



FORMATION COMMISSION

by Anne Mulqueen OFS
Spiritual Assistant, National Formation Commission

This issue of *TAU-USA* is dedicated to our most recent National Chapter—the first of its kind to be conducted virtually. May God grant that this is the first and the last virtual chapter we will ever have to experience.

We are familiar with the line from William Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet says to Romeo, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Adapting Juliet’s line I say, “A chapter by any other name would be called a meeting.” But what kind of a meeting? It is not simply a regularly scheduled meeting. A chapter is a special time of gathering.

The word chapter originally came to us from the Benedictines in around the 12th or 13th century. When the monks gathered, they would read and meditate on a chapter of their rule; hence the gathering took on the name *chapter*. Apparently, St. Francis was familiar with the term and used it.

What exactly is a chapter? What is involved when we call the membership to gather for a *religious* chapter? You might think this is an unusual topic for a formation article, and you would be correct. It is an unusual topic. However, I believe one of the objectives of formation is to help us understand why we do what we do. As agents of formation, we **assist** by feeding the mind as well as the soul of a person.

Basically, a canonical, *ordinary* chapter is a gathering of members who have the authority to govern a religious organization that meets at regular intervals. This governing body makes decisions and sets direction, bearing in mind the official guiding documents.

In the United States, there we are most familiar with two types of chapters: the annual national and regional chapter and the triennial elective chapter. If unusual circumstances were to occur that required convening the National or Regional

Fraternity, it would be considered an *extraordinary* chapter.

The International Fraternity (CIOFS) calls a *general* chapter every three years and gathers representatives from the entire Secular Franciscan Order throughout the world. The general chapter is a sign of our worldwide unity. CIOFS meets in elective chapter every six years.

Periodically, St. Francis called his brothers back to enjoy fraternity and to share their experiences on the road. He called these gatherings *chapters of mats*. While the brothers were still small enough in number to gather in one place, all the brothers came to the chapter of mats. Our Quinquennial celebrations are modern-day chapters of mats. All Secular Franciscans are called, and all are welcome.

Finally, since a chapter is a type of meeting, it is not necessary to refer to it as a “chapter *meeting*.” Using the word **chapter** is sufficient.

Now let’s move from the head, our intellectual understanding of chapter, to the heart, our formative, affective understanding of chapter.

Whenever Franciscans gather, they form fraternity. As an example, when the regional ministers and the national executive council come together, they form the National Fraternity Council. The same ideals and components of a healthy, vibrant fraternity apply to chapters. Therefore, much of what I write in this portion about chapters also applies to your local fraternity gatherings and council meetings.

Is governance, or business, a chapter’s primary focus? I don’t think so, but you may disagree. Yes, there is an agenda with many issues that must be discussed and voted on; issues that will affect Secular Franciscans not in attendance. However, I believe the governing body has an obligation that takes precedence over issues and votes. Their

first obligation is to come together in prayer to discern the will of God for the Order and the people they represent. Only by turning first to God for direction can they hope for the oneness of heart and mind to accomplish the tasks set before them.

Therefore, it naturally follows that every day of the chapter must be saturated in prayer; prayer in common and private prayer. Quoting our former National Minister and brother Tom Bello, “Leadership should never sacrifice the spiritual to business,” to which I add, prayer is our connection to God, and it is the Almighty who actually calls us together and blesses our work.

Just as every fraternity gathering should engage in ongoing formation, so too every chapter should allot time for ongoing formation.

Sometimes I think we use terms such as ongoing formation so often that we become *immunized* as to what the terms really mean. If ongoing formation is necessary, and we all believe it is, that means we are not yet fully formed. And if we are not yet the person we want to give back to God, that means ongoing formation is crucial. And if ongoing formation is that important, it must be a part of every Secular Franciscan gathering.

Have you ever noticed that during a discussion after a presentation, not everyone will comment on the same thing? People hear what they need to hear. That is the movement of the Holy Spirit, meeting the unique needs of each person. And that is what ongoing formation is meant to accomplish. And so it follows that we must be attentive and involved in our own ongoing formation.

Finally, not all ongoing formation occurs during its designated timeframe. God uses countless encounters and experiences to form us. These *aha* moments are the reward of being open to the Spirit.

All chapters set aside time for social and fraternal interaction. From the very first time I attended a gathering larger than my local fraternity, I wished every Secular Franciscan could have my experience. I was a newly elected local formation director, and I was attending the first National Formation Commission workshop. Some of you may remember that Commission led by Donna Marie Kaminsky, OFS. It was the first time I met Fr. Steve Gross, OFM Conv. My eyes were opened. It wasn't the information shared that changed everything for me. It was the people I met; people just like me who were doing extraordinary things, and I knew I would never be the same. My vocation took on a new and deeper meaning.

I believe God wants that for all of us. God wants us to enjoy the life He gave us. God wants us to laugh and find joy in life. Social times enhance our sense of belonging. The human part of us needs to feel connected to others. Social times strengthen that connection and increase our own commitment. Gatherings larger than our local fraternities allow us to meet people we would normally never meet and develop lifelong fraternal connections.

We will have an opportunity to enter into and experience all of this at the forthcoming *Quinquennial Chapter of Mats* in 2022! And I promise you, there will be a minimum of business, if any. See you there.



Forming a
Coast-to-Coast
Franciscan
Province

The six OFM provincial ministers, meeting via Zoom to discuss the formation of a new coast-to-coast OFM province in the United States, took time out to share their thoughts about the incident at the National Capital with their brothers, and the rest of the Franciscan Family. The following is an excerpt from their letter.

As friars, we pledge to work with all who promote human dignity, the common good, and peaceful and respectful dialogue. We reject violence as a means to achieve a desired end and want to promote non-violent means to restore justice. We will pray for all our government officials, especially, President-elect Biden, that they will work together to heal the wounds within our country.