

National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order of the United States of America
October 4, 2015: The Blessed Feast Day of
"Our Holy Father, Francis of Assisi, Deacon, Founder of the Three Orders"
(With apologies for enjoying the Sunday Feast Day and being one day late)



NATIONAL MINISTER'S ANNUAL REPORT

Beloved National Fraternity Council, soon to gather at our National Chapter,

May the Lord give us Peace!

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" Philippians 4:4-7.

With the same words that our Holy Father, Pope Francis, began his homily at the Canonization Mass for St. Junipero Serra at the National Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC, on September 23rd, 2015, please permit me to begin my last Annual Report as your National Minister.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!" OR "Be the Joyful Face of Christ to All," our prescient 2015 NAFRA Theme, which says much the same thing, these words and joy lie under, around and through everything that follows in this Annual Report, be it good or bad.

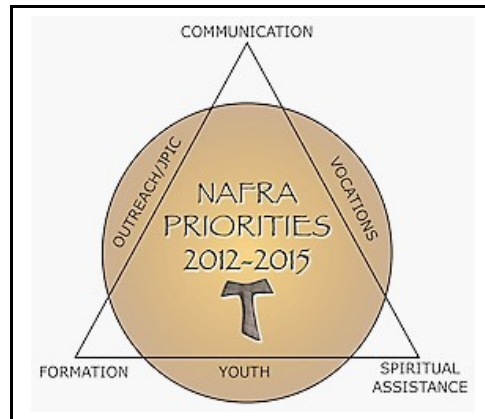
And if this 66-year-old geezer with two major surgeries since June and serious, lifelong health issues can say in all sincerity, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice," then what do any of us have to complain about personally or fraternally?

I will start in joyful thanksgiving to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and Sts. Francis, Clare and Anthony, AND to all of you for allowing me to continue as your National Minister since October 2009.

I offer thanksgiving for the National Executive Council (NEC), four of whom have served collegially, equally, with me in Visitations to your Regions and in extended Executive Council sessions together for all six years: our National Vice Minister Elaine Hedtke, our National Secretary Jan Parker, and National Councilors Mary Bittner and Arturo Villarreal.

Thanks to you and all the NEC members from 2009 to 2015 for your service and prayers.

The 2012 National Fraternity (NAFRA) Election Chapter chose the following Priorities for 2012-2015:



Although presented differently than before, the organizing principle for this Annual Report will be these six priorities set by the National Fraternity to build Fraternity: Spiritual Assistance, Formation, Youth, Outreach/JPIC, Communication and Vocations. In addition, the 2014 National Chapter chose as the theme for this year: "Be the Joyful Face of Christ to All!" so that these priorities on building fraternity should also keep the joy of Christ front and center. In other words, it is not only WHAT we are doing, for example, Formation or JPIC, but also HOW we are doing it, prayerfully, with the joy of Christ.

Why the consistent focus, for me, on Fraternity? As I have said before, Fraternity is essential to our Secular Franciscan call in that the fraternity is where we Secular Franciscans work out our salvation and the salvation of our sisters and brothers: "In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state" (Secular Franciscan Rule 2). The fraternity is "the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members" (Secular Franciscan Rule 22). "The vocation to the OFS is a vocation to live the Gospel in fraternal communion. For this purpose, the members of the OFS gather in ecclesial communities which are called fraternities" (General Constitutions Article 3.3).

Second, from my vantage point, Fraternity continues to be "an endangered species." Specifically, by best guess, reported in this year's Annual Report from the Regions submitted by our beloved and hard working Database Manager Bob Herbelin and attached with this document, NAFRA, the Secular Franciscan Fraternity of the United States, has 12,504, active professed members, which represents a drop of 235 members from the 12,739 active professed members reported to CIOFS in 2014.

