

SHARING THE VISION

“Life-Giving Union” - An Historic National Gathering on Spiritual Assistance

In recent years there have been many discussions about the decreasing number of Friars and the shortage of Spiritual Assistants.¹ Religious sisters and OFS members are helping to fill the gap, but the question often asked is: **“How will we maintain our bond with the First Order and TOR Friars?”** Knowing that solutions could only be found via collaboration with the friars, in 2018 the National Executive Council (NEC) petitioned the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants (CNSA) to convene a summit on this topic, pledging full logistical support and major funding by way the Duns Scotus Formation Trust Fund grant. What the CNSA brought to fruition in response was beyond our dreams! The following article by Sharon Winzeler, OFS, provides the details.



Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR, CNSA President-in-turn, delivers the welcoming address

A joyful, holy and historic meeting entitled “Our Life-Giving Union: Discussion and Discernment” has enriched the bonds within the Franciscan Family. The conference, held Aug. 26-29 at the Mercy Center in St. Louis, produced a number of recommendations intended to continue and enhance the work that was begun. In attendance were four Provincial Ministers, ten Friar Delegates of the Provincial, 25 Regional Spiritual Assistants, and members of the CNSA, the National Executive Council and Commission Chairs, who spent three days praying, sharing ideas, listening, eating, and laughing together. “In those three days came the answer for which we gathered: that we as Franciscans might serve the Church and the Church’s mission better,” said Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR, President-in-Turn of the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants. “We, (friars, sisters and seculars) need to go side-by-side into the future.”

The keynote speaker was Father Michael Higgins, TOR, president of the Franciscan School of Theology at the University of San Diego and past General Spiritual Assistant to the OFS. In preparation for this conference, Fr. Higgins consulted with Benedetto Lino, OFS, a former member of the International OFS Presidency. Topics presented included the co-responsibility among the orders, and

the *altius moderamen*, the higher direction or governance in accordance with the Rule and the General Constitutions of the OFS. “The spiritual and pastoral care of the OFS, in virtue of its belonging to the same spiritual family, is entrusted by the Church to the Franciscan First Order and the TOR, to whom the Secular Fraternity has been united for centuries,” Fr. Higgins cited from the Statutes for Spiritual Assistance to the OFS.²



Fr. Michael Higgins, TOR, delivers the first of two Keynote addresses

“The conference was everything we wanted and then some,” said Miriam Kennedy, OFS, executive secretary of the CNSA at the conclusion of the event. Jan Parker, OFS, National Minister added, “Our time together was invaluable. We shared so much and experienced such joy. Truly we are one Franciscan family, sharing a God-given mission.”

The conference built relationships and produced some immediate responses. During the conference, Jan Parker was invited by the Sacred Heart Province to speak at its next Provincial Chapter in June 2020. Fr. David Gaa, OFM, Provincial Minister of St. Barbara Province, made plans for a first-time meeting with the Regional Spiritual Assistants in his province. Two OFS Regional Spiritual Assistants met the Provincials who had appointed them. Because of time constraints and geography, provincials often do not meet the

¹ See the **2017 OFS-USA State of the Order**, pp. 5-7, reporting on the status of Spiritual Assistance in the OFS-USA at https://secularfranciscansusa.org/wp-content/uploads/State_of_the_Order_Report-2017.pdf or request a copy from the National Secretary.

² Fr. Michael Higgins’ two keynote presentations, and photos from the conference are available on the OFS-USA website: www.secularfranciscansusa.org



Fr. Jerome Wolbert, OFM, (CNSA), facilitates one of the small groups consisting of (clockwise) Theresa Ream, OFS, Kathy Taormina, OFS, Carolyn Townes, OFS, Sr. Pat Michalek, OSF, Br. Gordon Boykin, OFM, and Fr. Andrew McCarty, OFM Cap.

- ❖ TOR and 1st Order Provincials inviting a representative of their OFS Regions to meet with the Provincial Councils twice a year to report and discuss mutual needs.

- ❖ Building on the model of the conference just held by scheduling periodic events.

- ❖ Increasing communications among the orders - providing visitation reports, newsletters, action photos and captions of OFS activities.

- ❖ Mutual invitations to gatherings and shared mission projects.

- ❖ Sending friars in formation to attend monthly OFS fraternity gatherings for one year.

spiritual assistants they appoint. Instead, they rely on recommendations from the Region.

Conference attendees collaborated on a list of recommendations, the most popular being a Franciscan family council, a permanent group named “Heart of the Family.” This council would keep the lifeblood of information and common concerns among the “four chambers” flowing. Council members would include representatives from the OFS, Franciscan First Order, TORs, Poor Clares and TOR Sisters. Another popular recommendation was the establishment of “Mission Bands” of First Order and TOR friars to travel and engage with OFS who live in areas where friars are not actively present. Other recommendations included:

Attendees welcomed opportunities to engage in more collegiality among the orders. “We recognize there is a vital reciprocity that should be shared with one another. The fullest expression of the Franciscan charism comes when we are working together,” Fr. Higgins said.

“The Secular Order is an order in its own right,” he said, “and all orders working more closely together and communicating ideas and actions will strengthen everyone. Clear, constant communication between the friars and seculars is important.”

Fr. Higgins stated that a common family, charism, and birth of the orders call all Franciscans to learn more about each other. He believes that friars should meet with Secular Franciscans during their formation to learn more about them, as well as participate in yearly gatherings among the leadership. “Once you get to know the Seculars, you sort of fall in love with them,” Fr. Higgins said.

Reflecting on the success of this gathering, Fr. Christopher Panagoplos stated, “It was a true family gathering, a dream of many sunsets, now a reality. From these three days, a new light has dawned.... With passion and the flame of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, our future, more than ever, is dependent on this vital reciprocity.”



National Minister, Jan Parker, OFS with the four Provincials in attendance at the August Gathering: Fr. David Gaa, OFM, (St. Barbara Province), Fr. James Gannon, OFM, (Assumption of the B.V.M. Province), Fr. Thomas Nairn, OFM, (Sacred Heart Province), and Fr. Jack Clark Robinson, OFM, (Our Lady of Guadalupe Province)