



NATIONAL FORMATION COMMISSION

Formation as the invitation to transformation!

by Bob Fitzsimmons, OFS, National Formation Chair

What's in a name? As you might be aware, the FUN project as you now know it was just the beginning of revising the formation process and will hopefully lead us into the next step.

For Up to Now, as well as the rest of our past and current formation materials, which by the way I think are quite good, can only take us so far. That point is to introduce us to the Franciscan Spirit, Charism and Legacy. After our months of formation, when we have finally “arrived,” we are essentially Franciscan functionaries — a good first step, but totally inadequate to infuse our fraternities, our Church, and our world with the love expressed in Sacred Scripture, or the unfathomable love experienced in the Holy Eucharist.

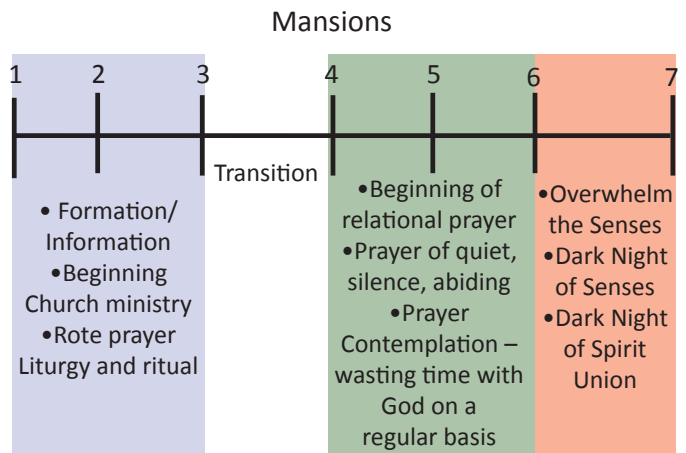
Yes you heard me right – functionaries! Our formation was and is always designed with one task in mind, the ultimate transformation of the person into the *alter Christus*. This is no less than the goal and legacy of Francis’ own life journey. To settle for less completely waters down the power of our Charism.

Long ago when I wrote my first article for the *TAU-USA*, I mentioned that as Christians our current formation or catechesis does not take us much beyond information that helps us become functional parishioners and disciples and, in our case, Franciscans.

If we relate this to, say, the *Interior Castle* of Teresa of Avila, or even look at the spiritual timeline for Francis (see the *FUN Manual*) we might begin to realize that the majority of our formation is of the informational kind. Let’s take a visual look at what I am speaking about using St. Teresa’s Seven Mansions from *Interior Castle*.

Granted, this is a very brief view, and we will flow back and forth between and among various mansions at different times, but we will ultimately settle in the one that supports our

comfort zone and perhaps stall our movement into relationship with God as full Trinity.



Movement into the unknown is much like a child’s testing of something new; we might stick a big toe in and when discomfort sets in, quickly withdraw to a known and safer place. Spirituality is no different, except we are being invited deeper into relationship with our God, the Gracious Mystery! But the experience is new and unknown and perhaps a bit scary, since it is always beyond our control.

Stop for a moment and ask yourself: Where do you think Francis’ legacy calls us to be?

Using the above illustration of the *Interior Castle*, the first three Mansions acknowledge (as adults) our desire to know and follow Christ, to realize that Jesus is the Beloved Son of God, who is our Lord, teacher and redeemer. In Jesus, we come to see the depth of the Father’s love and the extreme resistance to that love of the world we live in. In the early stages, we generally become very active in our Church communities and ministries, our fraternities and Order, though mostly in outward expressions We might be filled with zeal, as it was with early Brother Francis in his church rebuilding phase. We cannot, however, rest here for long, because in this place we are grounded in information, but experiences beckon.

The fourth Mansion reflects our desire to deepen our intimacy with God and becomes the

transition from information (formation), external expressions, group prayer, Scripture Study and liturgy — all those places where we first and most easily found God, into an ever deepening intimate and internal relationship. We begin to seek God hiding within and begin to long for more intimacy with Him. Our ministry and prayer expands even more as we grasp the reality of God's desire and love for us and we seek to become more fully conformed to Jesus and to do what he did.

The last three Mansions begin the approach to union with God, to transformation of ourselves into other Christs (like Francis, we seek to be *alter Christus*), in order to be loved and to fully love.

Prayer generally is no longer expressed in words; we have arrived at the place where our hearts and God's heart are known to both and freely given; we have arrived at what many call abiding prayer, the prayer of quiet. **I like the prayer of intimate presence.** Words are not needed, because resting in each other we are fully known, accepted and fully loved.

Here, God our Father finishes our purification and draws us the remaining way to Himself. Yes this last part of the journey (read Francis' life and be attentive to his trials) is painful. John of the Cross gave us some guides, signs along the way (*Ascent of Mt Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*), to keep us going, especially during the necessary trials. God is with us — He is just cleaning out the old baggage so he has room to move in us.

This is what formation must truly be about, and I hope may be the next phase in the FUN follow up, so we can help our brothers and sisters to become wise and loving spiritual guides for us.

For several years, I have tried to present a God who madly desires us, who names us His beloved, who wants to be embraced as our bridegroom — we must also desire Him in a mutual embrace.

Our formation, as information, begins to equip us for this journey, but like our Blessed Mother, it takes our YES. Our yes moves us beyond being a

functional Franciscan, one who understands, to a Franciscan in love, one who has become.

I can recall speaking to a person seeking to be closer to God by trying the Franciscan way— a brilliant person who when asked could tell me facts on some of the Franciscan saints that I never knew, yet with all of the knowledge at his fingertips, could share nothing of the insights they give us on the nature of God's love and desire. I fear too many of us fall into that category; we know the facts but don't experience the relationship! We just have not yet fallen in love with love. This was perhaps Francis' greatest lament, even for his own family. **“Love is not Loved.”**

Sure we are busy, with lives full of busyness, and we generally hide ourselves from God's love, using life as our excuse. Of course, we do like to trot God out when we need or want something, but then once we ask, we conveniently put God back into our little boxes and once again allow life (busyness) to block our way.

When we professed, we all said the words of self-consecration. We were no longer our own, but as an oblation, (yes just like the Eucharist) we offered ourselves first to God, for His use and asked that we be transformed, just like the bread and wine into the Christ. There, we publicly declared that our first love was for God and we would spend our lives entering more deeply into His love (which, by the way, empowers us to love spouses, families, the Church, the world, all creation ever more deeply and unselfishly).

Like Francis, we need to learn how to abide in God, to rest in the silence of the cave of our hearts, and yes, we need to learn how to shut up and be still, turn off our words and open our beings to let God be God., After all, as I said earlier, it's God's desire to be our lover and to embrace us as his Beloved!

Be brave dear sisters and brothers and enter the Gracious Mystery, unfathomable love awaits!

Pace e bene,
Bob