



THE NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER - USA

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

National Minister, Tom Bello, OFS

A "Trinity of Be-Attitudes" with an "Examination of Conscience" Concerning the Vitality of our Fraternities

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When my Mom's health really began to plummet after the death of her younger son, I needed to take her to her wonderful and wise General Practitioner, Doctor Leibowitz. I remember his asking her to the effect: "Jackie, do you know the number one positive thing you can do to maintain a high quality of life? I mean you know the negative things: Don't smoke. Don't drink or eat too much. Avoid stress. But I'm talking number one positive. Do you know?"

Neither Mom nor I had a quick answer.

He said in essence: "Be active! Get up! Show signs that you're still alive and kicking. Don't stay in bed all day. Don't lock yourself in the house. Get up and go out! Be seen! Don't mope around. Be joyful!"

And he added, "Check yourself at the end of each day, and ask yourself if you have done these things."

It was good advice for Mom and good advice for our fraternities.

Be-Attitude Number One for the Vitality of our Fraternities: Be active Spiritually, Formationally, Socially and Apostolically!

Examination of Conscience: If a stranger were to walk in off the street to attend your next fraternity meeting, how would he know that your fraternity was "alive and kicking"? What signs of life has your fraternity evidenced recently? When was the last time that your fraternity actually DID SOMETHING other than attend a dry business meeting?

The number one sign of life in a Secular Franciscan fraternity is spiritual vitality. How is the vitality of your fraternity's prayer life manifested? For example, do a variety of members share a variety of modes of prayer? Do you go to Mass as a fraternity? When you pray as a fraternity, are you truly praying as one or just repeating the words out of the Ritual?

Formationally, do ALL the members participate in Formation as is specified in the General Constitutions (GC)? "The journey of formation, which should develop throughout life, begins with entrance into the fraternity. Mindful that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of formation and always attentive to collaboration with Him, those responsible for formation are: the candidate, the entire fraternity, the council with the minister, the master of formation, and the assistant" (GC Article 37.2).

Please note that the entire fraternity is third only after the Holy Spirit and the candidate, and before the council, master of formation and spiritual assistant. Also note that Formation "should develop throughout life." At no time is an active fraternity excused from Formation.

Socially, do ALL the members take turns bringing snacks? Do you ever go to one another's places for a change of scenery? Is there some form of active social sharing at each meeting?

Finally, does your fraternity AS FRATERNITY have an apostolic action? This Apostolic Action could be 30 minutes writing letters at the meeting to missing homebound or hospitalized members. Each member could bring one item of food or clothing at an announced meeting to take to a local shelter. Have you ever gone as the entire fraternity, for example, to sing Christmas Carols at a local nursing home or to a homebound member's home?

Be-Attitude Number Two for the Vitality of our Fraternities: Be visible Spiritually, Formationally, Socially and Apostolically!

Examination of Conscience: Does anybody in your local parish, community or diocese, your local pastor, other local priests, the Bishop, know your fraternity exists or know when and where you meet or what you do? How many know? Who are they? How would they know? When was the last time public mention was made of your fraternity in the local media?

Spiritually, has your fraternity ever been seen OUT IN PUBLIC in prayer to God? Ever? For example, has your fraternity, as a fraternity, gone on a retreat together or made a pilgrimage together with the local parish or other fraternities? Has your fraternity ever not only attended Mass together, but actually sponsored a Mass with a local pastor or Franciscan friar on a Franciscan saint's day or feast day AND invited the whole parish or local Catholic community to attend? Has your fraternity ever organized a pilgrimage to Assisi, Rome or a local site? Has your fraternity ever organized a Greccio service, a Transitus or a Blessing of the Animals for your parish or community? Even once? Every year?

Formationally, has your fraternity ever invited a Franciscan speaker, like, say, Friar Kevin Queally, TOR, or Anne Mulqueen, OFS, to your area AND invited the whole parish or local community to learn with you? Has your local fraternity leadership ever held a "public" sharing on any aspect of Franciscan life?

Finally, does your fraternity, as a fraternity, have an active, visible apostolate in the parish or out in the community? For example, do you march as a fraternity, with a banner, in the March for Life or a Corpus Christi Procession? Do you work as a fraternity at the local soup kitchen or nursing home? Why not? How often? Why not?

Be-Attitude Number Three for the Vitality of our Fraternities: Be joyful Spiritually, Formationally, Socially and Apostolically!

Examination of Conscience: If a young person were invited to your next fraternity gathering, would she or he feel enough joy in your fraternity's walk with Sts.

Francis and Clare in the footsteps of Christ to want to come back and share that joy permanently?

As Brother Bill Short has said, in the Rule of 1221, St. Francis as much as mandates the spiritual practice of showing joy to all without exception. The Rule of 1221, Chapter 7, reads: "And all the friars, no matter where they are or in whatever situation they find themselves, should like spiritually minded men, diligently show reverence and honor to one another without murmuring (1 Peter 4:9). They should let it be seen that they are happy in God, cheerful and courteous, as is expected of them, and be careful not to appear gloomy or depressed like hypocrites."

"This may be the only Rule in the Catholic Church that has a positive command about being cheerful," Brother Bill has said.

How are we going to attract any new life by being an active, visible group of grumpy, grouchy old folks? I agree we have no control over our ages, but we can control our attitude and demeanor. Sure, the world may indeed be going to hell in a handbasket, but most of us have good, safe lives lacking none of life's necessities. We have so much to be thankful for. Show it! Smile. Actively, visibly evidence the Joy of the Gospel, the Joy of the Lord whenever we pray, teach, socialize or engage in apostolic action!

To recap:

Be active.

Be visible.

Be joyful.

As fraternity.

Spiritually, formationally, socially and apostolically.

As we live our lives.

In season and out of season.

Final Examination of Conscience:

- ❖ If I were to walk into your fraternity meeting, would I be able to share in any active visible joyful praying?
- ❖ Would I learn from any active visible joyful formation?
- ❖ Would I enjoy any active visible joyful socializing?
- ❖ Would I be able to participate in any active visible joyful apostolic outreach? If not, why not? If yes, how often? Is it more planned or unplanned? Shared or dictated?

Let us pray to God in Jesus' name that when we do what we can do, the Holy Spirit will do the rest.

Peace and love,
Tom