The 2014 count is down 264 members from the 13,003 active, permanently professed members nationwide I reported in my 2013 Annual Report, which was over 200 less than our average decline of 468 members for the preceding six years, as reported in that 2013 Annual Report (<http://www.nafra-sfo.org/NationalMinister/AnnualReport2013.html>). Thus, we have consistently lost members every single year since before I was elected National Minister, but this year's drop is the smallest drop since I was elected National Minister.

We currently have 1063 Candidates, which is the first time I have seen an increase of 49 Candidates over the 2014 number of 1014 Candidates, which showed a drop of 42 Candidates from our 2013 numbers, which had seen a drop of 100 Candidates from 2012, by comparison.

This year we report 558 canonically established fraternities, which represents a drop of 79 fraternities from our 2014 number of 637 canonically established fraternities, which was up 31 fraternities from the 606 we reported in 2012. I pray that this huge drop in our fraternities is in need of statistical correction, since, for example, Father Solanus Casey Region is listed with 724 members and 0 fraternities, and St Maximilian Kolbe Region is listed with 463 members and 0 fraternities. At National Chapter, I will solicit from everybody involved here better numbers, but any drop in the number of our fraternities confirms for me what I have seen and heard for myself; namely, that our fraternities truly are “endangered.”

I pray every day that all of us Secular Franciscans, especially those of us in Servant Leadership will heed the Holy Spirit’s challenge to offer a spiritual reality, an ecclesial community, sufficiently vital to attract and keep new life, new membership, and new fraternities.

I continue to shout from this 2015 Annual Report what I wrote in my 2011 Annual Report and spoke about in my 2012 Vision of our Order: “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” (http://www.nafra-sfo.org/meetings_and_resources.html).

Thus, I will go straight to my two greatest concerns with myself and other Permanently Professed Members gathering in Canonically established fraternities in the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States:

WE CONTINUE IN 2015 TO SHOW BOTH A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS AND OF THE FRANCISCAN CHARISM AND THE LACK OF A SINCERE LIFELONG COMMITMENT TO LIVING INTENSELY THE GOSPEL LIFE OF CHRIST IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SAINTS FRANCIS AND CLARE.

This double failure haunts our efforts to build vital fraternities and to attract new life and new membership to our Order. This failure has been shown at times by me and by too many of my sisters and brothers, both serving and not serving in elected position.

Admittedly not easy to correct without prayer and serious attention, these two concerns are and will be when I step down from office matters of continuing prayer for me and, I pray, for all of you. I feel these two concerns are interwoven because if we do not know who we are, we do not embrace that lifelong commitment; and when we lack a lifelong commitment, we often don’t care who we are or what the documents say.

In this public document, of course, I will not single out any individual, except myself; nor have I observed, thank God, really unFranciscan behavior by Secular Franciscans so far in 2015 directly before my face, but I have heard of this happening too often at every level of fraternity.

Perhaps this is only malicious gossip or perhaps we all need to grow up, get along and act more like Christ since I myself, and perhaps you, too, could cite numerous examples of elected Servant Leaders, including myself, and perhaps you, too, failing in our responsibilities; as well as numerous examples of unelected Servant Leaders, known by me and perhaps by you, failing in their responsibilities as permanently professed Secular Franciscans by not praying, acting and living as ones called by God to follow Christ in the footsteps of Saints Francis and Clare.

Of course, I realize that, as a priest friend told me, “the devil is always dancing,” our natures will always be fallen this side of ultimate salvation, and we all have bad days.

Since only God can free us from the devil, lift up our fallen natures and forgive us our sins through Holy Mother Church, I will start the rest of this Annual Report with Prayer and continue in Prayer as I offer three Recommendations, four Works in Progress and seven ACTION ITEMS gleaned from observing successes in various fraternities at all levels.

I will start with the three Recommendations:

One, More Individual and Fraternal Prayer from our hearts at every Secular Franciscan gathering.

Two, Better Formation, from Initial to Ongoing, in every Fraternity, Local, Regional and National, at every opportunity.

Three, More social sharing and JOY at every Secular Franciscan gathering.

One. More Individual and Fraternal Prayer from our hearts at every Secular Franciscan gathering.

