

2018-2021 NATIONAL PRIORITY
FRATERNITY LIFE

FRATERNITY AND ITS BEGINNING

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*The following article was adapted from the new **Guide to the Canonical Establishment of a Secular Franciscan Fraternity** approved ad experimentum on April 16, 2021. The complete guide is posted on the national website secularfranciscansusa.org/resources/guidelines, under the “National Guidelines” link.*

Welcome! Beginning a new fraternity is a great and rewarding task. Before you begin, however, you should be aware of the significance of what you intend to do. If you’re already a professed Secular Franciscan, the ideas that follow should not be new to you. Consider this a helpful reminder of some basics that might otherwise get lost in the procedural details. It is important to have these basics firmly in mind.

If you are not a Secular Franciscan, much of what is said will probably be unfamiliar to you. Some of the terms used will be explained as we go along. As for the rest, you’re not going to be doing this alone. Don’t be afraid to ask other Secular Franciscans for clarification.

To be more specific, the “other Secular Franciscans” who will assist you are;

- the Regional Executive Council (REC), one of whose responsibilities is the oversight of newly-forming Secular Franciscan groups in your geographic area, and
- the sponsoring fraternity, a local fraternity that will be assigned to mentor you through the process.

Let’s begin by clarifying what a Secular Franciscan fraternity is not.

- It is not a prayer group, although members do pray when they gather.
- It is not a support group, although members do support each other.
- It is not a study group, although formation in the Franciscan way of life is an ongoing part of every gathering.
- It is not a Bible study group, although the Gospels form the basis of OFS life and are frequently discussed.
- It is not a social ministry group, although members participate in a variety of social ministries.
- It is not a parish organization, although many fraternities do meet in parish facilities.

So what is a fraternity, then? **The local fraternity is the basic unit of the Secular Franciscan Order** (the OFS). It has **a special purpose** that is defined by the OFS legislation and **a unique identity** (called a “juridical personality”) **in the Church**.

Let’s unpack these statements.

A Secular Franciscan fraternity is **part of an established Order in the Church**, which has certain implications.

- The fraternity itself must be **officially “established” by one of the Franciscan Friar Provinces** that have ecclesiastical responsibility for the OFS. Thus by definition it is not a parish or diocesan organization.
- Individual members are **bound more intimately to the Church**, which is why full membership is open only to Catholics in full communion with the Church.

That describes the fraternity’s identity as it relates to the Church. What about its **purpose**?

- First and foremost, **the purpose of the Order** (and thus the purpose of the fraternity, all OFS members, and others who belong to the Franciscan Family) is to **make present the Franciscan charism in the life and mission of the Church** (OFS Rule, Art. 1).
- In and of itself, the fraternity is **a service to the Church**. “Fidelity to their own charism, Franciscan and secular, and the witness of building fraternity, sincerely and openly, are their principal services to the Church, which is the community of love (General Constitutions [GC] 100.3).”
- “The Fraternity of the OFS finds its origin in the inspiration of Francis of Assisi. to whom the Most High revealed the essential gospel quality of life in fraternal communion.” (GC 28.1) As an integral part of OFS life, it is marked by fraternal communion and is **a means of holiness**.

With these considerations firmly in mind, this Guide sets forth a clear pathway to canonical establishment of a new Secular Franciscan fraternity. It describes:

- the stages of development of the group;
- the requirements for documentation;
- when and how to obtain the approval of the local bishop and the Provincial Minister; and
- the respective roles of the sponsoring fraternity and the REC throughout the process.

Establishing a fraternity is more than the end result of checking off items on a To-Do list. There is another aspect of a fraternity's identity, a spiritual dimension that was hinted at in the description of its purpose. The fraternity is to become *a genuine ecclesial community*. Canonical establishment is *an acknowledgement by the Church that a fraternity, an ecclesial community, is present.*

The requirements for developing a genuine ecclesial community are more difficult to define than listing those for documentation and approval, but they are obviously key. In some ways, you can think of the process as analogous to the way you'd go about acquiring any new skill: you'd watch someone, you'd try it out, you'd get some coaching, and you'd practice what you learned. So to assist you, a sponsoring fraternity will be assigned to mentor you, answer your questions, and serve as a model of fraternity life. In addition, we list here some general attitudes that are helpful to keep in mind.

❖ ***Make building community your priority.*** A fraternity doesn't just happen automatically, without significant effort on the part of its members. It needs to be worked at for it to become a reality. Resolve that your commitment to your Secular Franciscan vocation and to the fraternity will take precedence over your involvement in other organizations, including those of the parish.

❖ ***Cultivate a sense of co-responsibility within the fraternity.*** Unlike other organizations where responsibility for the well-being of the group is held by a small number of members, in a fraternity all members share responsibility for the life of the fraternity. "The sense of co-responsibility of the members requires personal presence, witness, prayer and active collaboration, in accordance with each one's means and possible obligations for the animation of the Fraternity." (GC 30.2)

❖ ***Acknowledge that community takes time to develop.*** Look for opportunities to work together, visit together, pray together, study together and have fun together. Don't limit yourselves to the monthly fraternity gathering, but find ways to interact with fellow Franciscans throughout the month.

❖ ***Appreciate differences.*** Fraternal unity does not imply uniformity. Our differences add to the richness of life and bring a wide variety of gifts and talents to the fraternity. They are a positive advantage and should not be allowed to become

the cause of dissension. Which of us can be complete without his brothers and sisters?

❖ ***Beware of being judgmental.*** Being judgmental is one of the easiest ways to poison the spirit of the fraternity. "Blessed is the person that puts up with the frailty of his neighbor to the extent he would like his neighbor to put up with him if he were in a similar plight." (Admonition XVIII*)

❖ ***Practice forgiveness.*** "...I wish to know in this way if you love the Lord and me, His servant and yours: that there is not any brother in the world who has sinned—however much he could have sinned—who, after he has looked into your eyes, would ever depart without your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not looking for mercy, you would ask him if he wants mercy. And if he would sin a thousand times before your eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him to the Lord..." (Letter to a Minister*). Even in our fraternities, we will have many opportunities to apply this advice.

And finally, and most important:

❖ ***Follow St. Francis' advice*** to his brothers. "Pursue what you should desire above all else, namely, to have the Spirit of God and God's grace working in you..." (cf. Earlier Rule XVII*). When you come right down to it, all the attitudes and techniques in the world are insufficient to form a genuine ecclesial community. The Holy Spirit is the one who breathes life into your fraternity, who molds you and brings you together as one.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you know about the history of your local fraternity? When was it established? By whom?
2. If a non-Catholic friend asked you what a fraternity is, what would you tell them? How would you explain "ecclesial community"?
3. What is the significance of having a "juridical personality"?
4. The "general attitudes" for fraternity building do not apply exclusively to the early stages of fraternity life. How do you see them being applied in your own fraternity? Which one(s) do you consider most important?
5. What are several ways you personally can exercise co-responsibility?

**Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, Vol. I, The Saint*, New City Press, 1999.