



FORMATION COMMISSION

THE WAY OF LIFE IN FRATERNITY

by Mary Anne Lenzi, OFS

It is the second Sunday of the month. My local fraternity meets today. The work week was exhausting. I have so much to do. I skimmed the material in the book we are studying. Am I prepared to openly participate in prayer and discussion? It is a 45-minute drive through a section of the city that challenges me. I relish some quiet, reflective, alone time. What do I do? What did I promise? Years ago, I promised to “live all the days of my life the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Secular Franciscan Order by observing its rule of life.”¹ That rule calls me and you to a commitment of life in fraternity.

June 24, 2018, marks the 40th Anniversary of the *Rule of 1978* approved by Pope Paul VI by means of his apostolic letter *Seraphicus Patriarca*. The modification of the previous rule was prompted by the Second Vatican Council. The reason was *aggiornamento* — to update and address more effectively living our **charism** in the culture of the day.² In 1969 at the Assisi Congress, a special committee was formed that included both friars and lay men and women. The Way of Life Commission was tasked with developing essential elements for the new rule. Seventeen essential elements were established that gave a new direction toward our involvement with the world, with special consideration to our secular nature and spirituality. The 1978 Rule is essentially the outcome of the “refining, organizing and integrating”³ of these elements. It also hinged on a return to the origins and to the spiritual experiences of St Francis and the brothers and sisters of penance who received from him their inspiration and guidance.⁴ For a refresher on the historic developments of the 1978 Rule consider reading Chapter 6, *The Pauline Rule*, in *A History of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States*, Vol. IIA, by William Wicks OFS.

In preparation for this musing, I pulled a tattered periodical from my bookshelf: *The Cord*, Volume 53. No. 3, May/June, 2003, a special edition commemorating 25 years of the renewed rule, with wisdom writings by international and national servant leaders. What I read was not new, but it was highlighted through a lens of relationship. The “only two things necessary to be a Franciscan are the Gospel and community. If the Gospel is the book from which Franciscans are formed, then the

community, the local fraternity, is the fertile ground in which the seeds of this message are nurtured and grown.”⁵ Fr. Michael Higgins wrote that the rule “is replete with terms that refer to relationship and sharing of life. . . . “fraternity,” “community,” and “brothers and sisters” appear eight times each.”⁶ These two points stuck with me.

What did I do? I collected my breviary and book, some paper and a pen, a bundle of fruit and sweets to share and tossed them in my meeting bag. I paused before revving the engine and whispered a prayer to the Holy Spirit to breathe a little extra fortitude in me.

The Spirit does not disappoint. We shared a simple meal, a prayer, and stories of where we encountered God in our lives. In sharing a struggle, a member responded. As a fraternity we voice our struggles and try to help each other along the journey because living a Franciscan life is not a singular path. It is a daily exercise in trying to follow the Gospel in the way of St. Francis. It’s actually not easy. We can’t do it alone.

I was renewed. Joining with brothers and sisters, I experienced all that a fraternity is called to be: “a community of love, a place for ongoing conversion, and a place of support for living the Gospel in the world.”⁷ It is a place where we learn to let go of “me” to experience the beauty of “we.”

This June, consider celebrating the 40th Anniversary of Rule with your fraternity, then add it to next year’s calendar, and the next. Each time we study and pray the Rule something new will stand out about prayer, contemplation or action in our desire to fulfill our promises. The Rule we profess to live each day may not seem easy. It reflects a simple gospel command. “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15: 12).

Some ongoing formation suggestions:

Fr. Michael Higgins suggested an in depth study of how the words “fraternity,” “community” and “brothers and sisters” are used and understood in the Rule.

Select a Chapter in the *FUN Manual* to review and supplement: *The History of the Order*, *A Call to Vocation*, *The Rule*, *Our Identity*, *Fraternity and Francis*, for example.



¹ Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order, p. 24

² A History of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States, Volume IIA 1943-1978, p. 110

³ FUN Manual, History of the SFO and its Rules 3-23-11, p. 26

⁴ A History of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States, Volume IIA 1943-1978, p. 174

⁵ Baker and Mulqueen, *The Privilege of Being Secular*, *The Cord*, p. 122

⁶ Higgins, *The Franciscan Rule, an Invitation to Relationship*, p.110

⁷ *FUN Manual*, *Fraternity as Fundamental Element*, p.12