Eph 2:1-5), which is expressed especially in dying on the cross.

- A love that becomes "service" (Mt 20:28; Jn 13:1-20).

- A love that is expressed in the absence of goods and power (Mt 8:18-21; Lk 2:1-20; 2 Cor 8:9).

- A love that welcomes creation as an act of love given to us by God.

### **9.1.1. Pedagogy**

The law of the Little Herald is:

*1. I love God my Father.*

*2. I love all the children of God my Father.*

Children need a norm that dominates everything and everyone, and is at the same time "theirs," covering their group, their activities, their games, their relations with others. They also need a norm that is simple but not banal; "theirs," that is, perceived as belonging to them from the moment they have chosen to be part of the group that observes it, but not theirs alone. The proposed law aims to satisfy these needs. One must appeal to it constantly, because the entire group depends on it and is guided by it. Its text will have a place of honor. Those who ask to become Little Heralds and make the promise must be questioned on their understanding and observance of this law, naturally in a way corresponding to their abilities. Here the sensitivity and balance of the animator must come into play.

The animator will have to show that he or she lives the law at his level, and thus much more consistently.

### **9.1.2. The promise**

The promise is the act by which the Little Heralds pledge to observe the law. With this they enter the group as members. The group of Little Heralds may have a special name. Candidates make the promise after a suitable time of preparation, during which, through playing, praying and taking part in all the activities of the group, they will show that they have understood, at their level naturally, what is being asked of them. Preparation for the promise should not be longer than three months, but it should not be shorter than the time necessary to participate in at least five or six meetings.

The contents of the promise, which can be formulated by each group, thus making the law concrete, should contain the following elements of commitment: following Jesus with Francis, friendship with everyone, the daily good deed. It should be personalized as to the preparation, which should take into account each one's ability and actual preparation, and also as to the date. Little Heralds must feel that the promise is their personal commitment to live with the help of the group, a tiny cell of the Church.

The love Christ showed us and to which we want to introduce the Little Heralds has the spirit of service as its essential component. This service may consist of great deeds, but it consists primarily of everyday things: little acts of kindness, expressions of concern, random acts of helpfulness etc. Through these small things they can develop an attitude of availability to their brothers and sisters. We cannot ask more of a boy or girl than this as a beginning. However, it will contribute to creating a new mentality, that of Christ. This gesture is called in Italian *Pace e Bene* because it is a gesture of peace and a gift of goodness, and because this is how the Franciscan greeting and best wishes takes on flesh. The Little Heralds must be constantly challenged along these lines, with imagination and creativity. They will respond very well because they are still “uncorrupted.”

The Little Heralds also have their own motto, a word that sums up their commitment and becomes part of their jargon, which they need psychologically. They can use this motto in a thousand ways: as a shout to begin their games, as a motto to display on their notebooks and drawing pads, as a word of recognition among themselves etc. It is “Always Better!” It indicates a commitment not to grow tired of improving and growing. It is in line with the reference in Luke’s Gospel to Jesus, who “advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and men” (Lk 2:52).

### **9.1.3. Poverty**

Franciscan poverty is not flight but a loving choice. Christ chose it to be near us, and Francis also made it his choice out of love for Christ. Through gospel poverty everything is judged in relation to God, the only Lord of all. Through gospel poverty we understand better the value of wealth and riches themselves. We understand that we are stewards of things and not owners of what belongs to God and what God provides for everyone. If our heart is not stripped of power and possessions, it does not know how to love. If it loves to possess, it is not free from material influences, consumerism and conformism (the excuse of calling necessary that which everyone is running after, even though we do not need it). We strive to help the Little Heralds appreciate and be satisfied with the essentials (a significant aspect of poverty) when it comes to their needs, and in their use and choice of things.

Knowing how to provide for oneself so as not to be a burden to others, but instead have extra opportunities to serve them, is also an expression of poverty that should be part of our educational concerns. The acquisition of some manual skills is also part of the same picture. It favors creativity and is a way of approaching material things correctly.

