

# FRANCISCAN LIVING

## GOD ALONE

By Francine Gikow, OFS

*Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deut: 6:4-5)*

So begins the “Shema,” commonly known as the most important prayer in the Jewish faith. It identifies that God alone is the only God, and we should love Him with all that we are and do—but so many of our prayers seem to be meditating *about* God rather than praying *to* Him.

*For the Lord is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods,  
In His hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his...*

*O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!  
For He is our God.... (Psalm 95:)*

The emphasis of our God being worthy of the highest praise, adoration, and love reiterates the first and greatest Commandment: “*I am the Lord your God...and you shall have no other gods before me.*” (Ex: 20: 2-3)

This commandment warns us that we should guard ourselves against making anything else a “god” in our life, such as money, power, status, wealth, material goods, self image, job, reputation, “toys” or even our time. Any “thing” can take the place of God if we allow it to do so, by limiting our attention, time, and love for God. We can make any “thing” an idol—a false god.

It’s easy to deny that we worship idols, yet on closer examination, we may find an idol taking root in our lives. Review what topics/things/issues occupy your mind during the day. What do you worry about? What are your preoccupations? What are you constantly thinking about? If these are inordinate desires—something that preoccupies us, then they have become an idol. They take up that special “space” in our lives that

correctly belongs to God. By those thoughts/idols, we push God out of our lives.

It is so easy to shift our focus away from God when the evil one entices us, little by little, to where we may not want to be. Nonetheless, constantly refocusing on God alone takes persistence and discipline—with a constant review of our priorities and efforts in putting God first.

Unfortunately, even in our spiritual life, we must be on guard. Sometimes we can mistake God’s works and gifts for God Himself. We may initially be attracted to the spiritual life with God’s gifts of beauty, creation, and even His consolations, but eventually, God doesn’t just want us to love Him only for his gifts or the works he performs. He wants us to love Him, desire Him, and spend time with Him alone. He hungers for our love in relationship. He wants pure love, not conditional love.

St. Francis emphasizes the priority to love God purely and unconditionally when he writes in his early Rule: “*let us desire nothing else, let us want nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight except our Creator, Redeemer and Savior, the only true God...Let nothing else hinder us, nothing else separate us, nothing come between us. (ER:9-10)*

To love God alone is our goal: to praise Him and to love Him.

*All powerful, most holy, most high and supreme God, all good, supreme good, total good, you who alone are good: we give you all praise, all glory, all thanks, all honor, all blessing and every good. So be it! So be it! Amen. (OfP: Praises to Be Said at All Hours:11)*

# *Instrumentum Laboris 2021: Animate & Guide with Servant Leadership*

## OFS – USA Response to questions from the CIOFS Presidency<sup>1</sup>

### 1. What kinds of general and fundamental problems are we experiencing in our Fraternities today?

- a. **What are the major problems?** Most of the major problems are addressed in the document. Unwillingness to serve on council. Members do not prioritize their vocation to the OFS, leading to apathy, lack of participation, and diminishment of our potential as an Order. Ignorance of the principle of co-responsibility (GC Art. 30.1-2). Neglect of the spiritual aspects of OFS life. Lack of prophetic creativity on the part of leaders in guiding the brothers and sisters toward the full realization of OFS life as “a plan of life centered on the person and on the following of Christ” (GC 9.1).

- b. **Have we addressed any of these problems in this document?** Yes.

#### **Are there other kinds of basic problems that need to be addressed?**

**The busyness that characterizes our culture** is a distraction that acts as a drawback to people’s willingness to serve, particularly on council.

**The issue of older vocations.** Many of our new vocations in the OFS-USA come to the OFS later in life. They have much life experience, but little experience in the OFS. They may be willing to serve as leaders, but their previous experiences of leadership do not always reflect servant leadership values. Furthermore, their lack of experience in fraternity life may blind them to possible pitfalls.

**Polarization.** Polarization – the tendency to see issues in an all-or-none way – has become endemic in our culture and affects leadership in fraternity in a number of ways.

- Tense political *debate* does not belong in our fraternities, but *dialogue* concerning the common good is necessary. The fraternity should be a place of civil discourse. Leaders and informal leaders can play a big part here by setting a good example and using their authority to check a discussion if it gets too heated.
- Conversely, leaders can contribute to the problem by allowing polarization to affect how they lead, letting it overshadow their ability to be collegial. They see sides instead of seeing brothers and sisters.
- Polarization directly works against the respect for the “plurality of expressions of the Franciscan ideal” called for by GC 33.1. We see a tendency for members who have certain preconceived ideas to gravitate to a likeminded fraternity. They may stress their point of view to such an extent that it eventually makes members who see things differently feel unwelcome. If local fraternities become polarized, they may propagate division at the Regional level as well.

- c. **What is your response or suggestion on how these problems might be addressed in your cultural context?** Formation for all. It is important that all candidates and members be well-formed with respect to Servant Leadership. See below Q. 2, 4 & 8.

