



BREAKAWAY GROUP ACTIVELY SEEKS TO DRAW MEMBERS FROM OFS

by Fr. Jerome Wolbert, ofm, National Spiritual Assistant



Each of our families is touched by broken relationships. At least somewhere in the family tree, there is likely to be divorce, separation, or some kind of estrangement. Our national fraternity is similar in this way: there is a group of energetic former Secular Franciscans who have broken their fraternal relationships with us to form a separate group of Franciscan tertiaries. As is all too common with broken family relationships, these former members seek to draw other members into their group.

Informed of their departure last year, OFS General Minister Tibor Kauser first expressed his sorrow at the division. It is sad when members leave. But this goes beyond simply leaving the OFS. This group appears to be misrepresenting their situation in two ways: the nature of their group as a Franciscan Third Order, and the actions and decisions of Secular Franciscan members and leadership.

What this group is: a public association of the faithful sponsored by an individual friar province, which has taken the Leonine Rule from the OFS to guide the life of the members of this new group. Friar provinces have the right to establish such groups, and the groups can choose to live by whatever "rule" of life they want, as long as it's not sinful.

While Canon 303 permits groups to call themselves a "Third Order," canon law is using the term "Order" as a name, not a technical designation. It does not make the new group an "Order" in the church in the fuller sense in which the OFS is an Order. Following the Leonine Rule of 1883, which was abrogated (repealed) by the Church in 1978, does not make this group an "Order," nor do the papal comments delivered when this Rule was in force apply to them.

Leaving the OFS to join another Franciscan group is not a matter of simply changing fraternities. It means breaking a public commitment to the Church and to our fraternity that we made at profession. Typically, those who leave the OFS to join this new group are told not to discuss their decision with anyone. This gives us no opportunity to correct any misinformation. Those who have left usually ignore any messages or outreach from their local or regional ministers.

What Can We Do If.....

Someone shares information that may be untrue?

When someone makes an accusation, ***we can listen to the other side*** and do research to confirm the accusation before making a serious decision. If you hear bad things about someone, or especially about our Order, even from a friend you trust, ***check the facts*** with someone in the know. Seek counsel from your local minister or someone at the national or regional level who might be aware of more information – relevant details omitted by the one spreading gossip and innuendo.

Maybe you've experienced something that lends credence to the comments you hear. Do you allow the wheels of justice to turn slowly, or do you demand immediate action exactly as you think best in the moment? Which of those two options sounds more like St. Francis, who sought perfect joy and mercy for all his brothers, especially when they sinned? Sometimes the ***things that rile us up are challenges*** to grow more and improve how we follow in the footsteps of St. Francis.

When someone spreads "news" that we know is wrong, ***we can ask them to invite the informant who relayed the news to call us to***

correct their information. We understand that the person may not want to be corrected, and we keep the exchange brief but polite.

When we have a troubling conversation with someone regarding our Order, we can talk with our local and regional minister. We can ask for advice or simply inform them, so they are aware.

Someone suggests that I might be happier in another group of Franciscans?

If someone asks me to abandon my Secular Franciscan profession or suggests that the commitment I've made is not good enough, a good first step is to prayerfully remember why I professed in the first place and contemplate what my profession means. The commitment we all made has given us relationships – brothers and sisters – which means we cannot just “change our minds” and go to a different group.

If they invite me to join their group, but ask me **not to tell anyone about my decision, that is a warning sign, especially dangerous when they ask me to turn my back on relationships** that have meant a lot to me. Don't be swept into a culture of secrecy. Profession as Secular Franciscans is a life-long, public commitment that should not be abandoned lightly. Any decision to leave the OFS should be discussed with your local minister or spiritual assistant.

Someone leaves my fraternity and refuses to speak to me?

This is, first of all, an experience of the Cross. The humiliation and vulnerability we experience, often after damage is done; relationships ended without a chance to set the record straight—all of this reminds me of the story of Perfect



Joy¹ and also verses like those in Psalm 55:13-15:

For it is not an enemy that reviled me—that I could bear—

Not a foe who viewed me with contempt, from that I could hide.

But it was you, my other self, my comrade and friend,

You, whose company I enjoyed, at whose side I walked in the house of God.

For St. Francis to be rejected by his brothers after an arduous journey through rain and briars, for Jesus to be rejected by his own people, the Psalms testify to the fact that rejection is a common part of life where we can share God's grace through our loving and peaceable response.

Because this is an experience of the Cross, we are reminded by the very experience that we must first **turn to the Lord in prayer.**

Ultimately, we turn to our own hearts. Perhaps there is a **sacrifice** that we can make for our Secular brothers and sisters, a choice out of love to accept a penance for unity. Just as many Catholics keep Wednesday and Friday meatless—not only out of tradition, but with a special intention for an increase in respect for all human life—so each of us might look at some way we can make a sacrifice to endure as **an offering for the unity and health** of our Order, our fraternities, and all of our Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters. Even when *challenged* by brokenness and discord, **one of the beautiful**

dimensions of our Franciscan life, at its best, is the relationship that we have with our brothers and sisters in the Franciscan Family, and our freedom to strengthen that bond in harmony with the Church and the Gospel.

¹ **FAED 3:579-581**, online at <https://www.franciscantradition.org/francis-of-assis-early-documents/the-prophet/the-little-flowers-of-saint-francis/2480-fa-ed-3-page-579>