

Chapter VI

Collaboration of the SFO with Other Groups

1. Introduction

In view of the fact that many people see Saint Francis of Assisi as God's gift not only to the Roman Catholic Church, but to all people of good will, and recognizing that many people, even outside the Catholic Church, feel called in various ways to associate their lives with that of Saint Francis without being able to enter the Secular Franciscan Order, the *General Constitutions* of the SFO, Art. 103, leave open the possibility of various forms of collaboration and exchange between SFO fraternities and persons who are supportive but cannot or do not wish to belong. In practice, the situations in which this might be the case are:

- Associate members of a fraternity;
- Friends of Saint Francis;
- Members of other ecclesial groups or movements.

2. Associate members of a fraternity

The reasons preventing full membership may be various. In some cases the person is not a Catholic, in others he or she may for personal reasons be unable or unwilling to meet the requirements for full membership.

Since the status of persons who wish only to participate in the life of the fraternity, without juridical ties to the Order, is different from that of the professed members, the *General Constitutions*, Art. 53.5, say: "The national statutes can indicate special forms of association with the fraternity, for those who, without becoming a member of the SFO, want to participate in its life and activities." On the one hand, it is important to ensure that the Franciscan charism is as open as possible to all; on the other hand, it is also important to ensure the identity of the SFO as an Order within the Catholic Church, consisting of people who have professed a Rule of Life, and whose fraternities are juridical persons under the Code of Canon Law.

For an SFO fraternity to accommodate those who wish only to share in its life and activity, the fraternity itself must be well established, led by an elected council and regularly accompanied by a spiritual assistant. Moreover, to ensure the identity of the fraternity, the number of simple associates in the fraternity must remain low. The national statutes should give directions for this, establishing the maximum number admissible for each fraternity.

2.1. Commitment

For this form of membership, a procedure similar to that for admission of candidates to ordinary membership must be followed. In dialogue with the candidate, the

local minister (or the formation director, or whoever has the responsibility in the local situation) must carefully ascertain if the person is prepared to make a serious commitment. As with ordinary membership, the candidate's motivation must be examined, as well as his or her readiness to undergo formation, to attend meetings regularly, and in general to participate in the life of the fraternity. As in the case of ordinary members, the local fraternity council decides on the acceptance or non-acceptance of candidates for associate membership. After completion of the formation process, the associate member's position is formalized publicly before the SFO fraternity.

Associate members have the same rights and duties, including those of a financial nature, as ordinary members, except that they do not enjoy active or passive voice in elections. The national statutes can provide for associate members to have their own observers on the SFO councils.

2.2. Catholic associate members

In the case of a Catholic who wishes associate membership, the reasons for choosing this type of commitment rather than membership through profession must be examined. If in the particular case there are factors in the candidate's personal life that make profession impossible, or if the candidate is prevented by psychological, cultural or other barriers from making profession in the SFO, associate membership may be granted. If the candidate is able to undergo formation and live the life of the fraternity in a normal manner, associate membership may be granted. Otherwise, associate membership cannot be granted. Whatever the impediments to full membership may be, each case should be studied and decided on its own merits.

2.3. Associate members from other Christian confessions

While this form of membership and participation in the life and activities of the fraternity opens up great possibilities for ecumenism, it is important that both the ordinary members and the associate members have a true ecumenical understanding of the situation. The associate members are not to be regarded as prospective converts, but in the case of Christians from other denominations as representatives of their own ecclesial community. The associate members must not consider an SFO fraternity as a place for non-committed involvement with the Catholic faith. Just as the ordinary members, the associate members must continue to deepen their understanding of their own faith. Only in this way can all members develop an ecumenical spirit that is both enlightened and responsible. The presence of associate members in a fraternity must challenge all members to a deeper ecumenical understanding, which involves respect for both one's own Church and that of others. For this reason also, associate members should not be accepted in a Roman Catholic SFO fraternity if there is a Franciscan fraternity of lay people of their own denomination within a reasonable distance.

All members must respect the current rules on eucharistic sharing between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches. The present impossibility of eucharistic sharing was reaffirmed by the Holy Father in the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*,

where he said: “The path towards full unity can only be undertaken in truth. In this area, the prohibitions of Church law leave no room for uncertainty, in fidelity to the moral norm laid down by the Second Vatican Council” (no. 44).

2.4. Associate members from other religions

There could be special circumstances where a non-Christian could be an associate member of the SFO. However, this associate membership must in no way obscure the Christian, Catholic and Franciscan nature of the fraternity.

3. Friends of Saint Francis (FOSF)

Groups that call themselves “Friends of Saint Francis” or “Companions of Saint Francis,” or by other names, already exist in some countries, especially in those where English or French is spoken. Often, these groups have sprung up spontaneously, without any reference to the Secular Franciscan Order or to any Order of Friars, and even without reference to the Catholic Church. Faced with these groups, the Secular Franciscan Order can decide not to get involved at all, or it can decide to reach out to them, in the spirit of Article 45 of the *General Constitutions*, which speaks about promotion of vocations to the SFO. A local SFO fraternity could decide to take an apostolic initiative by leading its own group of Friends of Saint Francis. In view of this possibility, the following guidelines are offered as suggestions.

