

National Executive Council of the Secular Franciscan Order – USA
September 24, 2017

National Executive Council Recommendation on
OFS-USA Membership in the Franciscan Action Network

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
May the peace of Christ be with you!

Over the course of the past year we have given serious attention to the particular concerns that have been brought to our attention regarding the Franciscan Action Network (FAN). We have spent a considerable amount of time communicating with those OFS members who express strong objection to our Order's membership in FAN. We listened to their concerns and engaged in dialogue.

During this year we have also built a stronger relationship with the FAN Board of Directors and Staff members. On May 13, 2017, some National Executive Council (NEC) members met with a group of the FAN Board and Staff. Subsequently, in July, three of us met again with Sr. Margaret Magee OSF, President of FAN and Chair of the Board of Directors, and enjoyed her presence with us at St. Bonaventure University for the OFS Conference. During this conference many OFS members at large also met and visited with Sr. Margaret. It has been a blessing for us to become more acquainted with those who are the hands, hearts and voices of FAN.

Now, with heartfelt conviction for the good of the wider Secular Franciscan Order, and in service to the National Fraternity Council, we offer the following report on our work this past year in regards to FAN - a report inspired by frequent reflection on Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, particularly the Beatitudes.

Regrettably, given the level of misinformation that has circulated, we must begin this report with some *very basic facts* about the Franciscan Action Network. After this overview of FAN, we reflect next on the vision of the Secular Franciscan Order - and how we live out that vision. Lastly we share our recommendations for the OFS-USA regarding our membership in FAN.

The Franciscan Action Network is Franciscan

FAN is decidedly Franciscan. FAN developed as a result of a desire and a challenge both by Franciscans International and representatives of each of the six branches of the Franciscan family in Rome. These Franciscan leaders called for the six branches of the Franciscan family to come together and create a unified Franciscan voice in Washington D.C. This was the creation of FAN, and from its beginnings the organization has embarked on that mission. They continue to bring the Gospel to life under the direction of its Board of Directors who are members of the various branches of the Franciscan Order, along with the support and endorsement of numerous congregations of Franciscans.¹ FAN is Franciscan in its history and vision².

¹ See FAN's website for biographies of the Board of Directors and a list of FAN's institutional members.

² See FAN's website for their mission and vision statements.

The Franciscan Action Network is Catholic in its Mission

FAN is decidedly Catholic in its mission to advocate and educate. FAN follows the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church as outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. FAN's stated areas of its mission - peacemaking, care for creation, poverty, and human rights – *align perfectly* with “Safeguarding Peace” #2302-2317; “Respect for Integrity of Creation” #2415-2418; “The Social Doctrine of the Church” #2419-2425; “Economic Activity and Social Justice” #2426-2436; “Justice and Solidarity Among Nations” #2437-2442; “Love for the Poor” #2443-2449; “*preferential love for the poor*” #2448; “Respect for Human Life” and “Dignity of Persons” #2259-2301.

The Franciscan Action Network is Catholic in its Collaborations

FAN is decidedly Catholic in its Collaborations. FAN welcomes and includes Franciscans of other Christian denominations, those of other faith traditions and all people of good will³ in its work. In doing so, FAN follows the directives of the Catholic Church to work *with all, without exception*.

“In these days when cooperation in social matters is so widespread, all men without exception are called to work together, with much greater reason all those who believe in God, but most of all, all Christians in that they bear the name of Christ.”⁴

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reiterates our call to work together, and points the way:

“Certain things are required in order to respond adequately to this call (toward unity): renewal... conversion... prayer in common... fraternal knowledge... ecumenical formation... dialogue... and collaboration among Christians in various areas of service to mankind. ‘Human service’ is the idiomatic phrase.”⁵

And in FAN's own words:

“FAN collaborates with various groups and faith traditions who share our vision of peace, justice, and the integrity of creation. To not do this would be un-Franciscan. Catholic Social teaching calls us to form such partnerships. It should be noted that the USCCB also forms partnerships with interfaith groups and secular groups (around issues) to arrive at a common goal, as does the Holy See at the United Nations which partners with other nation states. FAN also partners with the USCCB on a number of issues. To “go” it of our own accord or only with groups that share all of our Catholic values would be placing us in a “Catholic bubble” incapable of authentic dialogue with the rest of society. Such a position is contrary to scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, and common human decency. This would also go against the example of St. Francis who reached out to persons of other religions, social groups, etc.”

