

State of the Order

National Minister, Jan Parker OFS

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

A little over a year ago, my daughter and I stopped at the “Little Church”, one of my favorite places of prayer. We prayed together before heading to the hospital for my surgery that day. It’s been quite a year since then, with many months of chemo.



I am so thankful for the love, support, and prayers of my Franciscan family during this past year, and ultimately, I thank God for what many see as a miracle, because today I’m cancer free.

Of course, there was great relief when I heard this news, but along with the joy, I also find myself nervous and anxious. I can’t help but wonder, “*Is the cancer gone for good? Could I go through all that again?*”

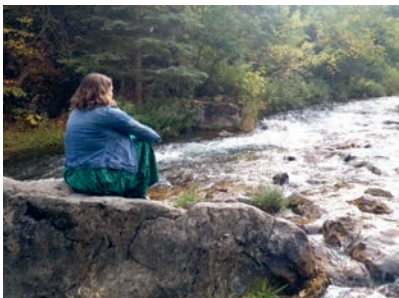
Other cancer survivors have told me how they too, experience a kind of post-traumatic stress.

I reflect on all this because I am far from alone in having had to face trials this past year. As I prepared for this talk, it occurred to me that ***the State of our Order depends to a great deal on the state of each of us.***

We have all been through a lot. Health issues, isolation, job losses, and drastic changes in our lives, not to mention natural disasters, political divides, and social unrest.

This pandemic has affected each of us, and it has affected our Order as well. As fraternities have struggled to meet these challenges, servant leaders are on overload. Many councils were asked to serve longer terms. There’s a lot on our plates. Sometimes I wonder - I got through cancer, but can I make it another year as National Minister? I’m sure many of you have had those days, too, when you’ve asked yourself, “Can I keep going?”

So, what do we do when fears and worries surround us? We continue to pray. And we listen for God’s voice.



One morning last week, when those fears and worries were haunting me, I tuned in to our local Christian radio station. As I did, they announced it was time for “A Minute in the Word.”

My ears perked up when I heard this message from Sandi, one of the radio hosts who often gives this little reflection on Scripture. Here’s what she said:

“*Do you know who you are?*” (That’s when my ears really perked up.) She continued: “*Several years ago, in counseling, I was asked to consider my identity. Who am I, really?*”



It was thought-provoking and good for my soul... Do you know who you are?"

She then shared this Scripture:



“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart...” (Jeremiah 1:5)

She continued: *It is both sobering and life-giving to realize that we are known by God. Fully known. Fully loved. When you know who you are, as God’s beloved child, it changes everything. You not only understand yourself better, but you can more fully embrace the love of your Father.”*

This message resounded in my heart. I truly am a beloved child of God, and my Father is there for me. God will help me do what I need to do. All will be well.

As if I needed further confirmation, my eyes were drawn upwards to a plaque that hangs in my kitchen – it says, “The Lord Your God Loves You.”

I found the encouragement I needed that morning, and *I was filled with hope.*



Hope is energizing. One of my favorite verses about hope is from Romans 5:5, which begins with the phrase: ***“And hope does not disappoint...”*** Thinking about this promise brings joy to my heart! The rest of the verse gives me the reason for my joy: ***“because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”***



Artwork by Kirsten Malcolm Berry,
www.KirstenMalcolmBerry.com
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This beautiful image of God’s love being poured out is displayed in Mary Bittner’s home. The quote that encircles the image is in Greek, and is part of that same verse from Romans 5:5 - “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

This is a beautiful reality, and it certainly describes how I feel about the state of our Order. God’s love for us, as a National Fraternity truly has been poured out. God’s love continues to pour upon us, and the Holy Spirit is at work within us.

This pandemic has not slowed us down. Despite the year that we have had, and even though once again at this Chapter we are together only virtually, ***we have not been***

disappointed. We continued to ***“live a life worthy of our call”*** and, thanks to the Holy Spirit, we have accomplished more than we could have ever imagined.





One of the many gifts that has been poured out upon us this past year is the gift of **prophetic creativity**.