Here is one main place where Spiritual Assistance is so important in building the vitality of our fraternities. "Suitable and well-prepared" (Secular Franciscan Rule #26) Spiritual Assistants, by definition, should focus the fraternity on the spiritual. In the Opening Letter of the Minister Generals in the "Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order," page 3, in the ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER, they, the Minister Generals, write of their need "to guarantee pastoral and spiritual care to every single fraternity." Later in the same Letter, the last sentence on the same page reads: "Likewise, it is absolutely necessary to make sure that fraternities are not deprived of this essential guide and that, at the same time, the indisposition of Franciscan friars or sisters does not result in the disappearance of any secular fraternity."

ACTION ITEM NUMBER ONE: EVERY SINGLE FRATERNITY IN EVERY REGION NEEDS SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE.

Thus, local and Regional Ministers and Executive Councils should pray and persist without ceasing in securing "suitable and well-prepared" Spiritual Assistants. I know this is not an easy assignment, but I also know of at least one Region in the United States that has Spiritual Assistants in every fraternity, local and Regional. If one Region can do it, I pray that every Region can spare neither prayer nor effort in seeking "suitable and well-prepared" Spiritual Assistance!

ACTION ITEM NUMBER TWO: EVERY PROFESSED SECULAR FRANCISCAN ASKS THE HOLY SPIRIT FOR GUIDANCE ON HOW TO BRING MORE AND BETTER PRAYER INTO ONE'S LIFE AND THE LIFE OF THE FRATERNITY, AND THEN FOLLOW THE SPIRIT'S LEAD!

Every fraternity and council and individual gathering should start and end with prayer, often as provided in the RITUAL. Ongoing formation should include building the prayer life of the individuals and of the whole fraternity. Many fraternities offer or attend Mass around their meeting times. Many fraternities offer a variety of prayer forms: praying the Liturgy of the Hours at the appropriate time, the Franciscan Crown, the Rosary, centering prayer, intercessory prayers, prayers for vocations, or simply quiet time for silent prayer or contemplation, preferably before the Blessed Sacrament or with one another.

As Secular Franciscans, we all share a supernatural call, and thus the essential element of vital Secular Franciscan fraternities remains the spiritual. Suitable and well-prepared Spiritual Assistants at every fraternity, and more and better prayer, guided by the Holy Spirit, by all of us can help us better heed this supernatural call.

Two, Better Formation, from Initial to Ongoing, in every Fraternity, Local, Regional and National, at every opportunity.

At the National level, I mention specifically three gatherings that I was unfortunately unable to attend because of health issues, each of which was concerned, in a way, with better formation, here, largely ongoing formation. From each of these gatherings, I have received glowing reviews, plus, very gratefully, many cards and prayers.

I also pray that an article in the TAU-USA might capture some of the joy, fellowship and formation from each of these National gatherings of 2015 and that we can continue to gather nationally because we need to communicate and share more to be better sisters and brothers to one another across this great United States.

- A. The Summer Seminar on Servant Leadership at Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania. The presenters were our National Councilor Mary Francis Charsky OFS and Friar Michael Higgins, TOR, their former Minister General. I received an excellent packet of materials from this seminar that I will bring to Chapter so that anyone may see or copy them, depending on available facilities. They can provide excellent ongoing formation for our upcoming National Fraternity elections and other fraternity elections.
- B. The JPIC Peace Retreat at Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois. The presenter was our National JPIC Chair Carolyn Townes. Wrote Carolyn in her Annual Report sent to all of you: "About 30 Seculars representing 18 regions were in attendance for a weekend of prayer, sharing, skills building and Franciscan joy. The weekend also included presentations by the JPIC Vice-Chair, Rhett Engelking, OFS and National JPIC Commission Spiritual Assistant, Brother David Buer, OFM, who also led our daily Morning and Evening Praise. Retreatants participated in several Franciscan Sacred Pause Moments – 5 minutes of falling still and being silent. By the end of the retreat, the 5 minutes seemed shorter; suggesting that the pause can be as long or as short as needed. Several members shared they would introduce the Franciscan Sacred Pause into their fraternities and councils."
- C. The Formation Retreat at the Franciscan Prayer Center in Independence, Missouri. The presenters were, I believe, the entire Formation Commission: Mary Anne Lenzi, Chair, Diane Menditto, Patti Reynolds and Anne Mulqueen, Spiritual Assistant. As you can read in their Annual Report sent to all of you: "The weekend centered on the theme 'Be Who We Say We Are' with presentations highlighting some early writings of Francis, and focusing on Belonging, Communication, Dialog, Listening, Respect and the Spirituality of the Formator. There was time for discussion, large and small group and always one-on-one, as well as time for individual reflection. Participants openly discussed the needs, concerns and desires of their regional fraternities."