### 2. What is the experience of our National Councils about how we are addressing the issue of good servant leadership? A. Does the formation plan include this topic? Yes. It is essential to achieving our goals as an Order. By the end of 2021 we will have new initial formation texts which address Servant Leadership.

B. **Is there a specific formation on servant leadership for those on the Councils?** Our National Fraternity has a wealth of resources on the topic of Servant Leadership. These include a *Handbook for Secular Franciscan Servant Leadership* (Table of Contents attached), a brochure *Care and Feeding of Councils*, and other materials developed by individual Regions and shared with the National Fraternity (see our national website [secularfranciscansusa.org](http://secularfranciscansusa.org) under resources/formation & spirituality/ongoing formation). **How can we address this concern?** See Q. 8.

### 3. According to you, which are the fundamental points on which to evaluate the service of a Council?

The document has listed several reasonable ones on p. 15. In our experience, visitations have a key role in evaluating the service of councils and addressing particular leadership issues. Local fraternity members often find it difficult to offer constructive feedback to the council members for fear of hurt feelings, conflict, or possible retaliation. Such feedback might better come privately from the Spiritual Assistant.

4. **Which items (or points) are important to develop in a course aimed at preparing leaders who are capable of answering the needs of the times so that they can present and propose Franciscan values lived as Seculars?**

In addition to the topics touched on in the document, we suggest the following.

**Recognition of the specific challenges at each level of fraternity – and all need to be addressed.**

Delineate between the duties appropriate to each level.

**Sense of belonging.** Knowledge of the Rule and Constitutions, and what we belong to – our Order and its Charism – is necessary to encourage the development of the sense of co-responsibility in each member.

**Informal Leadership.** Members can exercise leadership “informally” – that is, without being elected to the council. Some years ago, Fr. Felice Cangelosi, OFM Cap., wrote an article about Fraternal Service that listed ways in which all members can exercise leadership by serving their brothers and sisters, including carrying another’s burdens, good example, dialogue, and commitment. Members can also take the initiative in offering hospitality, volunteering to assist on existing programs (the formation team, the fraternity newsletter), or starting new ones with the agreement of the council (a book club or a new ministry).

**Describe the positive role of the Spiritual Assistant.** We agree that the SA should not run the fraternity. Nonetheless, as a member of the council, the SA is part of the leadership of the fraternity. There should be recognition that the SA’s leadership can be expressed in a very positive and fruitful way. Their objectivity is vital when it comes to constructive feedback for those in leadership.

**Effective ways to encourage someone to become a servant leader:**

- 1- Build Relationship – Listen to them, learn about their “being,” share experiences
- 2- Mentor leadership / let them walk alongside you / model service
- 3- Point out their talents/gifts. Nurture their love of their vocation, and the desire to serve follows.

**The course or manual should have a balance of spiritual / practical / intellectual points.** It would be particularly helpful if CIOFS were to address fully the spiritual and intellectual points. These are fundamental, and basically the same throughout the Order. As on pp. 5-6 in this document, CIOFS should break open the GC for us. Practical points can be developed by national fraternities to address local or cultural particularities.

5. **Based on your experience, is it appropriate for us to get involved with civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to work together to support and promote our values?** For individual Seculars and local fraternities, activities in the areas of social justice should flow from a Franciscan heart and give witness to our charism. It’s not just what we say or do, but how we say or do it. The question becomes more complicated at the higher levels of fraternity. There are some who feel strongly that we *as an organization* should not support groups that are not under the direct control of the Church, or which accept support from individuals or groups who may not share all our Catholic values.
6. **How do you feel about the rotation of offices and leadership so that our leaders do not serve more than two or three terms in any office?** This makes sense at the higher levels as long as continuity of service is maintained, and there is a good transfer of information as described on p. 14. At the local level it is an ideal that may not be practical or pastorally right for small local fraternities.
7. **What should YouFra expect from the OFS delegate or the Fraternal animator? Which kind of formation can YouFra propose for them?** What our young people are asking for is guidance, the example we can set in living our charism, and a willingness to walk with them on their journey to holiness.
8. **What tools, programs or actions do you suggest that CIOFS consider to help you in addressing the above problems?** We recommend that CIOFS provide a manual (such as was done with *Forming the Formators*) and direct the national fraternities to develop their own courses based on that material. Testimonial videos on servant leadership from members of the Presidency could supplement the manual. A repository of servant leadership resources in other languages, or links where people can go to find such resources, would also be extremely helpful.

<sup>1</sup>*Animate and Guide with Servant Leadership* is the *Instrumentum Laboris*, or working document, of the XVI General Chapter of the OFS. A pdf of the *Instrumentum* is on the national website <https://secularfranciscansusa.org/ongoing-formation-resources/> See *Share the Vision*, p. 3 for additional information.