

# SFO NEWS

THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER  
IN THE UNITED STATES

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## **Pennsylvania Woman, Wisconsin Priest Give Keynote 'Assisi Talks' at World Gathering of Secular Franciscans**

The spirit of St. Francis is as relevant today as it was in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, two Americans told delegates and observers from 60 countries at the recent 2005 General Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order held in Assisi, Italy, the birthplace of Francis.

“Our Franciscan heritage is meant to be shared with a world on the verge of spiritual and physical suicide, violence, revenge and hatred, depression and loss of hope, greed and the desire for power to dominate,” said Lester Bach, OFM Cap., of Madison, WI, a national spiritual assistant and author of spiritual formation books for the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States.

“Francis’ spirit seeks to transform these destructive elements in our world and among its people,” the priest continued. “Secular Franciscans, in particular, are expected to be in the middle of things in the world and bring Francis’ Gospel spirit wherever they are.”

The challenge for people of faith, particularly Secular Franciscans, is to share the message of Christ; in fact, “to BE his message,” added Carol Gentile, SFO, of Monaca, PA, the order’s U.S. national minister.

The answer to that challenge is in the Gospels and in St. Francis’ Rule for Secular Franciscans – and the time for action is now, she said.

The pair gave a series of keynote talks at the week-long Assisi gathering, which included a day at the Vatican for a general audience with Pope Benedict XVI, who greeted the order’s general minister, Encarnacion del Pozo of Spain, after urging Secular Franciscans to witness to the Gospel in the world with a “renewed apostolic drive.”

“We cannot receive Christ in the Eucharist and go back into our homes, our places of employment and be uninvolved with the world around us,” Mrs. Gentile said. Referring to the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Nations), she said Secular Franciscans must be in the forefront of taking the part of the poor, advocating for the powerless, and acting with humility and self-sacrifice for the good of all.

Just as Francis received the call to holiness in the 13<sup>th</sup> century – a call to rebuild the church and live the Gospels in a radical way – “at this Chapter we will hear the call to holiness and move forward,” Mrs. Gentile said. After 25 years, it is time to fully live the new Secular Franciscan Rule approved by Pope Paul VI in 1978 so that, as the Rule proposes, “Christ is the center of our life” with God and with the world.

Father Bach noted several elements that St. Francis brought to the church: devotion to the Trinity, return to the Gospel as a sense of Christian vision of life, the laity regaining an evangelizing role, a reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit, and a hierarchy of authority that “serves the brothers and sisters” rather than dominates them.

“Our goals are love and forgiveness, dialogue and mercy, hope and charity, sharing and compassion, conversion and new life,” Father Bach said. “We choose not to dominate people with our vision, but to befriend them and create a situation that will allow them to listen to our vision with openness. Even if they do not change (since conversion is the work of the Spirit), we plant the seed of conversion through our words and our Franciscan lives.”

And, he said, the Secular Franciscan Rule shows the way.

Added Mrs. Gentile: “Today, at this very moment in history, we need to see with the eyes of Christ and hear with the ears of Christ, and speak with the words of Christ.”

How? Articles 15-19 of the Rule offer direction based on scripture, she said.

“I would like to speak of the direction we have taken in the United States of America, not because it is the best practice, but because it is one with which I am familiar.” In an attempt to foster practical applications of the Rule, and the Gospel vision behind it, she said the U.S. National Fraternity created four “apostolic commissions” – Peace and Justice, Work, Family, and Ecology.

These national commissions offer documents, on-going guidance, and practical suggestions to the regional and local fraternities throughout the U.S.

She explained how these four apostolic commissions reflect the Rule and are “at the core of our mission.”

**“Peace and Justice”** is reflected in Articles 15 and 19 of the Rule.

*“Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives.”*

*“Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon.”*

She listed 25 practical ways to fulfill the living of “Peace and Justice.” A few examples -- pay attention to news reports about problems in the world where peace and justice is needed; volunteer to work in a soup kitchen; participate in a non-violent peace demonstration; pray daily for peace; write or visit someone in prison; send a letter to legislators on a peace/justice issue; attend a program or read a book about world hunger.

The **Work Commission** is given voice in Article 16 of the Rule, she said.

*“Let them esteem work both as a gift and as a sharing in creation, redemption, and service of the human community.”*

Mrs. Gentile listed 25 practical ways to live out the Work Commission. Some examples – tutor a person in preparation for a job; help complete a job application or resume; assist with support groups and material resources for the unemployed; mentor a student; hold a fraternity workshop on the spirituality of work; write letters to the editor on work-related issues; see the presence of Christ in others at work.

**Family Commission** is reflected in Article 17 of the Rule, which, she said, “identifies the family as the core of our activity at home and in the world.”

*“In their family they should cultivate the Franciscan spirit of peace, fidelity, and respect for life, striving to make of it a sign of a world already renewed in Christ. By living the grace of matrimony, husbands and wives in particular should bear witness in the world to the love of Christ for his church. They should joyfully accompany their*

*children on their human and spiritual journey by providing a simple and open Christian education and being attentive to the vocation of each child.*

She listed 25 practical ways to live out the Family Commission. A few examples -- watch a movie with family; teach a child how to pray; hold hands while saying grace; laugh and smile often; plan a weekend with family; call a grown child to say how much you love him/her; share a compliment with each other.

**Ecology Commission** comes from Article 18 of the Rule.

*“Moreover, they should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which bear the imprint of the Most High, and they should strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship.”*

Again she listed 25 practical ways to implement the Ecology Commission. Some examples – pick up trash when you see it; substitute one organically produced item for a conventionally produced product when you shop (to support environmental stewardship and family farms); spend time outside with nature giving God praise for its variety; turn down air conditioning and heating to conserve energy (within healthful limits); participate in a group that adopts a highway to keep it free of litter; support land conservation; bring your own mug to fraternity meetings to reduce the use of plastic and paper products.

She concluded: “This vision and mission, lived out in practical ways day in and day out, would ultimately ‘build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the Kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively’ (Rule 14).”

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