### **9.1.4. Exercise of responsibility**

Duties towards God, one’s neighbor and creation call for responsible sharing. This means that it is conscious, motivated, constructive and competent.

Children first learn to become responsible through the exercise of simple tasks

commensurate with their abilities, tasks that are simple, but not contrived, tasks that are real with all their consequences. Formative tasks include those of messenger (spreading news), caring for some or all of the gear for activities, checking whether the youngest ones (or a particular one) have what is needed for an outing, activity etc.

It will also be formative not to make up for lack of responsibility by coming to the rescue at the last minute. Everyone should gradually develop the habit of considering the discomfort they cause others through their negligence.

### **9.1.5. Relations with others**

Relations with others—with individuals, but especially with other groups and institutions—should be regarded as important moments from a formational point of view. Therefore they should be suitably prepared for, either specifically, one at a time, or in general, so that they might be occasions for examination and dialogue.

## **9.2 Heralds (pre-adolescents)**

The boy or girl we are considering as a Herald presents these features (with different stages, patterns and expressions for boys and girls):

- a need for adventure;
- a sense of the “band” or exclusive group of persons of the same age;
- a desire to face reality (expressed through adventure and the band);
- a demand for consistency, justice and absolute loyalty;
- a need and search for models (with a tendency to be indiscriminate);
- an affective need, different from the preceding, to seek the opposite sex, but also shifting between love and hate;
- on a religious level, acceptance of a Christ who is real (historical and personal, not doctrinal), with whom the boys want to “do something” and the girls want to “share his company.”

The responses are given in the course of a gradual journey, marked by stages.

The need for adventure is met by:

- appropriate surroundings;
- ventures planned and carried out.

The need to deal with persons and things is met by:

- what we have just said above;
- the law and the promise;
- the Heralds and their groups;
- the good deed.

The affective need and sexual impulses are met by:

- coeducation;
- a spirit of service;
- a clear and positive moral catechesis.

The need for a band or exclusive group is met by the Heralds.

### 9.2.1. Pedagogy

The Herald to whom we devote our service has, as we have seen, needs to which we must give formative answers. The pedagogical method adopted is offered as a life experience that is faithful to the individual's personality and clearly inspired by the Franciscan spirit of fraternity, simplicity, commitment strongly motivated by the following of Christ, and love for creation.

The basic outline of the method is this:

- **Means of formation:** instruments of growth through the exercise of commitment (law and promise), availability (the good deed), responsibility (teams, spelling out services within the group), poverty (the use of things without enslavement to them, a sense of indebtedness to God's love), humility in commitment, also in awareness of one's own weakness (the motto).

- **Agents of formation:** persons and events that, by using the means of formation, promote the individual's growth. These include the animator, who is called and regarded primarily as an "elder brother," the Heralds' fraternity (the group and its organization, as a place of formative experience), the surroundings (psychological place of fraternity, creativity and adventure), the journey (means of formation considered in the dynamic of activities led by the animator and experienced by the boys or girls as agents), coeducation (boys and girls sharing the formative journey and fostering enriching relationships).

The boy or girl needs a norm beyond self and others to identify with as an ideal, a consistent line, a relationship of equality with others and reassurance.

The law of the Heralds is this:

1. I am on the way to discovering God my Father with the help of Jesus Christ, who reveals the Father to me in his Gospel.
2. I want to accept and use all the gifts that God, the Lord of my life, gives me (Word, sacraments, prayer; relations with others, with creation, with God).
3. I commit myself completely to overcoming my selfishness and being simple and humble, generous with others and accepting of them, respecting my home which is creation and my body which God has given me.

4. I seek every day to do something good for others and with others, even if they do not ask me.
5. I am always loyal and truthful with myself and with everyone so as to merit their trust.