We were first introduced to the topic of prophetic creativity in the Instrumentum Laboris for the 2021 General Chapter, “Animate and Guide with Servant Leadership”. Not only has this been a great topic of conversation, but we have also experienced **prophetic creativity in action** this past year.

One example of that creativity is the technology that we are using right now. The ability for us to meet virtually has broadened our reach, allowing us to come together more often and in greater numbers. Numerous virtual gatherings have been held across our National Fraternity – some quarterly, many monthly and some even weekly. Certain of these were regular meetings of the NEC, as well as meetings of our three Commissions and our many Committees, but ideas for different kinds of virtual gatherings evolved.

Our Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission (JPIC) met in focus groups with four different areas of interest – immigration, care for creation, spirituality and JPIC, and mindful dialogue. Virtual formation gatherings were numerous. There were formation workshops nationally as well as regionally, including one with Ohana ‘O Ke Anuenue Region in Hawaii. Weekly Formation Friday discussion groups sprang up in response to the Formation Commission’s wonderful “Formation Friday” offerings. Formation with Spanish-speaking formators continued with quarterly virtual gatherings. (How wonderful it would be to expand this idea and gather our Korean-speaking formators as well.) Our Franciscan Youth and Young Adult Commission offered weekly training sessions for YouFra animators, continuing to build on the enthusiasm for outreach to youth. Our three national councilors met regularly with their “councilor groups” of Regional Ministers, and Regional Ministers took the lead by gathering in Geo Groups as well.

All these gatherings resulted in fruitful discussions, Franciscan enrichment, and the building of relationships.



There was great creativity and fruitfulness!

As time went on new ideas sprang up. The NEC began to schedule virtual gatherings with newly elected Regional Council members. What a blessing this was for us to meet these newly elected Regional leaders! We could feel their energy, and see their enthusiasm and their willingness to serve. What a blessing to be able to interact with these new OFS leaders who we may not have otherwise had a chance to meet. These meetings filled me with hope. Those who serve on Regional Councils may well someday bring their gifts and leadership abilities to the National Level.

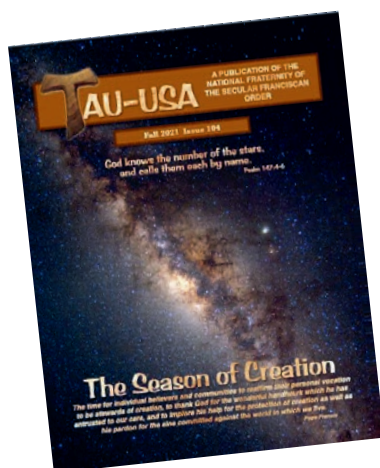
With no obstacles to being able to attend a gathering, our Commissions and Committees flourished. Members were fully engaged, and much work was accomplished. There were weekly meetings of various working groups who made progress on such projects as the revision of the Spiritual Assistant Handbook and the transition to our new Database. The Formation Visioning team met for many weeks in 2021, continuing their work on the new formation texts. Our Website team, now seven in number, met weekly for training and to share ideas that have greatly improved our national website.

I am particularly excited about two new groups that have formed this past year. One is a regional Diversity Group, and the other is our national Accessibility Committee. Each of these have been featured in TAU-USA articles. It would be wonderful to see similar groups developed in every region.

There have been opportunities to meet with the wider Franciscan family as well. Our Ecumenical Interfaith Committee joined with our Franciscan siblings from other congregations and faith traditions for gatherings of the Joint Committee on Franciscan Unity. Our Franciscan Family Forum brings together friars, sisters, and OFS members at a monthly virtual gathering place. The Franciscan Action Network (FAN) coordinates “Justice Circles.” Many OFS members are part of these local grassroots communities. Inspired by the Franciscan charism, these groups come together to advocate for social and environmental justice. By the way, we are excited that FAN’s new executive director, Michele Dunne, is a Secular Franciscan. Michele has an impressive background in peace and justice work on an international scale. I look forward to visiting with her soon.

