

**National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States
October 4, 2011: The Blessed Feast Day of
“Our Holy Father, Francis of Assisi, Deacon, Founder of the Three Orders”
(With apologies, five days late)**

NATIONAL MINISTER’S ANNUAL REPORT TO THE ORDER

Beloved National Family, “This is how God inspired me, Brother Francis, to embark upon a life of penance. When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me. After that I did not wait long before leaving the world.”

For background and for continuing focus, when your newly elected National Executive Council came together for its first formal meeting in St. Louis, February 26-28, 2010, we crafted a brief vision statement and articulated our major priorities for our new term. That vision statement was "Keeping the gift of Gospel living alive," to be promoted through the following priorities or areas for development:

- 1 - Fraternity**
- 2 – Formation**
- 3 – Communication**
- 4 – Youth**

That initial vision statement became the theme of our 2010 NAFRA Gathering: “Bringing the Gift of Gospel Living to Life: Our Credible Witnessing,” and it certainly informs the theme of our 2011 NAFRA Gathering or Annual Chapter: “Witnessing the Gospel Life Courageously in the World.”

From this current theme and with a look forward to our 2011 NAFRA Gathering where I will soon meet with many of you face to face, always my preferred manner of communication, when we can pray, share and be together over time, I would like to use our four originally articulated priorities, Fraternity, Formation, Communication and Youth, around which to organize this 2011 National Minister’s Annual Report.

I. The first priority is Fraternity.

Let me start with the numbers that I have received through our beloved National Vice-Minister Elaine Hedtke from you through the 2011 Collated Annual Report from the Regions, which is attached to this Annual Report as last year for your perusal. A special thank you to Elaine for this true labor of love, with the emphasis on labor. Thanks to all of you Regional Ministers for your annual reporting to us. Our information is only as good as what you provide us.

By the numbers, NAFRA, the Secular Franciscan Fraternity of the United States, has around 13,420 active, permanently professed members nationwide, with 1262 inactive. Thus, by the numbers, our active membership continues to drop. I reported around 14,000 in last year's report (14,399 in one tally and 14,079 in another). In 2009 we reported 14,722 active, permanently professed members, which itself was a decline of 1,089 from the 2008 number of 15,811. Thus, I make a guesstimate of around 2,400 fewer active, permanently professed members in the last three years.

To fill those missing seats at the SFO table, we currently have 1206 Candidates, down from 1224 Candidates last year; and 865 Inquirers, down from 927 Inquirers last year. Let us all pray for their successful formation and discernment.

We have 653 canonically established fraternities, down 35 from our 2010 number of 688 fraternities, which is an increase of 14 from the 2009 number of 674 and a decrease of 30 from the 2008 number of 718.

The 2011 Collated Annual Report from the Regions records 42 "Emerging Communities," down 1 from last year; and 33 "Newly Forming Groups," an increase of 4 from last year.

What do these numbers mean? I continue to see from traveling around the Regions and from personal exchanges and reading that we are an aging order with members who die or can no longer attend actively; but those of us who are still active can attract new blood by our faithfully living out our Franciscan calling and charism within vital Secular Franciscan fraternities.

According to Article 92.1 of the General Constitutions, referencing SFO Rule 26: "The purpose of both the pastoral and fraternal visits is to revive the evangelical Franciscan spirit, to assure fidelity to the charism and to the Rule, to offer help to fraternity life, to reinforce the bond of the unity of the Order, and to promote its most effective insertion into the Franciscan family and the Church."

As National Minister, I have seriously focused this past year in my visitations (Father Solanus Casey Region, 04/29-30/11; Divine Mercy Region, 08/12-14/11), elections (Queen of Peace Region, 06/03-05/11; St. Clare Region, 06/11/11) and in my writings to do exactly this.

Perhaps no aspect of the Secular Franciscan life should be of more concern to those called to leadership than the vitality of the fraternity, be it local, regional, national or international. The one "assignment" that Our Lord gave to Peter, the leader of his initial fraternity of disciples, once Peter satisfactorily answered the question, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" was to provide for the care and feeding of the flock (John 21:15-17). Note, the love of the Lord is first, then the care and feeding of the flock.

As you know, “Fraternity” was precisely the focus for our 2011 Summer Seminar held at St. Francis University in Loretto, PA. The presenters were our own beloved National Councilor Mary Bittner and National Spiritual Assistant Lester Bach OFM Cap. I believe that the first very day of our 2011 NAFRA Gathering will focus on this priority, with the same Mary Bittner and Friar Lester leading the presentation and discussion. This is how important “fraternity” is to me.