The boys or girls seek a norm to appeal to in order to validate their rights. This is a very limited and utilitarian concept of law from which we must free them so that they can acquire a norm and plan of life, a moral norm to guide the growth in relationships that every person has with God and neighbor, even when the person rejects those relationships. Since it is a question of a norm and plan, what is preferred is a positive formulation based on the commitment.

The animator, especially in one-to-one conversations with Heralds, must stress this commitment, going over again, with examples, the gospel commandment of love, in order to animate them, especially in the areas of greater need. But discussion of the law must also constantly take place with the whole group, as a purposeful stimulus and a reference point for checking.

Obviously this law does not take the place of the Ten Commandments, much less the gospel Commandment. It is intended to be an expression of both that reaches the Heralds in their psychological and moral life. On the other hand, it is not an exhaustive expression, but it highlights those areas in which the boy or girl needs more prodding.

### **9.2.2. The promise**

The promise is a commitment to live the law and thus becomes the will to carry it out. Essentially, it is a commitment to allow oneself to be led along the paths of Francis of Assisi's spiritual experience.

It is to be made after a suitable period of preparation, during which the promise must be explained, so that the Herald has a first clear sense of what the commitment involves. It must be adapted to the age of the boy or girl, but it must be real. Possibly, the promise should be made no later than a month after the candidate has been accepted. If the candidate comes from the Little Heralds, the time can be shortened by half.

The content of the promise expresses a commitment to observe the law of the Heralds and strongly emphasizes Christ, the Lord of life and creation, and availability to others. The promise should be personalized as to the preparation and date. In any case it is a major event for the whole group.

The love Christ showed us and to which we want to introduce the Heralds has the spirit of service as its essential component. This service can consist of great deeds, but it consists primarily of everyday things: little acts of kindness, expressions of concern, random acts of helpfulness, etc. Through these small things they can develop an attitude

of availability to their brothers and sisters. We cannot ask more of a boy or girl than this as a beginning. But it will contribute to creating a new mentality, that of Christ. This gesture is called in Italian *Pace e Bene* because it is a gesture of peace and a gift of goodness, and because this is how the Franciscan greeting and best wishes takes on flesh. The Heralds must be constantly challenged along these lines, with imagination and creativity.

The Heralds also have their own motto, a word that sums up their commitment. They can use it in a thousand ways: as a shout to begin their games, as a motto to display on their notebooks and drawing pads, as a word of recognition among themselves etc. It is “Always Better!” It indicates a commitment not to grow tired of improving and growing. It is in line with the reference in Luke’s Gospel to Jesus, who “advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and men” (Lk 2:52).

### **9.2.3. Exercise of responsibility**

Formation to conscious, motivated, constructive and competent sharing, to promotion of one’s duties towards God, neighbor and creation, takes place through everyday things and through experiences commensurate with the person’s intellectual and psychological abilities.

The group of Heralds must make this a living experience in order to introduce the boy or girl to a sense of responsibility. Many are the duties they can perform within the group, so that it might be like a body with many members, each having its own specific function. At this age it is a good idea to have assignments that are permanent, or at least kept for a longer period of time, for example a month.

Besides observance of the law, the completion of assigned tasks must also be considered when checking on the group. Not in order to put the group on trial, but to identify the kinds of help to be given to those in difficulty and to modify the task in order to make it more useful and more effectively doable. Here, even more than with the group of Little Heralds, the animator must not function as a magician who comes to the rescue at the last minute. The discomforts arising from someone’s lack of responsibility must be borne patiently and quietly, remedying them if possible, but without the extraordinary interventions available only to adults. One must get used to living with the consequences of one’s actions, without getting angry. These consequences are already a silent and quiet punishment for pride and fickleness.

### **9.2.4. Poverty**

What has already been said above concerning the Little Heralds also holds for the Heralds.

### **9.2.5. Relations with others**

Relations with others—with individuals, but especially with other groups and

institutions—should be regarded as important moments from a formational point of view. Therefore they should be suitably prepared for, either specifically, one at a time, or in general, so that they might be occasions for examination and dialogue.