ACTION ITEM NUMBER THREE: EVERY YEAR, WITH THE SINGLE EXCEPTION OF THOSE YEARS WHEN WE TRY TO GATHER THE WHOLE FRANCISCAN FAMILY AT A QUINQUENNIAL, THE NATIONAL FORMATION TEAM WILL GATHER ALL THE REGIONAL FORMATION DIRECTORS AND, IN THE SAME YEAR, BUT ON A DIFFERENT DATE, THE REGIONAL FORMATION TEAM WILL GATHER ALL THE LOCAL FRATERNITY FORMATION DIRECTORS TO DISCUSS FORMATION.

Vital Secular Franciscan fraternities need essential information, effective lifelong formation and spiritual, even social and organizational, transformation. Formation people at local and Regional levels need to gather on a yearly basis to pray, share best practices and be with one another.

If your Region does not have the funds to do a yearly formation retreat/workshop, please consider now how to set aside sufficient funds for 2017, since, God willing, we will have a 2016 Quinquennial, OR find out how to obtain funds already earmarked for Formation from the Duns Scotus Trust. This process is not so difficult, even if it takes time and persistence. Contact any member of the Duns Scotus Board of Trustees listed in the National Directory.

ACTION ITEM NUMBER FOUR: EVERY CANDIDATE IN EVERY LOCAL FRATERNITY WILL HAVE A MENTOR FROM THAT FRATERNITY, IN ADDITION TO THE FORMATION DIRECTOR, TO JOURNEY WITH THE CANDIDATE.

This journey with the candidate will start from when the individual shows a sincere interest in Permanent Profession, even from pre-candidacy, but certainly at the time of Admission to the Order (see General Constitutions Article 39) to after Permanent Profession. Each fraternity should assign a suitable and well prepared Mentor to journey with each Candidate.

Many Religious Communities, together with Holy Mother Church herself for her future priests and deacons, have a similar process of assistance and friendship. For those of us who have been both on the giving and receiving end of this mentoring, we can testify how valuable a process this can be. Please give it serious consideration!

Other Recommendations for better Formation, perhaps not given the importance of ACTION ITEMS NUMBER THREE AND FOUR, but still valuable, would be:

Every Candidate at the beginning of Candidacy receives or purchases THE ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS, and does homework in the Documents between each Candidacy session.

Every Candidate before Profession reads Friar Felice Cangelosi's article on Profession on which Friar Richard Trezza based his article on Profession in the FUN Manual. Friar Cangelosi's article is attached with this Report.

Every Candidate will watch Friar Richard Trezza's Presentations on Profession from YouTube. Part One: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZgowg5egpU>. Part Two: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JWlcoeiTIY>.

Every Candidate will discuss both articles and both presentations with the Mentor and/or Formation Director and/or other Candidates.

Every Candidate before Profession chooses and completes a service apostolate to the satisfaction of the Mentor or Formation Director.

Three, More social sharing and JOY at every Secular Franciscan gathering.

ACTION ITEM NUMBER FIVE: EVERY SECULAR FRANCISCAN GATHERING WILL HAVE TIME AND POSSIBLY REFRESHMENTS FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION BETWEEN AND AMONG SISTERS AND BROTHERS.

