



# THE NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER – USA

## CONVERSION TIMES THREE

by Tom Bello, OFS

National Minister of the Secular Franciscan  
Order

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Penance,

May the Lord bring us Peace! By our very definition as “Brothers and Sisters of Penance,” any day is a good day for repentance or conversion. After all, our Secular Franciscan Rule 7 states: “United by their vocation as ‘brothers and sisters of penance’ and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel calls ‘conversion.’ Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily.”

How much more strongly this daily call to conversion should resonate in our hearts during the Holy Season of Lent! As our Lord Himself declares in his very first words recorded in what most scholars say is the first of the written Gospels: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

I would like to pray for me and for you a threefold conversion this Lent and throughout this Year of Faith in a similar way to the threefold evangelization I urged at our National Fraternity (NAFRA) Election Chapter in October 2012 in Denver, Colorado. (See the last of twelve PowerPoint slides on page six:

[http://www.nafra-sfo.org/NAFRA-2012/  
NationalMinisterKeynoteOct2012.pdf](http://www.nafra-sfo.org/NAFRA-2012/NationalMinisterKeynoteOct2012.pdf).

You can also listen to the talk:

[http://www.nafra-sfo.org/NAFRA-2012/  
NationalMinisterKeynoteOct2012.mp3](http://www.nafra-sfo.org/NAFRA-2012/NationalMinisterKeynoteOct2012.mp3).)

First must come a personal conversion. Each of us individually must turn away from those personal sins; those internal or external, seen or

unseen, vices; those sinful habits, unique unto us and turn, convert, ever closer to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. “Come after me!” Christ calls to his very first disciples (Mark 1:17).

The means for that conversion are offered in the Ash Wednesday Gospel taken from our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Chapter Six in St. Matthew’s Gospel: prayer, self-denial or fasting, and works or offerings of charity. This Lent, now, today, let us ask ourselves: How can I pray more or better? How can I give more? What more can I give up?

This does not mean merely giving up chocolate for the heck of it; no, this personal conversion is seriously intended to bring us closer to Christ, away from self and toward God. Even the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass or serving the poor are not ends in themselves, but means to bring us closer to Christ.

Second, as we are called as Secular Franciscans into fraternity, so we must convert our fraternities. Sometimes, unsurprisingly, our fraternities can be guilty of some of the same vices that beset us individually. For example, our fraternities can become as self-centered and self-absorbed as we can sometimes be as individuals. In fraternity, we may become more engaged in individual personalities, good or bad, than we are in drawing each other closer to Christ. We may not be contributing as a fraternity as much as we could in works of penance or charity.

Just as we individually make examinations of conscience on a regular basis, perhaps our fraternities should conduct regular collective examinations of conscience. Our reference could again be the Sermon on the Mount, which is well reflected in our Secular Franciscan Rule 4 to 19, Chapter 2, The Way of Life.

For one example of how a fraternity examination of conscience based on our Secular Franciscan Rule might work, Rule 8 reads: “As Jesus was the

true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do. Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.”

How well and how often does our fraternity pray together? When and how could we find richer opportunities to pray together in various forms of liturgical worship? When was the last time, for example, that the whole fraternity celebrated Mass together, or went as fraternity to a Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance or an Anointing of the Sick? When was the last time that our fraternity offered a Holy Hour or the Stations of the Cross?

Another example might come from Rule 13: “As the Father sees in every person the features of his Son, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, so the Secular Franciscans with a gentle and courteous spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ. A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ.”

When was the last time our fraternity reached out to members who no longer attend regularly because of failing health, job situations or feelings of animosity or incompatibility with one or more fraternity members? Do we as a fraternity spend time together, eat and socialize together? Do we have a phone or social media tree to stay in touch with one another, or an outreach person or infirmarian who contacts the sick?

Does our fraternity have a collective apostolate or any charitable giving on a regular basis? When was the last time the whole fraternity engaged hands-on in an act of charity or service like visiting a nursing home or cleaning up a local park or stream? Do we reach out with other groups in service to the elderly, the homeless, the ill or the imprisoned? What more could we be doing, what more could we be giving?

Third and finally, how might we better convert the world around us? Do we pray, individually or in fraternity, for the conversion of the world, the country or our social, political and economic leaders? When was the last time we invited someone from outside our Secular Franciscan world to a fraternity meeting? When was the last time we held an Open House or an Inquiry Session for people to find out about us?

Does the greater Church, the greater Community, know anything at all about our fraternity or about our Secular Franciscan Way of Life? Why should they care? What have we done, what could we do, to deserve their attention or attract their interest so we might teach them by example and convert them closer to Christ?

St. Francis certainly went outside his comfort zone when he went out to beg, when he tried to convert the Sultan, or when he negotiated with the Wolf of Gubbio. How can we as Secular Franciscans, individually or in fraternity, reach outside our comfort zones and engage the outside world? How visible are our Tau Crosses? How noticeable is our Way of Life to those we encounter in the workplace, at Church, at home, out on the highways?



Let us pray for the grace of conversion times three. We start with ourselves; we cannot convert others to Christ if we are not converted. We then take our prayers and efforts to our fraternities, for fraternity is where we as Secular Franciscans work out our salvation. Finally, we shine the Light of Christ through our Secular Franciscan Way of Life into the world to draw all to Christ. Dear Lord, please convert us, our fraternities, our world closer to you. We pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Peace and love,  
*Tom*