The Franciscan Action Network and Politics

To fulfill its mission of advocacy and education FAN addresses political issues, again following the teaching of the Catholic Church:

³ See OFS Rule Article 14.

⁴ Unitatis Redintegratio / Decree on Ecumenism #12. See also the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) “The Church is Catholic” #830-856 and “Toward Unity” #820-822.

⁵ CCC 821

“The Church’s obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith, a part of the mission given to us by Jesus Christ. Faith helps us see more clearly the truth about human life and dignity that we also understand through human reason. As people of both faith and reason, Catholics are called to bring truth to political life and to practice Christ’s commandment to “love one another” (John 13:34). According to Pope Benedict XVI, “charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as ‘social charity’”⁶

In addressing political issues, however, the Franciscan Action Network is *non-partisan*. In their effort towards advocacy and education FAN speaks to the Catholic perspective on Gospel issues – however they do not publicly support a political party or a political candidate running for office. This befits their status as a 501(c)3 organization.

FAN aims at transparency so when reporting about an issue they may mention a political party or a politician. We see examples of this in articles on the USCCB website, and on other Catholic websites as well. Some call this being partisan. One local OFS fraternity made the decision to send a letter to FAN objecting to this practice. The individual OFS member who volunteered to draft this letter to FAN later retracted his offer after noting similar instances in articles by his own Archbishop.

The practice of citing the name of an individual politician or referring to a particular political party is done by FAN - and others - in order to educate and communicate clearly.

The Franciscan Action Network is Catholic in its Actions and Statements

FAN is decidedly Catholic in its actions and statements. Those who hold to the belief that FAN is anti-Catholic tend to look for proof by either raising issues outside of FAN’s mission and vision; by looking at situations totally unrelated to FAN; or at the worst, believing comments on social media with no regard for the accuracy of such accusations. These comments run rampant, and rumors are spread glibly with no attempt by the instigator to first speak with our OFS leadership, or with FAN directly. The NEC has researched every instance where it has been proposed that FAN is anti-Catholic, and we found absolutely no supporting evidence.

The Franciscan Action Network and Prophetic Voice

Franciscans are prophetic in words and in actions – and FAN’s role is to be prophetic. Prophets speak a truth that is sometimes uncomfortable to hear. Strong words convey their passion. FAN is aware of the need to be thoughtful and measured in their communications; their public statements are reviewed by the Board before release. In their response to us about this issue Sr. Margaret Magee OSF stated:

“As with any organization, there may be moments when we might have worded something better, but this is the rare exception not the rule. That said, if the issue here is really about the content of what we say, then it should be remembered we represent a religious community within the church.

⁶ See the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Faithful Citizenship and “Deus Caritas Est”, no. 29

As such, Pope Francis time and again reminds religious communities of their prophetic role in the church and in society. As such we are called to live and preach the Gospel in a manner that is prophetic which makes people uncomfortable. Your Rule seems to be calling the OFS to be doing the same.”

Pope Francis speaks to this point as well:

“A religious must never give up prophecy. This does not mean opposing the hierarchical part of the church, although the prophetic function and the hierarchical structure do not coincide. I am talking about a proposal that is always positive, but it should not cause timidity. Let us think about what so many saints, monks, and religious men and women have done, from St. Anthony the Abbot onward. Being prophets may sometimes imply making waves. I do not know how to put it... Prophecy makes a noise, uproar, some say ‘a mess.’ But in reality, the charism of religious people is like yeast: prophecy announces the spirit of the gospel.”⁷

The Secular Franciscan Call to Live the Gospel

In the above sections we have noted that Franciscan Action Network is Catholic, Franciscan and a prophetic voice in the world. We cannot help but ask, are we, the Secular Franciscan Order, not also Catholic, Franciscan and prophetic? In our deliberations about FAN, or in *any* matter that comes before us, *who we are---our identity---must drive what we do*. In his June 2017 Pentecost letter to the entire Order, our Minister General Tibor Kauser stated:

