



Vision for Franciscan Youth in the United States

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In the previous issue of *Tau USA*, we looked at some of the challenges for developing a strategy and goals in reaching out to young people with the Gospel life in the spirit of Francis and Clare. What worked for previous generations of young Catholics will not be appropriate for most of this next generation today. We will need the Holy Spirit's vision, creativity and sensitivity in order for us to touch the hearts of young people, and invite them into the Franciscan Family. Let us first review how YouFra is set up, and then see the vision for a new YouFra movement in the U.S.

Officially, YouFra is supposed to be its own organization, with its own constitutions, its own local, regional and national fraternities, its own elected leaders, and its own financial resources. The Secular Franciscan Order is to provide support, mentoring, guidance and assistance with formation for YouFra. The relationship is similar to the relation the Friars have with the Secular Franciscan Order. The Secular Franciscan Order should also have structures in place to support YouFra at every level, and always ready to invite YouFra members should they want to pursue a deepening adult vocation to the Franciscan Gospel life as professed Secular Franciscans.

Since there is no YouFra organization established in the United States yet, according to our rule and constitutions, it is the responsibility of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States to rebuild a viable and active Franciscan Youth (YouFra)* movement and organization. In the words of Francis, "Let us begin again, for until now we have done nothing." Here is the general vision that we will be unfolding over the next few years to make this happen.

Rebuilding YouFra will be done primarily by regional fraternities and councils working with local fraternities. However, there is a strong need for the first several years for initial capacity building and visioning by the National Fraternity and Council (NAFRA) to spur this nationwide YouFra movement. This will be done by building the capacity of regional councils to help both local OFS fraternities and emerging YouFra fraternities. This will require:

1. Establishing a national YouFra vision and goals through a collaborative national YouFra commission;
2. Facilitating national networking and communication with regional and local OFS Franciscan Youth chairs, and with YouFra members and leaders as they emerge;
3. Initiating a communications and outreach project to connect with young adults who are interested in forming YouFra fraternities;
4. Developing new YouFra materials and curriculum for formation, and servant leadership training;
5. Developing initial draft guidelines for YouFra constitutions;
6. Disseminating successful models for YouFra fraternities;
7. Hosting annual regional gatherings for YouFra and OFS ;

8. Training Secular Franciscans who the gifts and vocation to work with YouFra as Animators; and
9. Facilitating a new generation of YouFra leaders to eventually take over responsibility for building the basic infrastructure (remembering “more charism, less structure”) to foster a perpetual, viable, and dynamic YouFra movement throughout the United States.

The hope is that within the decade, there is a national movement and network of YouFra members embracing the Gospel Life, giving life to the Franciscan Charism, and organizing themselves enough so that the movement maintains its staying power to continue to mobilize each succeeding generation of young adults that the Holy Spirit calls forth.

In the immediate future, the YouFra focus will be on young adults (ages 18 to approximately 28) rather than “youth” (minors under age 18), although support can be provided to regional councils that have local fraternities who, in collaboration with diocese and parish, wish to engage in work with young people under the age of 18. At this time in the Catholic Church, it is neither wise nor logistically and financially feasible to develop the capacity of the Secular Franciscan Order to engage in safe and effective ministry with minors. Our focus on working with young adults is also strategic for several other reasons:

- It is during the times of transition out of adolescence (late adolescence and young adulthood) that young people are taking stock of their spiritual lives and identities, and choosing to live Gospel lives... or not. Developmentally as they enter the adult world and take on adult responsibilities, it is a very appropriate time for young people to be approached informally in intergenerational friendship by mature adult Secular Franciscans, and for these young people to be invited to try out Christian community and spiritual formation through a Franciscan YouFra fraternity experience.
- Young adults are generally in increasing need of Christian support and mentoring, since this age loses most of its formal social and institutional supports that were provided earlier in their lives by healthy Christian adults in their nuclear family, parish, school, and youth clubs. Catholic parishes are generally very ineffective in reaching out to this young adult population; most have not assumed responsibility for young adult ministry, and so the need is great. This is both a ministerial need and opportunity consistent with our Call and our Secular Franciscan Rule.
- According to research, young adults today have a strong desire for, and are in strong need of, authentic spiritual formation. As a generation who are being raised without the Catholic institutions that formed all earlier generations of Catholics, contemporary Catholic young adults simply do not have the healthy Christian models, relationships, support and quality formation that they are longing for.
- Young adults today are looking not so much for simply an intellectual experience of faith, but rather an active and integrated *applied* experience of their faith. They want to *experience* Christian faith, and they want to live and serve the Gospel in *relevant ways* for the 21st century. Franciscan spirituality, which integrates both contemplative spirituality and active apostolic service, is amazingly appropriate for today’s young people, with the Franciscan focus on joy-filled incarnational theology, community, simple and sustainable living, ecospirituality and care for Creation, service to marginalized people, engagement in social justice advocacy, and commitment to authentic Gospel lives of transformation.

To rebuild YouFra in the U.S., Secular Franciscans will need to embrace a “New Story” in order to effectively carry that Story to the next generation of young people. The New Story is simply the renewed Franciscan charism and ecospirituality for today, focused on reaching out to young people whose hearts are already burning with the desire to know and love God by loving Creation and their neighbors. As Secular Franciscans, we need only help young people to connect the dots, and walk with them as they do so. Facilitating this New Story is the task at hand for the Secular Franciscan Order in the U.S.

What can you do right now? Make sure every region has a qualified Franciscan Youth Chair appointed to serve the needs of the region. If your fraternity has qualified people with a gift for working with youth, appoint that person as a fraternity chair. Any local or regional chairs should contact me and be added to our e-network. If your region has an emerging or active YouFra group already, contact me with the names of leaders. Plan to participate in this season’s Lenten H2O Project as a first mobilizing event for young people, or plan to participate in our JPIC-FYYA Summer Confab this July.

* Some explanation of terms: Our national commission has been called the “Franciscan Youth and Young Adult (FYYA) Commission,” which is consistent with the U.S. practice of separating out young adults (ages 18-30+) from youth (ages 13-17 or middle school and high school students). In much of the rest of the world, the term “youth” is inclusive of both groups. Worldwide, “YouFra” (from “Franciscan Youth”) is also usually inclusive of youth and young adults. I will use the terms Franciscan Youth, YouFra and Franciscan Youth and Young Adult interchangeably, but know that most of our initial work will focus on the young adult ages from 18 to about 28.