3.1. Membership

Anyone may apply to belong to the Friends of Saint Francis (FOSF), including the very young and the elderly, Catholics, Christians and non-Christians. The only qualifications required are that the member has a personal devotion to Saint Francis of Assisi, or at least wants to know about him. Admission must be approved by the team, as described in the next section. Members have no obligations or commitments besides those of their state in life, unless they voluntarily assume a responsibility in the FOSF group. Members are not admitted to meetings of the SFO or of the Franciscan Youth or of the Franciscan Children, unless by invitation on a particular occasion.

Adult Catholics should be informed about the SFO. If it appears that they might be suitable members, they should be encouraged to join a local fraternity. In places where the Franciscan Youth Movement and/or the Franciscan Children exist or can be organized, Catholic youth and children should be referred to those fraternities rather than to the Friends of Saint Francis.

3.2. Responsibility of the SFO

The leader of the FOSF group is a professed Secular Franciscan, who is either an elected member of the council of the local SFO fraternity or is appointed by the council (in which case he or she has no vote in the council). The leader is the fraternal animator of the FOSF group. If problems of a theological, spiritual or pastoral nature arise, the

leader seeks to resolve them with the help of the spiritual assistant of the local SFO fraternity. The leader forms a team of helpers who are not necessarily Franciscans or Catholics or Christians. The team members, if they are not elected by the FOSF group, are to be approved by the council of the local SFO fraternity.

The team of helpers assumes the responsibility of deciding on the suitability of persons wishing to join the FOSF group, of admitting them, and of organizing the regular meetings of the FOSF.

3.3. Meetings of the FOSF

The meeting caters to the particular needs of the FOSF group, which may consist of young people only or adults only or a mixture of both. The meeting opens and closes with a prayer of Saint Francis. In this way, its Franciscan inspiration is affirmed and recognized. The meeting includes an element of formation at the human or Christian or Franciscan level, depending on the needs of the members.

The meeting also includes an element of building fraternity among the members by their getting to know one another and sharing interests. The members are encouraged to be actively involved in service to their civil society and to the faith-community to which they belong.

An integral part of the meeting is time for recreation, for chatting and sharing some refreshment before leaving for home.

3.4. Application to join the SFO or YouFra or the Franciscan Children

Adult members of the FOSF who are practicing Catholics and who are attracted to the local Secular Franciscan Fraternity may apply to the fraternity council for admission. Likewise, young people or children who are practicing Catholics may ask to join the Franciscan Youth or the Franciscan Children, where these movements exist or can be organized.

Upon admission, they no longer belong to the FOSF as members, but they enter the period of initiation and proceed through initial formation to their commitment as Secular Franciscans, Franciscan Youth or Franciscan Children.

4. Members of other groups or ecclesial movements

Since its beginning, the Franciscan Movement has accepted the Word of God, lived in fraternity, as its plan of life. Thus, through a gospel life, it has influenced the renewal of the Church and cooperated in its mission in the world. But the Holy Spirit has continued and continues to enrich the Church. For several decades there have been present in the Church new charisms and new movements, the latest gifts of the Holy Spirit for our time. Pope John Paul II recalled this when he said: "One of the gifts of the Spirit in our time is the flowering of ecclesial movements, which since the beginning of

my pontificate I have continued to point to as a reason for hope for the Church and for humankind.”¹

Seeing the beauty and diversity of the charisms that the Spirit of the Lord awakens in the Church, we feel the need for greater communion among the various charisms. It is well, however, to stress that “communion” should not be confused with “double membership.” In other words, the individual members must remain faithful to their membership in the SFO. In general they should avoid joining a number of lay groups, each of which has its own charism and specific purposes. Within the movements, the experience of community life is very deep, and their proposal embraces every Christian dimension, so that membership in the SFO would end up devoid of content.

The invitation to communion concerns the local fraternity as a whole, which must strive to bear witness, together with the other groups, that they form one People of God. Thus it is very important to know and love each other, to be familiar with other experiences and above all, in our specifically Franciscan formation, make more and more room for the Holy Spirit, who will help us to understand and accept his gifts and his projects.

To avoid any risk of confusion and misdirection, it is necessary that fraternities, in identifying the movements and communities with which to collaborate, keep in mind the criteria for discerning lay groups. These are also called the “criteria of ecclesiality” and were spelled out by John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, on the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world:

- The primacy given to the call of every Christian to holiness, as it is manifested “in the fruits of grace which the spirit produces in the faithful”² and in a growth towards the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity.³
- The responsibility of professing the Catholic faith, embracing and proclaiming the truth about Christ, the Church and humanity, in obedience to the Church’s magisterium, as the Church interprets it. For this reason every association of the lay faithful must be a forum where the faith is proclaimed as well as taught in its total content.
- The witness to a strong and authentic communion in filial relationship to the Pope, in total adherence to the belief that he is the perpetual and visible center of unity of the universal Church,⁴ and with the local bishop, “the visible principle and foundation of unity”⁵ in the particular Church, and in “mutual esteem for all forms of the Church’s apostolate.”⁶

1 Homily for the Vigil of Pentecost, *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XIX, 1 (1996), 1373.

2 Cf. LG, 39.

3 *Ibidem*, 40

4 *Ibidem*, 23.

5 *Ibidem*.

6 Cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 23

- Conformity to and participation in the Church's apostolic goals, that is, "the evangelization and sanctification of humanity and the Christian formation of people's conscience, so as to enable them to infuse the spirit of the Gospel into the various communities and spheres of life."⁷

- A commitment to a presence in human society, which in light of the Church's social doctrine, places it at the service of the total dignity of the person.

⁷ *Ibidem.*