



NAFRA

NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

When Things are Out of Order

by Jan Parker, OFS National Minister

Dear Brothers and Sisters, there are wonderful joys in fraternity life, but there are certainly times of struggle and questioning as well. Life is not always easy, and Franciscan life is no exception. There are the usual questions such as: “Does this Inquirer shows signs of an OFS vocation? Is this Candidate ready for profession? How should our fraternity use these funds?” These are difficult enough, especially if there is disagreement among those making a decision. But the difficulty escalates when unexpected and serious situations arise – a treasurer mishandling funds, a disruptive fraternity member, a council member who is not meeting his/her responsibilities, a fraternity member who may not be living in accord with Church teaching, factions within a fraternity, or a council that is fractured. These are very real situations that can cause much angst. A fraternity may feel at a loss as to how to address these issues. There are often different sides that must be considered. It can become confusing and hard to determine what to do.

In a serious situation we certainly don't want to overreact, or react too quickly. We pray. We talk things over. We may need to reach out to a member of a higher level. We are well aware that our decisions and actions – and our non-actions as well – will deeply affect the lives of others, *and* the life of the fraternity, so it is not unusual to find ourselves second guessing, “Are we doing the right thing? Is this God's will? Is this the loving thing to do?” When our emotions are heightened and our heads are spinning it's hard to land on any one answer that brings peace. We may begin to think that there's no good way out. The stress can be so great we just want to run away!

Well, please, don't run away! I have been in these situations myself, and I can honestly assure you that God will show you a way and give you the grace you need. It won't necessarily be easy and it may take time, but the spiritual benefits are amazing. You will

experience remarkable growth in trust, a great sense of wonder at how God can work through any circumstance to turn it to the good, and incredible peace. I have learned to do two things when faced with a stressful decision. First of all, let it go and give it to God, and secondly, go through a process of discernment.

There is a wonderful writing from our very down-to-earth St. Francis that has been a help to me in accomplishing both of these steps. I share it with you here, and follow it with some thoughts on how it helps me to first, let go, and secondly, to discern.

“Virtue Puts Vice to Flight

*Where there is charity and wisdom,
there is neither fear nor ignorance.*

*Where there is patience and humility,
there is neither anger nor disturbance.*

*Where there is poverty with joy,
there is neither greed nor avarice.*

*Where there is quiet and meditation,
there is neither anxiety nor restlessness.*

*Where there is fear of the Lord to guard an entrance,
there the enemy cannot have a place to enter.*

*Where there is mercy and discretion,
there is neither excess nor hardness of heart.¹*

Let Go, and Give It to God

Fr. Lester Bach is fond of the saying, “When you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging!” It is true. Experience has taught me that when I am stressed and struggling to find an answer, I need to stop – just stop, let go and give it to God. “*Where there is quiet and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor restlessness.*” There,

¹ Admonition XXVII, St. Francis of Assisi, "Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol.1, The Saint"

in God's presence I see that it is not so much the situation that is causing stress, but rather fear, anxiety and worry. These are vices that blur our vision and block our ability to access a situation honestly. In his admonition, St. Francis names other vices: ignorance, anger, disturbance and greed – and also names the *virtues* that are, for each vice, a remedy.

Whether we are frozen by fear, distracted by anger, or hampered by greed, we simply need to seek the corresponding virtue. If you are fearful, seek charity; if angry, seek patience; if anxious and restless, seek quiet and meditation, and so on. Though all these great virtues are to be desired, we need only focus on one, for St. Francis assures us that “whoever possesses one [virtue], and does not offend the others, possesses all.”² When you open up to the Holy Spirit, and ask to be filled with even just one holy virtue, it seems that *all that is of God* flows into your heart as well. Try it! Virtue brings purity of heart and clarity of vision. It not only puts vice to flight, it makes possible ease, self-mastery and joy.³ A virtuous reality! Once we are at peace, we are in a much better place to discern what God wants us to do.

The Process of Discernment

Discernment helps us know what to do when faced with a serious question or a difficult situation. The fruit of discernment is clear direction from the Holy Spirit. I must tell you that in all my Franciscan life I have found no better guide to discernment than one given to us by our sister Anne Mulqueen.⁴ Her simple and clear steps for discernment of a vocation can be applied to any situation. You will find it in *For Up to Now* (the FUN Manual). I highly recommend it.

I have found St. Francis's 27th admonition to be a great reminder that in discernment we need both truth and love. “*Where there is charity (love) and wisdom (truth) there is neither fear nor ignorance.*” Fear and ignorance are two huge roadblocks to discernment. For good discernment we need to focus on truth and on love. We should always pray, “O God, inspire us with your wisdom and love...”⁵

Wisdom (Truth) – Wisdom resides in a heart that is humble and pure and helps us to see beyond ourselves to the purpose and plan of God – a plan that is always

achieved, often in the most interesting of ways. Wisdom reminds us first of all to pray, to look to the Gospel, to speak to all those involved in a situation, and to seek counsel from others. Wisdom then leads us to be informed by the important resources we have been given - the Rule, Ritual, Constitution and Statutes - our “essential documents”, alongside other wonderful resources such as the Handbook for Spiritual Assistance, the Handbook for Franciscan Servant Leadership, our national formation manual, For Up to Now (FUN Manual) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. More than once have I found an answer simply by taking a second look at one of these resources - a word to the wise!

Charity (Love) – Perfect love casts out fear. We should never fear when faced with a tough decision. God loves us and gives us the will and the courage to do what is best. Our brothers and sisters love us, and in them we find counsel, support and understanding. In our decisions we need to be guided by our love for the Order, and look to the greater good. God will always guide us and will never mislead us. In some situations, he will show us that real love needs to be “tough love.” It's not easy to confront someone with the truth, but again, we are guided by love. When we love someone enough to close a door they should not go through, we help them find the door that God is holding open for them. Love never fails.

In the end, a decision is made. If vices have been put to flight, if virtue has given guidance, and if you have faithfully followed a process of discernment, be at peace. You have done well and have done the best you could. Follow through on the decision you have reached and let God take it from there. The Holy Spirit will complete any work that you think is unfinished. It's not our Order. It's God's. It's only through Him and in Him that all things come to order.



² Salutation of the Virtues, St. Francis of Assisi, "Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol.1, The Saint"

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church Second Edition, 1997 - #1804

⁴ For Up to Now: For the Formator, Anne Mulqueen OFS

⁵ Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order, page 39