

FRANCISCAN LIVING

VALUING OUR HOME

By Francine Gikow, OFS

I entered the room and I immediately felt different! It was as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders! I relaxed — for I WAS HOME!

The old saying: “Home is where the heart is” surely applied! It is a place where we are known for who we are and not for what we do. It is where we can be ourselves surrounded by love and support. A true home emanates joy, hope, peace, reverence and motherhood, fatherhood, brotherhood and sisterhood!

There was a lot of laughter in that room, a sharing of ideas and thoughts, respect, and communal prayer! Even though there were deep differences of opinion, there was a deep mutual respect, listening with the heart and compassion. Each one of us felt valued and loved! It was home!

Our temporary home was a room that enclosed the 2016 National Chapter, where Regional Ministers, our National Council, National Spiritual Assistants, and our International brother and sister, touched us with their wisdom, support, and love. It was our “home,” where we ate, drank, addressed “hard” subjects and “became.” As the National Formation Commission emphasized, it was a place of belonging, a place to love and be loved, and a place to go out to love others.

Fraternity can be a miraculous thing at the national and international level! But it is especially miraculous at the local level where most of us live out our Secular Franciscan vocation. We can easily take what we have for granted in our local fraternity. It seems that after years of living in fraternity, all we see are its faults. Sometimes it takes the enthusiasm of a new vocation to remind us of what we have. In fact, when I receive feedback from a new vocation about what drew them into the Order, they tell me it was often a feeling of joy that they felt when they visited the fraternity for the first time. Oh, how I lose sight of this *anima* and joy of a fraternity and often take it for granted!

We refer to a fraternity as a “living” community, and indeed it is! It lives by the energy and commitment of its various members’ personalities, spiritualities, apostolates, and gifts. When one new member is added, the personality of the fraternity is forever changed. It becomes different, and we, as members, become different as a result. Never underestimate the effect of your fraternity on your life! A good fraternity challenges us to become the person God wants us to be. It changes us, hopefully for the better, as we learn to live in relationship — a relationship not just with

each other but a reflection of the relationship of our triune God to others.

Yes, fraternity life is a powerful thing! In hindsight after 32 years of professed life, the importance of fraternity is finally sinking in! I have been changed. I have been softened. I have grown in humility. I have been forced to identify my faults, which I had heretofore not recognized or had refused to examine.

A good fraternity is able to bring forth from its members their unique gifts. Many times, it can recognize a gift, even when a member does not. We learn to trust their faith in us — especially when it comes to accepting nomination to an office of the Council.

A good fraternity challenges us, too. It can make us accountable if we are fooling ourselves by making excuses for not coming to the meetings. If we are not fully honest, they can call us on it. If we put our own needs, agendas, or interests, before others’, the fraternity nudges us to conversion. It is through this dialog in fraternity that we learn about our relationships and ourselves with God and each other.

In addition, a good fraternity supports us when we are undergoing crises of faith or health issues. Having the wisdom and knowledge of our elders in fraternity available to us is a great resource for us to tap into when we are experiencing “dark nights” or spiritual crises. Unfortunately, I have seen numerous times when a person in crisis keeps to him or herself and does not reach out to others who might have the experience and wisdom to assist.

On the other hand, fraternity is not always about such “heavy” issues! It is also about shared experiences in serving others, laughter about a good joke or shared companionship. It is joy in our relationship with others.

All this takes time... a lifetime in fact! But isn’t that we signed up for? We have committed ourselves to *this* fraternity for a lifetime (if we don’t move). We have committed ourselves not only to Christ in the way of St. Francis, but also to each other! We have committed to live in relationship, and through these relationships we learn lessons about what love really is! It is not just a poem written on a greeting card or a nice feeling. It is something more than that! It is the beautiful concrete living out of our vocation for Him, with Him, and in Him through others. By being ourselves, we make God available for others.