

FRANCISCAN LIVING

A Family Reunion

By Francine Gikow, SFO, Staff Editor

“Why Francis? Claim the Gift!” with this motto, the Eighteenth Quinquennial Congress of the Secular Franciscan Order of the United States began! And oh, what a gathering it was!

Over 600 Secular Franciscans from all parts of the United States invaded the Skokie, Illinois Holiday Inn (and I do mean *invaded*, since the hotel did not know what hit it!)

Deacon Tom Bello, our national Minister, set the tone by saying: “My first prayer is that everybody knows we are family. There are no strangers here. We’re all brothers and sisters.”

This love among the brothers and sisters was so evident in the spirit of the congress: people greeting one another like long lost friends with hugs and tears (in *reality* as brother or sister), making jokes, sharing meals, sharing difficulties, being together! We prayed for each other. We rejoiced with each other. We grieved with each other.

Ilia Delio, OSF, our keynote speaker, stated that our Order is an *Order of Relationships*. “Franciscan life is a moving out- a fountain fullness of love. We find that our engagement with others is an engagement with God.” Presenter Ed Shirley described our life, “Like the Trinity: there are three phases of Franciscan life, all mentioned in the Rule, that have a dynamic relationship, a flowing back and forth – prayer, transformation/vision, then apostolic action. *Prayer* leads to *transformation*, where we begin to see the world as pregnant with Christ, which leads to *apostolic action* and in turn leads more deeply into a *transforming vision*. And seeing the world “shining with the Trinity and incarnating Christ, we are struck with awe and wonder. This in turn, leads to deeper *prayer*.”

Do you see God in your fraternity brothers and sisters? Can you envision this dynamic relationship between prayer, transformation/vision leading to apostolic action in your life and in your fraternity? I did at the “Q”! The small discussion groups, or what we called our “Q”

fraternities, were where we shared our thoughts and hopes for the Order. They became for us a visible sign of Christ’s love for each one of us, which we in turn, shared with one another. God enfleshed in a human became real! This is where we found God!

A spirit of “family” was very much in evidence in the “Q fraternities!” We prayed as brothers and sisters, were transformed with a new vision, and considered action as we sought to determine a path for the future. We were united in God for a common purpose.

Sr. Ilia stated that the word “world” is WORD with Love in it (W-O-R-L-D)! This love makes our order different. It is the main orientation of our brothers and sisters as Franciscans. We are people who love. We are not specialists in apologetics, nor are we specialists in preaching, nor in any specific apostolate. In fact, we are not specialists in anything but generalists in living out our brotherhood/sisterhood in love; our life based upon the evangelical life that Jesus lived with his apostles. We are evangelists, living the life of overflowing God’s love in each other and ourselves. Our Franciscan tradition could, in fact, be described as “Christian humanism,” in the best sense of the word because we see the human person as sacrament. We seek out the living face of God in our relationships with each other. As Sr. Ilia said, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive!”

However, the love we experienced in the “Q” fraternities was not the only place where we experienced the love of brothers and sisters. Our General Minister, Encarnación del Pozo, OFS, (called with affection in the familiar form, Encarnita) spoke about the “Q” and the international family of Secular Franciscans: “you have (Secular Franciscan) brothers and sisters in 113 countries’ and “His [God’s] love for us should turn into love for Him and for one another.” “Who are we?” she asked. “We are for God. We are for Church. We are for society. We are for one another!”