In addition, my recent articles in the TAU-USA have focused specifically on building more vital Secular Franciscan fraternities. This discussion started three TAU-USA articles ago on the four marks of a Franciscan Gathering: “Prayer, Formation, Fraternal Sharing and Necessary Business, and in this order!” (TAU-USA Winter 2010 Issue 69, http://www.nafra-sfo.org/tau-usa/articles/winter10/minister_winter10.pdf).

In this article, I quoted our then St. Margaret of Cortona Regional Spiritual Assistant (and later National Spiritual Assistant) Friar Bart Karwacki, OFM Conventual, who was making a Pastoral Visitation to my local Fraternity, St. Thomas More, meeting at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Arlington, Virginia. Perhaps we were conducting more “business” than we should have, but for whatever reason, Father Bart told us to the effect that, “Business is not the primary concern of a fraternal gathering. Actually, FRATERNITY is your primary business, and I wish to remind you that the four purposes of a fraternal gathering are: Prayer, Formation, Fraternal Sharing and only as much Business as is necessary, and in this order!”

I followed up this article with the “The Primary Focus and the Four Marks of a Vibrant Secular Franciscan Fraternity” (TAU-USA Spring 2011 Issue 70, http://www.nafra-sfo.org/tau-usa/articles/spring11/minister_spring11.pdf). In this article, I stated that: “Spirituality, Formation, Family and Witnessing all for the sake of ‘the salvation of souls’ (Canon 1752, Code of Canon Law http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P70.HTM)

offer us the Primary Focus and Four Marks of a vibrant Secular Franciscan Fraternity. These were precisely the reason why prayer, formation, fraternal sharing and only as much business as is necessary offer us the four purposes of a fraternal gathering, and I prayed that God would “give us the grace, the Living Presence of Christ and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit when we gather to worship, to form, to share, to witness in Christ’s Name, always striving to keep our fraternities and our souls alive and focused on salvation.”

Because the essential element of “vital Secular Franciscan fraternities” is the spiritual, leadership must never sacrifice the spiritual to the business of the fraternity; vital fraternities must nourish a vital prayer life for all the members. Thus, every Secular Franciscan fraternity deserves “capable and well-prepared persons” (General Constitutions Article 88.1) as Spiritual Assistants.

According to the 2011 Collated Annual Report from the Regions, we have 495 Spiritual Assistants (down from 506 the year before) for 653 local fraternities and 30 Regional fraternities. Of course, we all know many local fraternities that lack any formal Spiritual Assistant, and I have been to Regions that have only one, often over-worked and venerable, Spiritual Assistant to serve the whole Region.

Supplying “capable and well-prepared” Spiritual Assistants to every fraternity at the local and regional level is a continuing problem, which needs our continued prayer and attention. I know of no “easy fix,” but I encourage everyone involved in leadership at any level of fraternity to avail themselves of the Franciscan Family Connection’s (Spiritual Assistant’s) Course and to be prepared, as with first aid, to give Spiritual Assistance wherever and whenever needed.

As I have said and will continue to say, we are wasting our time in fraternity if we are not concerned with ongoing, even daily conversion, leading us into closer conformity in our thoughts, words and deeds with our Risen Savior Jesus Christ (SFO Rule 7).

At the National level, we continue to be blessed by the prayers, advice, example and service of our Conference of National Spiritual Assistants: in alphabetical order, Fr. Lester Bach OFM Cap and current President in turn; Bro. Bob Brady OFM; Fr. Steve Gross OFM Conv; and Fr. Kevin Queally TOR. Would that every Regional and local fraternity could have such Spirit-filled assistance! Please make yourself known to them at our National Gathering. Ask for their advice and prayers.

I believe that Saturday, the last day of our 2011 NAFRA Gathering will focus on Spiritual Assistance, and we have moved this presentation back, not only to save “the best for last,” but to allow Father Kevin a chance to join us at our gathering and share with the other National Spiritual Assistants. I look forward to their presentation.

If Spirituality is the initial and essential element of fraternity, then that Spirituality and love of the Lord must be witnessed out in the world, not put under the bushel basket of the fraternity gathering. In my article, “The Primary Focus and the Four Marks of a Vibrant Secular Franciscan Fraternity,” I wrote, “We are to be a ‘community of love’ (SFO Rule 22) to all in the world. As Blessed Pope John Paul II told us directly at the Xth General Chapter in 2002, ‘The church expects from you, Secular Franciscans, a courageous and consistent testimony of Christian and Franciscan life, leaning towards the construction of a more fraternal and gospel world for the realisation of the Kingdom of God’ (<http://www.ciofs.org/per/2005/lca5en14.htm#b>).”