“We must have a clear vision about our identity. It is much more important to have a very clear knowledge on who we are, than to know what we are to do. Our identity is whom God wants us to see. Without knowing who we are we will never know what we shall do, and will make lots of mistakes, also if with a good intention.”⁸

If we are indeed Secular Franciscans, then we must truly reflect what it means to be Catholic, to be Franciscan, and as Seculars, how to live out our call in the world. We must reflect our identity – we must “be who we are”. When Secular Franciscans are the authors of disparaging remarks and misinformation about FAN; stooping even to defamation of character and attempts to undermine their efforts, we must ask, “Is this who we are?” For the good of the Order, we must address this behavior. It is incumbent upon *all of us*, the servant leaders of the Order at every level, with the support and assistance of the wider Franciscan family, to ensure fidelity to the charism. This is what formation is all about – this is our Gospel life – and it begins with knowing our identity.

We note that our Order is not alone in experiencing such behavior; the wider Church is experiencing this as well. In an article addressing a similar situation, Bishop Robert W. McElroy names this behavior a “campaign of distortion” and states that it “must be challenged and exposed for what it is... because this cancer of vilification is seeping into the institutional life of the church.”⁹

⁷ Pope Francis, August 2013 from “A Big Heart Open to God, A Conversation with the Pope” by Antonio Spadaro, SJ

⁸ Tibor Kauser, OFS, June 4, 2017 Pentecost letter to all OFS members in the world

⁹ Bishop Robert W. McElroy, September 18, 2017 – America Magazine

It is our conviction that this type of behavior will not disappear if we discontinue our membership in FAN. Those who now question FAN will simply move on to questioning something else. In that sense, opposition to FAN is a symptom, not the disease. The issue is bigger than that. The decision before us is not a decision about our membership in FAN – it is about who we are as Gospel people.

NEC Recommendation

For the coming year, the NEC recommends continuing our institutional membership in the Franciscan Action Network, and maintaining our seat on the FAN Board of Directors. The National Fraternity Council in the U.S. will continue to seek ways to effectively bring a united Franciscan voice to public policy.

It has been suggested that we leave membership in FAN up to each individual OFS member. This would perhaps appease those who object, and in that sense it would be a convenient solution. We do not recommend this for the following reasons.

1. Two Feet of Love in Action

Some years ago the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) formulated the campaign “Two Feet of Love in Action.” As described on the USCCB web site,

“This foundational tool describes two distinct, but complementary, ways we can put the Gospel in action in response to God's love: *social justice* (addressing systemic, root causes of problems that affect many people) and *charitable works* (short-term, emergency assistance for individuals).”

We are comfortable with charity, but find it challenging to, as the U.S. bishops put it, “work to address the root causes of problems facing our communities by advocating for just public policies and helping to change the social structures that contribute to suffering and injustice at home and around the world.”

Making a distinction between social justice and charitable works finds a practical application when we consider the matter of FAN. As individuals, we’re all free to choose the ways in which we show love in action. One of us might emphasize charitable works; another might focus on structural change. Each person contributes according to their own gifts. As a body---as an Order---though, we don’t pick and choose---we need to walk with both feet. Thus, each year NAFRA, as a body, donates substantial amounts to various charities (one foot). NAFRA participates in and supports FAN, as a body, to fulfill its obligation to work for social justice (the other foot).

2. Our Membership in the Franciscan Family

The Constitutions of the OFS call us to "be in the forefront ... in the field of public life" and “collaborate as much as possible for the passage of just laws and ordinances.”¹⁰ We are called to

¹⁰ OFS General Constitutions (GC), Article 22; OFS Rule Article 15

“build the Kingdom of God in temporal situations and activities, and live our membership both in the Church and in society as an inseparable reality.”¹¹ They also urge us to “promote common initiatives or participate in them with the religious of the First, Second and Third Orders, with Secular Institutes, and with other lay ecclesial groups that recognize Francis as a model and inspiration in order to work together to spread the Gospel, remove the causes of marginalization, and serve the cause of peace.”¹²

Participating in FAN fulfills all of these functions. It expresses our identity, affords us the opportunity to partner with the other five branches of the one Franciscan family, and unites us in action.

Let us not deny our identity. Let us not fail in living the Gospel.

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.” Isaiah 58: 6-8a

¹¹ OFS GC, Article 20

¹² OFS GC, Article 98.1