

It's hard to describe what happened at that moment. It was as if St. Francis himself had come into my room carrying a steaming bowl of porridge and, with a grin on his face and a twinkle in his eyes, he was holding it out for me to take and enjoy. All I know is that a big smile came to my face, and my worries just disappeared.

The words to a song come to mind as I think of it: *"In the love come from God, I now entreat you, put away all your cares, and be free from every possession, coming freely to love, and to serve and to honor the Lord."* I had been visited by Sister Simplicity. Perfect joy filled my heart. It just goes to show how simple

pleasures and the joy of good food are such a part of our charism—and how in the midst of all we are called to do we must sometimes just stop, put aside our to-do lists, pick up our fiddle sticks, dance a bit, and then enjoy some cherry pie!

Yes, in many ways our world has been turned upside-down, and the struggles are real, but so is the grace we have been given to live our Franciscan vocation. May the stories in these pages be a source of inspiration and fraternal encouragement, and may spiritual joy fill your hearts! Peace and all good.

Your sister, Jan



Jeff Gumz, OFS with his homemade cherry pie with vanilla ice cream topping.

From the La Verna Vision:

"Jeff is always busy with something: family, high school teacher, working with Secular Franciscans, Lambeau Field Stadium tour guide. Now, his busy schedule also includes baking a cherry pie! Jeff says that one of his joys of living in Northeastern Wisconsin during late July is cherry picking, and Door County, Wisconsin, is famous for their cherries. So now is your opportunity to join in and enjoy a piece of cherry pie. But first you have to prepare it."



Door County, fresh picked cherries

2018-2021 National Priority: Fraternity Life

BUILDING FRATERNITY: ADVICE FROM SCRIPTURE AND ST. FRANCIS

by Mary Bittner, OFS

"Fidelity to their own charism, Franciscan and secular, and *the witness of building fraternity sincerely and openly* are their principal services to the Church, which is the community of love" (OFS General Constitutions Art. 100).

Given that building fraternity is intrinsic to Secular Franciscan life and forms one of our principal services to the Church, how do we go about it? St. Francis in his *Earlier Rule* and the words of Scripture give us much practical advice about fostering fraternity spirit and growth. Take some time to ponder each quotation. As followers of Christ in the footsteps of Francis, how might we put his words into practice?

Love is the basis of fraternity. "And they should love one another, as the Lord says: *This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved*

you (Jn 15:12). And let them express the love which they have for one another by their deeds (cf. Jas 2:18), as the Apostle says *Let us not love in word or in speech, but in deed and in truth* (1Jn 3:18)" *ER XI 5-6*. "In brotherly love let your feelings of deep affection for one another come to expression" (Rm 12:10). This may seem so obvious as to be not worth mentioning, yet Francis stresses that a genuine love of the brothers and sisters is of primary importance in fraternity life. He reminds us that it is easy to assume that we love someone until we're called upon to do it.

Make building fraternity a priority. "And wherever the brothers are and in whatever place they meet other brothers, they must greet one another wholeheartedly and lovingly, and *honor one another without complaining* (1 Pt 4:9)" *ER VII 15*.

“And each one should confidently make known his need to the other, so that he might find what he needs and minister it to him. And each one should love and care for his brother in all those things in which God will give him grace, as a mother loves and cares for her son (cf. 1 Th 2:7)” *ER IX 10-11*. “So then, let us be always seeking the ways which lead to peace and the ways in which we can support one another” (Rm 14:19). Fraternity doesn’t happen automatically, without significant effort on our part. It takes time to develop. We need to give it high priority and be willing to work to make it a reality.

Don’t be judgmental. “Let them not judge or condemn. And as the Lord says, they should not take notice of the little defects of others (cf. Mt 7:3; Lk 6:41)” *ER XI 10-11*. “And let all the brothers, both the ministers and servants as well as the others, take care not to be disturbed or angered at the sin or evil of another, because the devil wishes to destroy many through the fault of one; but they should spiritually help [the brother] who has sinned as best they can, because *it is not the healthy who are in need of the physician, but those who are sick* (cf. Mt 9:12; Mk 2: 17). “Let us each stop passing judgment, therefore, on one another and decide instead that none of us will place obstacles in any brother’s way or anything that can bring him down” (Rm 14:13). Being judgmental is one of the easiest ways to poison the spirit of the fraternity.

Don’t gossip. “Let them not murmur nor detract from others, for it is written: *Gossips and detractors are detestable to God* (Rm 1:29-30)” *ER XI 8*. We don’t usually think that indulging in gossip is a serious matter, but it too poisons the spirit of the fraternity.

Willingly show forgiveness. Francis, in his *Letter to a Minister*, gives the topic of forgiveness a telling introduction: “And by this I wish to know if you love the Lord God and me, his servant and yours—if you have acted in this manner: that is, there should not be any brother in the world who has sinned, however much he may possibly have sinned, who, after he has looked into your eyes, would go away without having received your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not to seek mercy, you should ask him if he wants mercy. And if he should sin thereafter a thousand times before your very eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him back to the Lord” *Letter to a Minister 9-11*. Even in our fraternities, we will have many opportunities to apply this advice.

“Well,” someone might say, “this emphasis on building fraternity is all well and good, but isn’t it a bit inward-looking? Are you saying we should just focus on ourselves and our own little group?” No, not at all. As Secular Franciscans, as we build fraternity we serve the Church, and we assist our members to bring the Gospel life to the world.

Discussion Questions

1. Francis’s emphasis on love always comes with the admonition to show love in *deed*, as indeed does Scripture. Which articles of the OFS Rule relate to this most basic element of building fraternity? What do they ask us to do?
2. Is building fraternity a high priority for you and your fraternity? Would others agree with your self-assessment? How has your fraternity grown in this over the last several years? How might you try to improve?
3. Francis particularly asks that we not take notice of the little defects of others. Why? Why do you think Francis was so concerned that his brothers not judge each other, and not be angered by the sin of another? What happens when we do get angry at another’s sin? How do we then respond to the one who sinned?
4. Why are gossip and being judgmental so detrimental to a fraternity? How can they be countered?
5. Why does Francis consider the way in which we forgive and show mercy to our brothers and sisters to be evidence of whether we “love the Lord God and me, his servant and yours?” What experiences have helped you learn to forgive?