Precisely because of the theme of our 2011 NAFRA Gathering: “Witnessing the Gospel Life Courageously in the World,” please permit me to expand further on this Witnessing, the fourth mark of a vibrant Secular Franciscan fraternity. One of

the three greatest joys for me in this past year of many joys has been the action of our Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Commission under the able leadership of our beloved JPIC Chair Kent Ferris. Together with Catholic Relief Services (CRS), NAFRA embarked on a “courageous initiative” to support CRS with their Catholics Confront Global Initiative through a series of eight different webinars, each of which shared information about this CRS work AND about our Secular Franciscan presence out in the world. In addition, Kent continued his work with the Franciscan Action Network. He has his JPIC Commission as well as a wider team of “JPIC point people” who help him convey matters of JPIC concern to all interested parties, and they convey matters back to Kent and the Commission. I complement Kent and his team. I believe that the second day of our 2011 NAFRA Gathering will allow Kent to share his JPIC work with us, looking back and looking forward. Thus, fraternity first, then fraternal witnessing out in the world.

II. The second priority is Formation.

And the second of the three greatest joys for me in this past year of many joys was gathering at the National Formation Workshop at Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois from May 12-15, with National Formation Commission Chair Bob “Fitz” Fitzsimmons; all his hard-working National Formation Commission, 18 Regional Ministers, 2 other members of the elected National Executive Council, 3 of our Conference of National Spiritual Assistants, 23 Regional Formation Directors and other SFO’s from 29 of our 30 Regions all across the United States, 128, I believe, SFO’s in all, the largest SFO Gathering in the United States since the Q in 2007! Wow! I always love gathering with Franciscan sisters and brothers in prayer, formation, sharing, singing and just enjoying the Lord in each other.

As if that gathering in itself were not enough, each of us in attendance received the new 460 page Formation Manual with an unbelievably rich accompanying CD of Reference Material. In addition, every Region received an electronic Adobe copy of this new Formation Manual. As I have noted before, I cannot imagine any other single document by any other single author or authors replacing these SFO Formation materials in my lifetime. We should all give thanks to God, the International Fraternity, Fitz and the National Formation Commission and to all those who contributed countless hours to give us these fundamental and comprehensive formation materials.

Of course, vital Secular Franciscan fraternities need effective formation. The work now is to get this new Formation Manual into the hands, hearts and minds of every local SFO Fraternity involved in Formation. Please pray and assist as you can in this effort. A national blog has been set up our National Webpage Master Vickie Klick. Money is available through the Duns Scotus Trust Fund and, I believe, through the Formation budget for any Region that lacks funds for a Regional Formation Workshop. A DVD of the National Formation Workshop nears completion. The current (Summer 2011) issue of the TAU-USA focuses almost

exclusively on Formation (http://www.nafra-sfo.org/tau-usa/articles/summer11/Issue_Num_71_sum_11.pdf). I believe the third day of our 2011 NAFRA Gathering will allow Fitz and the Formation Commission to give us a look at where we go from here. Again, we all owe a deep debt of thanks to them and to all the authors for this incredible document and resource files. Heavenly Father, help us build up Your Order, forming ourselves and those You bring to Your Order exactly how You want us to be formed. We pray in Jesus' name.

III. The third priority is Communication.

I am happy to report that the new Formation Manual has already been translated into Spanish, and is currently being translated into Korean. The National Vocational Prayer and the National Minister's articles in the TAU-USA have been translated into Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese and Polish.

The NAFRA Computer Committee with its Chair Dan Mulholland and National Webpage Master and Regional Minister Vickie Klick have had continuing discussions with National Councilor Michelle Kim and others about various ideas and formats for making our NAFRA webpage more "state of the art" and "user-friendly." At last year's NAFRA Gathering, a Facebook and a Twitter account were set up for us by Regional Minister Randy Heinz. I honestly have not accessed them as I am not a Facebook or Twitter type of guy. I have accessed our National Blog and the Formation Manual Blog, but this form of communication has not caught on with our Regional Ministers or with other members of the National Executive Council. I also have access to the NAFRA-L and NAFRA-RM list serves, and from my informal research, they seem to offer the most preferred form of electronic communication within the National family. Thanks to Dan Mulholland for keeping them up and running well.

As I suggested above when I shared my excitement with being with many of you again shortly, my preferred form of Communication is one-on-one, or in a small group, preferably over a meal, most especially before, during or after "breaking Bread together" at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. My second most preferred form of Communication continues to be email. I continue to average perhaps 20 to 30 emails every day, with 50 being a high and 10 an "easy" day. It's a lot of correspondence that I don't always handle well. Of course, I have no staff, no personal secretary. I have no office; the computer is mine. It's all by me, and I'm only me. This is not new.