Speaking of the wider Franciscan family, this past summer the Franciscan family came together for an international webinar on Laudato Si. Our International OFS Council (CIOFS) asked our JPIC commission to produce a video for this webinar, and our multicultural councilor ensured that this video, like so many of our other materials, was translated and made available in Spanish.

Our National Fraternity also participated this year in a groundbreaking virtual conference hosted by the Franciscan Federation. The Federation is undergoing a transformation, adapting to the signs of the times and leading the way for a “*Franciscan renaissance*.” The wider Franciscan family is involved in this renewal and our National Fraternity has participated in ongoing Federation sponsored events to help bring this about. This conference opened our eyes to how God is calling all Franciscans to *work together*, and together we will continue to rebuild the Church and the world.



Has there been anything that’s not been virtual? Of course!

We have the TAU-USA, which is very real, and delivered right to your mailbox – a treasure trove of inspiration, ongoing formation, and news. It’s great to have a hard copy to refer to, or to pass on to someone to spur interest in the Order, although current and past issues are always available on our website.

But something else that is VERY real in our National Fraternity is our love for God and each other. This is seen in our prayer together, in the building of relationships, the increase in co-responsibility, the work and sacrifices made on behalf of the Order, the learning and growing through ongoing formation, and all the ways we are living the Gospel.

Much has been accomplished this past year through virtual gatherings, but technology can never measure up to the experience of real presence - being physically present to each other – and I can’t wait for the day when we can be together.

Physical presence enriches our prayer, our formation, our growth, our work. When we are present to each other we can more easily interact; we can make better connections; we can have those conversations that are so vital to fraternal life; and we can more easily grow in our understanding of each other.



But even now in our virtual circumstances, God is helping us in many ways to build fraternity. We just need to be open to the virtue of patience, and ask for the grace to persevere. We need to be compassionate and understanding. We need to be ready to forgive each other instead of assuming the worst. We need to be ***messengers of joy and hope*** in whatever current circumstance we find ourselves.

Certainly, this past year, hope did not disappoint.

So, ***where do we go from here?***

Let us hark back to something we talked about earlier.

Our identity.

Knowing who we are not only gives us hope – it gives us direction.

I'm reminded of what Tibor said four years ago in his Pentecost letter:

“We must have a clear vision about our identity. It is much more important to have a very clear knowledge of who we are, than to know what we are to do. Our identity is whom God wants us to see. Without knowing who we are we will never know what we should do, and will make lots of mistakes, even if we have a good intention.”

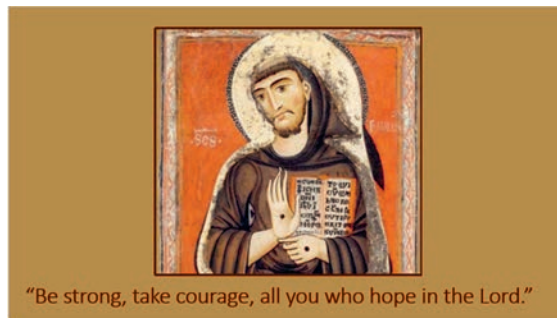


The prophetic creativity that has begun ***continues the trajectory*** that I spoke of last year and the year before. The work that began with the first visioning on Youth in 2017, followed by the visioning for Formation and JPIC, will continue to flourish. We have some big projects before us – the completion of our new formation materials and the revision of our National Statutes. These will come. The vision will have its time.

We will look forward to what God will do next...



AND -- we can look forward to the biggest celebration of 2022 -- our Quinquennial Congress! It will truly be a Franciscan Jubilee! What a way to celebrate all that God has done!



And God willing, we will be together!

We have God, and we have our Franciscan Charism, and we have each other.

For all that has been, we give praise and thanks!

For all that is yet to come, I say,

“Be strong, and take courage, all you who hope in the Lord.”

Many thanks to National Vice-Minister, Mary Bittner, for her help with this report. Many thanks also to the entire National Executive Council and our Commission Chairs who have all worked very hard this past year. We are a great team, and it is so true that “Teamwork makes the Dream Work”. I am very thankful for each of them.