

News & Views

Franciscan Life in the 21st Century
Lester Bach OFM Cap



NEW COUNCILS

It is ordinary that changes occur after elections. New councilors bring a variety of life experiences. These experiences may be helpful in making council decisions -or- they may hinder the way a council functions. We all bring wonders and warts with us wherever we go. We may identify the wonders or warts early on and support or question them as needed. Do your decisions enrich Franciscan fraternity life? Do they cause conflict? Why? How do you handle the conflict? Prayer to the Holy Spirit and dialogue are needed.

1. **COUNCILS** - Do council decisions enhance fraternity life and find acceptance or not? If not, why not? That answer will require honesty, understanding, and willingness to dialogue. The presence of conflict is possible. But if Franciscans resist and do nothing but criticize decisions, the council will need to pray and dialogue, dealing with the consequences of their decisions. Some people resist change no matter how good or important it is. Some people support every change without considering its consequences. Some folks don't want to change and are stubborn about it. They presume that they alone understand Franciscan life. Councils respectfully discern who is right or wrong (or partially so).

2. **\$\$\$\$** In deciding financial issues some resistance is predictable. Developing a healthy fraternity may require increasing the "fair share." At a time when the country's economy is not exactly blossoming, negative reactions are understandable. Clarity about needs, and finding creative programs to increase income, becomes important. Fraternity finances need support in order to have a balanced treasury.

Suggestions can recognize the need for fresh sources of income to meet normal and/or unexpected needs of fraternity life. Remind one another that profession includes articles 24 and 25 of the OFS Rule. Secular Franciscans have committed themselves, by profession, to contribute *according to their means*. Personal and fraternity needs do change and prayerful dialogue may be required. Councils can consult with the members when needed. The councils remain responsible for the decisions they make for the good of the fraternity. The support of the members is important to the council and the fraternity. How the council functions makes a difference in the development of fraternity life.

Finances can be a delicate issue. This is especially true if OFS members are growing older, with fixed incomes and no likelihood of increased income. Or, if they are younger and have multiple bills, from college tuition: apartment/house payments: food; transportation; doctor bills; education costs; clothing; insurance; etc. People with competent financial skills might assist in dealing with these situations.

3. **WOW!** The fraternity family needs the support of all the members - across the board. Whatever happens to members has consequences for the whole fraternity. In making suggestions to the council (at all levels) members should realize that their ideas may be compared to or combined with other ideas. The interaction is respectful and courteous, both listening and sharing. *It illustrates the quality of their Franciscan dedication to the common good of fraternity life.* It is not a way to promote personal projects. We allow for critique and additions or subtractions to our suggestions. Blended with other ideas, it is a good process for fraternity growth.

This blend of ideas provides an insight into the Franciscan pattern of fraternity government & growth. Input and suggestions reveal each individual's grasp of their Franciscan, gospel-oriented, vocation. If nobody offers ideas, the council should address that issue. The way a council functions may need to be evaluated. Encouragement and openness will stimulate commitment to this 24/7 way of life. Initiate a conversation that fits your fraternity. Franciscans

remain respectful of each other's ideas. Good dialogue will be productive for fraternal life. As someone once put it, make certain to *keep the "main thing" the "main thing!"*

4. **AND THEN:** Article 24 of the OFS Rule:

To foster communion among members, the council should organize regular and frequent meetings of the community as well as meeting with other Franciscan groups, especially youth groups. It should adopt appropriate means for growth in Franciscan and ecclesial life and encourage everyone to a life of fraternity. This communion continues with deceased brothers and sisters through prayer for them.

OFS Rule #24

Is it possible to live a knowledgeable and committed Franciscan life when we gather only once a month for 3 or 4 hours? *That's about 36 or 48 hours a year* (out of 5,840 waking hours in a year - excluding 8 hrs of sleep!) to maintain and deepen the Franciscan way of life 24/7. I realize other special programs may occur. But the regular gatherings may need to be upgraded. ***The way a gathering is conducted really makes a difference.*** This is true whatever happens in the lives of professed Franciscans. Regional gatherings may also receive substantive ideas promoted within local fraternities.

If regular gatherings are not enough, how does a fraternity council improve things? Small group dialogue at regular gatherings can help. Extra gatherings may be another way to enrich fraternity life for those who are able to attend. Share ideas with one another as much as possible. If small groups develop outside the regular gathering, they share their ideas & conclusions with the larger fraternity. The councils guide such groups so they remain contributing members to fraternity life. Be aware of the consequences when you make changes. Not all changes are equally effective for improving your fraternity's life (Try them for 3 or 4 gatherings). Change them if needed. Develop programs that best fit your fraternity life. Review and renew them as necessary. As growth occurs, more changes may be needed. Don't get caught in a *"we always did it this way"* approach. Leave an 'open door' for fresh possibilities as yet untried and/or prompted by the Holy Spirit.

5. **FORMATION** - Councils, at every level, make certain that ***initial and ongoing formation*** is alive and well, guided by a team. Neglecting formation in Franciscan life can be disastrous. Devotions might be promoted while continued learning is neglected or *vice versa*. Neglect may create an unbalanced atmosphere in fraternity life that spills over into everyday secular life. These failures may neglect articles of the OFS Rule that deal with the poor, or the work for peace, or ecology, as well as articles calling for prayerfulness. Growth in Franciscan living can be diminished. *Prayerfulness* may grow, but its partner, *action*, may be unknown, or *vice versa*. A *prayerful and active* fraternity recognizes the ***need for balance*** between prayerfulness and activity.

The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes 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.

OFS Rule #22

Supportive materials can be found on the inside back cover of TAU-USA. Initial formation books need to be approved and used. Article #44.2 (OFS Constitutions) calls for *newly professed* members to have specific ongoing formation (E.g. *"What it Takes"*). Regular *ongoing formation* continues from Profession until Sister Death arrives.

These requirements are fulfilled by the fraternity members and councils as a collegial responsibility. The OFS way of life requires a lifetime of enriched learning. The Constitutions make this very clear. ***"Giving Life to the Words"*** offers a spiritual commentary on the OFS Constitutions. Learning, by itself, is not enough. It finds expression at gatherings, in the activities of everyday life, in personal prayerfulness and conversion.

Fraternities task leaders to share useful ideas with other fraternities in the region or on the national level. Local Councils and Regional Executive Councils offer support to one another. They share effective ideas with the National Executive Council. We owe it to one another to share ideas that work well. Sharing ideas as well as effective ways & means to enhance fraternity life are a common activity.

As it expands, goodness takes root and develops. If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good. In this sense, several sayings of St. Paul will not surprise us: "The love of Christ urges us on" (2 Corinthians 5:14); "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel." (1 Corinthians 9:16)

The Joy of the Gospel - Pope Francis - #9

Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work. Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelization, nor are dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts.

The Joy of the Gospel - Pope Francis - #262