In addition to email, I continue to write a not-always-monthly series of National Minister's Monthly Messages (<http://www.nafra-sfo.org/monthly.html>), which have attracted a number of emails and comments. As mentioned above, I continue to write for the TAU-USA under our most creative new editor Anna Geraci. Each issue of the TAU-USA continues to go out in hard copy to those who wish and is available online for those who wish (http://www.nafra-sfo.org/tau-usa/tau_newarticles.html). Anna will be with us at our 2011 NAFRA Gathering and

is always open to your comments and suggestions. If you have not seen it, the most recent issue on Formation (Summer 2011) is a blockbuster!

Communication continues to be a concern, and I scour the 2011 Collated Annual Report from the Regions for any ideas you have on improving communication.

IV. The fourth priority is Youth.

As I wrote last year, I need more help and prayers from all of you to attract Youth and Young Adults into our NAFRA family. Our beloved National Vice-Minister Elaine Hedtke continues to serve as Temporary Chair of the Franciscan Youth/Young Adult Commission (FYYA). We seek, but have not found a “youthful” Chair, for Youth needs to be represented by Youth.

I will report that National Spiritual Assistant Friar Kevin Queally and International Councilor Anne Mulqueen traveled to World Youth Day in Madrid 2011 with Youth (both with more than one) funded in part or in whole by NAFRA and our FYYA Commission. At least one of these Youth will join us at our 2011 NAFRA Gathering.

I have talked with Franciscan Action Network (FAN) Executive Director Patrick Carolan and FAN Director of Creativity for Creation Christy Elliott, both of whom will join us at our 2011 NAFRA Gathering, about plans to set up Secular Franciscan Youth and Young Adult Fraternities at our Franciscan Colleges and Universities in the United States. Serving on the FAN Board of Directors is Dr. Kevin Godfrey, who is Executive Director of the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities (<http://www.franciscancollegesuniversities.org/>). Perhaps, God willing, something might come from these discussions.

The 2011 Collated Annual Report from the Regions reports a wide variety of activities with Youth around the United States. Let us pray that all of us will do what we can to celebrate and encourage Youth. Let us pray for youthful hearts for all of our members that we might attract other youthful hearts, no matter the age.

V. Embracing Those Suffering from Leprosy.

As I started with St. Francis becoming acquainted with lepers, permit me to share the third of the three greatest joys for me in this past year of many joys, my personal “courageous initiative” down to Manaus, Brazil with Jim Flickinger, head of Amazon Relief (<http://www.amazonrelief.org/>). Much of Jim’s great ministry takes place among the good people afflicted there with leprosy, homelessness and poverty. I have written about this trip in the current National Minister’s Monthly Messages (<http://www.nafra-sfo.org/monthly.html>), but I share again, even in the face of great suffering, the joy of knowing that “with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26), and that where He is needed most, Christ

will most be found. I am honored that Jim will join us at our 2011 NAFRA Gathering.

VI. Guests at the Table.

Speaking as I have so often in this Annual Report about our 2011 NAFRA Gathering, let me report that In just a few weeks, most of the Nation's Regional Ministers, the entire National Executive Council, all 4 members of the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants, our National Formation Commission Chair, our National Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission Chair, our National Computer Committee, our National Archivist, our National Historian, our National Ecumenical/Interfaith Chair, our TAU-USA editor will all be in attendance.

We will be joined by guests from outside our Secular Franciscan family. Those mentioned above, as well as our 2011 NAFRA JPIC Award winner, Father Louis Vitale OFM; Franciscan Mission Service Executive Director Dr. Kim Smolik; Sister Liliame Alam, FMM, from Franciscans International; Chris West from Catholic Relief Services; Reverend Joan Verret from the Third Order, Society of St. Francis; and John "CJ" Boylan from the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans. Please introduce yourself to any face you do not know and welcome them to our table.

VII. The 2012 Quinquennial.

As we look forward to 2012, I ask you to make every effort to attend the 2012 Quinquennial to be held at the Holiday Inn Northshore in Chicago, July 3-8, 2012. We have secured the hotel for only \$89 a night. Quinquennial Registration will be around \$300 and will cover all meals. We are honored to have Sister Ilia Delio OSF and Brother Bill Short OFM speaking to us. This will be a Chapter of Mats for all the SFO's in the United States, and we are praying for one representative from every fraternity in the United States, and this includes YOU! We are blessed that our former National Minister and Quinquennial Co-Chair Patrick Mendes will join us at our 2011 NAFRA Gathering.

A blessed Sunday to all of you, the fifth day in the Octave of our Patronal Feast Day. May Father Francis intercede for us and have God show us what is ours to do AND supply the grace to do it! Let us pray for one another.

With Peace and Love in Christ's and your Service,

Tom