It would seem silly to mandate social interaction if I did not still attend meetings primarily concerned with "the business of the Order" and not paying sufficient, in my view, attention to our sisters and brothers who truly are "the business of the Order." How can we help our sisters and brothers on this difficult journey to everlasting salvation if we don't know who we are? How can we know who we are if we have no social interaction?

Further, I have seen contentious budget and other discussions with professed sisters and brothers, and I ask myself what my brother Arturo Villarreal taught me: Where is the love? Where is the JOY?

As National Minister, I cannot mandate love or joy, so I will defer to our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. After washing the feet of his disciples, our Lord said: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35).

This love should be seen in our joy and our caring, regardless of disagreements or contentious discussions. Without others seeing our love and our joy, how can we ever keep the people we now have or receive from the Lord new membership and life?

Finally, four Works in Progress, all of which need each other, all of which are not finished, perhaps can never be finished, but need our consistent concern: Youth and Young Adults, Vocations, Communication and Outreach, not placed in any particular order of importance.

One, Youth and Young Adults.

I place Youth and Young Adults as a Work in Progress because Youth and Young Adults represent our Future, without which we will die as an Order, but unfortunately not our Present, as less than 1% of our Order in the United States as reported to International in 2010, our last official tabulation, was under 35.

Sue and Christy Nelson, the first Mother and Daughter Team in NAFRA history, have helped move us forward with Youth and Young Adults, as you can read in their extensive Annual Report sent to all of you. For just one example, both former Regional Minister Sue Nelson and her daughter Christy, formerly a Regional Vice Minister, attended and presented at their booth(s) at the recent World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia. Alleluia!

Two: Vocations.

To me, it was great that our National Vocations Chair Jane DeRose-Bamman was also at the World Meeting of Families with Sue and Christy. Vocations and Youth and Young Adults should work together to spread the Secular Franciscan Joy and attract new membership!

I also thank former National Minister Carol Gentile for answering our 1-800-FRANCIS number for 2015 until she will retire on November 1st, 2015 because of health reasons, again as you can read in her Annual Report. Please keep Carol in your prayers, and please keep the 1-800-FRANCIS number, with someone in good health, willing to answer these calls.

Three: Communication.

Related with Youth and Young Adults and Vocations is of course Communication. How can we better share our Secular Franciscan Joy AND attract our American Youth and Young Adults without more concern for our Communications?

ACTION ITEM NUMBER SIX: PLEASE, CONTINUE OUR ADMITTEDLY "TEMPORARY" NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE AT LEAST FOR ANOTHER YEAR.

Our National Communications Committee will have its one yearly meeting on Tuesday October 13 at 1 pm prior to the beginning of our National Chapter. Anyone attending Chapter is invited to attend this meeting as well. If you attend, please bring your ideas concerning the Committee's stated purpose:

“The Communications Committee will examine the current avenues of communication that exist in the Secular Franciscan Order of the USA, evaluate how well these avenues are working, and then set goals for improvement and/ or additional means of communication if necessary. These avenues of communication would include: between and within all levels of the Order, both from the higher levels to the individual members AND from the individual members to the governing bodies. (Also,) between the Order and the Church and the world.”

I, too, plan to attend this meeting of the Communications Committee because as National Minister I have struggled to maintain adequate communication with and among leadership and members at every level of fraternity. I have also struggled with how much we as a National Fraternity should be using current social media tools and at what expense in time and treasure? Communication continues to be a Work in Progress.

Once again, I commend Jim Wesley, the editor of our TAU-USA, and all his creative staff; the NAFRA Public Relations Committee with Bob and Mary Stronach; the NAFRA Computer Committee with its Chair Dan Mulholland; and National Webpage Master Vickie Klick for their consistent and admirable efforts to further effective communication with and among our 30 Regions, 558+ Fraternities and 12,504 active, permanently professed Secular Franciscans, and to all of our 1063 Candidates.

