



# Recognize Fraternal Life: Relationship

Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, T.O.R.

We live in a world of change. We witness a significant re-ordering of our social fabric almost at the blink of an eye. The cultural, moral, and spiritual framework in which we live is evolving dramatically. This is the context where our Franciscan witness to the Rule is challenged. Fraternity members are immersed in society. We are acutely aware of the power and influence of many streams of thought and prevailing attitudes on the lives of people.

The discussions and the sharing of experiences in our formation gatherings, in order to “*exercise our responsibilities competently in the Christian spirit of service, we together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively*” (Rule 14).

The heart of our Franciscan living is the reality of relationship. It is this bond of mutual love that forms the center of Franciscan evangelical life. To live the Gospel and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus means to build up the kingdom by living in loving relationships (*RegB III: 10-14*). For Francis, the word “fraternity” identifies this relationship that each of us has with Jesus our brother.

For St Francis, fraternity is his radical living in solidarity with all of humanity and creation. From the poetry and prayer of the *Canticle of the Creatures* to the *Story of the Wolf of Gubbio* and exemplified in the *Encounter with the Sultan*, Francis’ heart rests in the faithful recognition of his relationship with the other. “The strongest and most demanding love is

that which is required with regard to those to whom we have committed our lives” (*Thadde Matura, “Fraternity,” 112*). Such love is an active self-emptying love that frees our hearts from self-interest, in a daily conversion, which builds up the bonds of fraternity. Its absence undermines and breaks this bond.

When ruptures inevitably occur despite the best of intentions, the remedy of reconciliation becomes essential in fraternity life, to ask for forgiveness and to receive forgiveness (*EpMin 9-12*). We make peace with one another in a spirit of kindness and humility, accepting one another without preconditions, being realistic and merciful, and exercised in fraternal equality, blended together with our love of God, is the central value of our Franciscan vocation (*Matura, “Fraternity,” 117*). The Kingdom of God is realized when we live in loving relationships.

Living the Gospel means accepting to live with our sisters and brothers -- all of them -- bearing witness of God’s infinite patience, His inexhaustible forgiveness, His constantly renewed grace. To have the heart of God in our hearts. “Thy Kingdom come.” Is this not the kind of witness to be given for the light of the Gospel to shine in a murky world in which we serve? -- in peace, justice, and in love. Fraternity becomes the place, and increasingly, the place of compassion and relationship.



**National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order – USA**  
**CONFERENCE OF SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS**

The Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CNSA) is comprised of appointed members of the four obediences (Orders) of the First Order and Third Order Regular. They serve the National Fraternity in the same way that Regional Spiritual Assistants serve their Regions, and local Spiritual Assistants serve their Fraternities, to strengthen the bond of the Franciscan Family.



***Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, T.O.R***

President-in-Turn  
Provincial Spiritual Assistant, Immaculate Conception Province,  
T.O.R.  
Regional Spiritual Assistant, Lady Poverty Region  
Priest Chaplain at Altoona Regional Health System  
St. Joseph Friary, Hollidaysburg, PA



***Fr. Jerome Wolbert, OFM***

Provincial Spiritual Assistant, the Assumption of the Blessed  
Virgin Mary (OFM) Province  
Guardian, Holy Dormition Byzantine Franciscan Friary,  
Sybertsville, PA  
Pastor, St. John the Baptist Byzantine Catholic Church,  
Hazelton, PA



***Br. Alexander Escalera, OFM Cap.***

Provincial Spiritual Assistant, Western America OFM Capuchin  
Province, Burlingame, CA  
Regional Spiritual Assistant, St. Junipero Serra Region



***Fr. Giles Gilbert, OFM Conv.***

St. Bonaventure Province, OFM Conventual  
Regional Spiritual Assistant, Franciscans of the Prairie Region,  
OFS  
Parochial Vicar, Holy Family Catholic Church, Peoria, IL