

FRATERNITY LIFE

FRATERNITY: OUR SECULAR FRANCISCAN WITNESS

by Mary Bittner, OFS

Consider the following question, suggested as part of a recent discussion on synodality:

- What could be the *best contribution* we, as *Secular Franciscans*, can make to the life of the Catholic Church?

You might want to keep in mind that our Franciscan charism is a gift that is meant to be shared with the wider Church.

Got your answer? Here's what Pope St. John Paul II had to say in 2002:

“The Church expects from you, Secular Franciscans, a courageous and consistent testimony of Christian and Franciscan life, leaning towards the construction of a more fraternal and gospel world for the realization of the Kingdom of God.

You are called on to give your own contribution, inspired by the person and message of St. Francis of Assisi, in speeding up the advent of a civilization in which the dignity of the human person, co-responsibility and love will be a living reality (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes* 31). You must deepen the true foundations of the worldwide Fraternity and create everywhere the spirit of welcome and the atmosphere of brotherliness. Commit yourselves firmly against all forms of exploitation, discrimination and marginalization, and against all attitudes of indifference towards others.

You Secular Franciscans, by vocation, live belonging to the Church and to society as inseparable realities. Therefore, you are asked, above all else, to bear personal witness before all in the environment in which you live: ...in your associations with all men and women, brothers and sisters of the same Father; in your presence and participation in the life of society; in your fraternal relationships with all creatures.”¹

You can probably see where the Pope's call for fraternity was coming from. The “spirit of welcome and atmosphere of brotherliness” he cited 20¹ years ago is even more sorely lacking in society today. Instead we see polarization, politically and even within the Church. “Brotherliness” is apparently irrelevant.

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“Our society is very unchristian in this matter of brotherliness. We often condemn our society as being unchristian because of immodesty or sexual license, but it is equally unchristian because it has no place for brotherliness in public affairs. Public life is a matter of rights and duties, and society saves itself from collapse by balancing them. But if anyone should suggest that we must think of the needs of others and give up our rights in order to serve them, he would be laughed out of court. Yet this is the actual Gospel challenge. When we view our relationship with another from the angle of his duties and our rights, we actually move away from the Gospel spirit.”²

I think Pope St. John Paul II would agree.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is our public life simply a matter of rights and duties? Should it be?
2. Is thinking of the needs of others and giving up our rights to serve them the actual Gospel challenge, or part of it? What would happen if we began to do that publicly? How might people respond? Are you willing to try it?
3. Which articles of our Rule address *fraternity* in the sense of brotherliness?
4. This article has highlighted *fraternity* as something the OFS has to offer the Church. There are certainly other possibilities. What elements of the Franciscan charism would *you* choose?

¹ Address to the 10th General Chapter of the OFS 2002

² Finbarr Connolly, C.S.S.R. *God and Man in Modern Spirituality* (Christian Classics, Inc., Westminster, MD 1984)