



A SUMMER SEMINAR ON SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE

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and Sylvia Paoli, OFS

The **6th Summer Seminar for Secular Franciscans**, sponsored by the Institute for Contemporary Franciscan Life and Saint Francis University in Loretto, Penn., was held July 10 to 13, 2014. It focused on the topic of *Spiritual Assistance* at the special request of the National Executive Council's Spiritual Assistance Development Task Force (SADTF). More than 80 participants from 20 of our 30 regions attended the seminar to increase their understanding of spiritual assistance and the training of spiritual assistants. The Summer Seminar attempted to address the two major task force concerns. There were two separate "tracks," for the distinct issues as well as some quality time together. One track was for anyone wanting to understand Spiritual Assistance and the role of the Spiritual Assistant in all levels of fraternity. The other track was for those who wanted to know more about specific types of training programs.

Track A, referred to as "*Spiritual Assistance 101*," was led by Anne Mulqueen, OFS, and Fr. Kevin Queally, TOR.

They were asked to present an overview of spiritual assistance to participants who were not currently in spiritual assistant training programs and those who simply had an interest in learning more about the role and duties of a spiritual assistant.

The sessions were composed of a blended approach to each topic—*delivering the information* and group work. Initially either Fr. Kevin or Anne would take the lead. It was not a strict lecture.

Whenever one of them had something essential to add to the topic, they would just commandeer the microphone and the other would acquiesce with grace! The participants also gathered in small groups to mull over and respond to pertinent questions posed concerning the material they had just heard. Animated large group discussions followed the small group reports.

[Anne and I have known each other for many years, and we have worked together before, though not as presenters, in a situation like the Summer Seminar. We have always worked well together. Fr. Kevin calls the presentations a work of "vital reciprocity"! We both prepared slide presentations. The printed text of these presentations were available to the participants after the sessions.]



The sessions, were carried out in a relaxed, relational, dialogical and, informative style. The intention was to limit the "information" segment to 20 minutes; however, when mixing Fr. Kevin and Anne, minutes expand. Yet the lion's share of each session was allotted to group discussion and group reporting.

Track A, was a participant-centered event with the intention of providing information, eliciting feedback, sparking enthusiasm and interest and having fun. It

was never boring. We may even take our show on the road.

[Anne and Fr. Kevin are collaborating to use some of the information collected from the small group discussions feedback. This will insure that something will come out of the hard work and discussions of the participants. They are hoping to produce something useful in terms of a deeper understanding of spiritual assistance.]

Track B was led by Sylvia Paoli, OFS, Fr. Matthias Wesnofske, OFM Cap., and Faye Martin, OFS. Sylvia shared her impressions of the Summer Seminar:

The make-up of the facilitator team was chosen for the following reasons: Fr. Matthias basically uses only the book, *Franciscan Family Connections*, a correspondence course handled one-on-one, and he meets one time or more with each student. Faye and her regional team conduct six weekend classes where all the students gather in one location, and they handle the remainder of the course by correspondence. Her course lasts about two years. The St. Francis Region team in California has only classes, which every student attends. It meets all day on one Saturday per month. Also, unlike the other two programs, the St. Francis Region program includes both potential spiritual assistants and formators, and lasts for three years. It also has an intern program for those designated at the end of the class as possible spiritual assistants, and no one is certified until successfully completing the internship program.

The Loretto program began on a Thursday evening and was completed Sunday morning. There were about 25 people in the Track B portion of the Summer Seminar. Throughout the presentations by all three facilitators, there was a lively interchange among the class members and the facilitators with

questions, comments, explanations and other sharing, all of which added substantially to the content of the program.

The goal of the facilitators was to give the participants enough information to be able to adopt and adapt from the three types of preparation for becoming a Spiritual Assistant currently being conducted and form their own training program. The regions have very different concerns: some have a major distance problem; some have weather issues; some do not yet have a team equipped to conduct such training programs; and there are other issues each region has to deal with. The feedback from the participants was very favorable, and it is hoped that, from this, all regions will be able to start their own training programs for spiritual assistants, who are so badly needed in our Order.”

These Summer Seminar participants are part of the foundation on which the Spiritual Assistance Development Task Force and all the concerned entities (i.e., NEC, CNSA, National Formation Commission and NAFRA) will continue to work on meeting its goals: *to articulate the role of spiritual assistants and to educate the various constituencies about Spiritual Assistance – what it is, who is responsible for it, and the purpose and role of the Spiritual Assistant within each fraternity; and to work together to develop a standardized program for the implementation of a Franciscan Family Connections program in the United States for training “suitable and well-qualified” Secular Spiritual Assistants by identifying the key elements of successful Spiritual Assistant training programs that can be used in all types of programs across the country.*