Every recent (from 2004 to 2015) issue of our TAU-USA publication is available through our National Webpage: <http://www.nafra-sfo.org/tau-usa.html>. In addition, email, both personal (tbelloso@gmail.com), and through the NAFRA-L, NAFRA-ALUM, NAFRA-RM and NEC listservs, has kept me in contact with our widespread National family. Thanks to Dan Mulholland for keeping these listservs up and running.

Four. Outreach.

I put Outreach as a Work in Progress, separate from JPIC, which I feel abides in good hands with Carolyn Townes, already mentioned, and her excellent JPIC Commission, because I don't feel, as a National Fraternity OR in many Regions and local fraternities, that we are doing all we could to reach out to those on the margins as Pope Francis has encouraged us all to do.

ACTION ITEM NUMBER SEVEN: EVERY FRATERNITY AT EVERY LEVEL, LOCAL, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL, WILL ADOPT AND REPORT PROGRESS (LOCAL FRATERNITIES TO THE REGION, REGIONAL FRATERNITIES TO NATIONAL AND THE NATIONAL FRATERNITY TO THE WHOLE NATIONAL FAMILY) ON AT LEAST ONE APOSTOLATE TO THE MARGINS, AS EACH FRATERNITY SO DEFINES THOSE MARGINS.

Apostolates may be to those in our own Franciscan family sick and unable to attend gatherings and to those who have disappeared from our gatherings without any explanation. Apostolates may be to the hungry and homeless, the imprisoned and hospitalized in our local areas. Apostolates may take the form of International outreach to migrants and refugees, the sick and suffering throughout the world.

Perhaps our recipient of the 2015 Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Award, Sister Caritas Barajingitwa, LSOSF, who I pray will join us at our National Chapter, will offer more ideas on possible apostolates for all of us.

Sister Caritas is a member of the African-based Little Sisters of St. Francis, and she dreamed of providing a loving home and practical education for orphans in Africa. That dream came true when she opened Holy Family Vocational Orphanage in Southern Uganda in 2003. She began creating a future for children of AIDS victims and of victims of war. With her plans to expand and teach practical life skills, she founded an orphanage which houses 30 children and includes 26 acres for farming and

a future school. We welcome Sister Caritas to our National Chapter and congratulate her for her great work with the Lord.

Also, under Outreach, you may remember that our brother Jim Flickinger presented at NAFRA 2013 his plan for an OFS Disaster Relief Team, which would not try to duplicate, but only assist in the Relief efforts of Catholic Charities.

Further, under Outreach, I complement our Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee under excellent leadership from Anne Mulqueen, whose articles you can read in each edition of the TAU-USA and whose Annual Report has been sent to all of you.

Thanks to all of you for all your hard work.

There is so much to do, and, speaking for myself, my time, energy and abilities are so limited that the devil would love to see me despair.

Thus, I finish as I began: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!" OR "Be the Joyful Face of Christ to All."

Servant Leadership in the Secular Franciscan Order is never just about us individually in isolation. We always have our fraternities, our great Franciscan family, as well as our divine family of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Blessed Mary, all the angels and saints. How could I or you ever think to despair?

Saturday evening, I prayed and sang and joined in a candle-light procession with all our beautiful Franciscan family, Friars, Sisters and so, so many Secular Franciscans at the Transitus Service held at the Franciscan Monastery perched atop Quincy Street in Washington, DC. The homilist, Friar Joe Rozansky, OFM, said words to the effect that he had a late night inspiration before his talk where someone whispered in his mind the three P's of St. Francis's success: He was unfailingly POLITE, unceasingly PERSISTENT and ever-PRACTICAL.

Let us pray that following in the footsteps of St. Francis, we too might be unfailingly POLITE, unceasingly PERSISTENT and ever-PRACTICAL to better serve the Lord and one another.

Let us always pray for one another that we might all "Be the Joyful Face of Christ to all!"

Peace and love and Holy Feast Day to all, with apologies for length and for being one day late

Tom