

# Sharing **T**he Vision

## News from the National Executive Council (NEC)

by National Secretary, Jan Parker, OFS



*“I thank you,  
Lord, with all  
my heart,  
Before the gods  
to you I sing  
I bow low  
toward your  
holy temple;  
I praise your  
name for your  
fidelity and  
love.”  
(Psalm  
138:1-2)*

*of you who do not believe.”... “Master, to whom shall we go?” (John 6:63.68)*

The wisdom of our Rule guides us: “Let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do.” (Rule, Art. 8). On Friday morning, before any business was conducted, before a single decision was made, we came together for 90 minutes of prayer and formation, and on Saturday morning, two hours. It was life-saving. In prayer we found our purpose and our refuge. In heartfelt sharing we were transformed.

From *The Journey and the Dream* to *The Joy of the Gospel* Franciscans walk the path to the sacred. We walk this path together. There’s no other way. It’s wonderful to plan our annual Chapter. It’s wonderful to have an updated Visitation and Election Schedule. But more than wonderful is our journey together on this path to the sacred.

Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* begins with the phrase, “Praise be to you, my Lord”. In this same sentiment of praise and with the beautiful words of Psalm 138, we began the June 19-21, 2015, meeting of the National Executive Council (NEC). It was a momentous meeting.

*“God says to you, do not be afraid of holiness; do not be afraid to aim high, to let yourself be loved and purified by God; do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit.” (Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy, p. 32)*

Over the years that I have served as National Secretary, I have tried to share with you what “national” does. There seemed to be much interest in this, and so I have shared the vision and the news from the NEC as best I could. In this article, most likely my last as your National Secretary, I want to share with you something we did at our June NEC meeting. It is actually something that “national” does at every meeting, and is undoubtedly the most important thing we do as a Council.

What does our prayer and formation time look like? It is the Holy Spirit who leads us; we know only that we need it. We enter this time intentionally, gathered in a circle in a comfortable space. A prayer of “self-emptying” allows the Holy Spirit to enter the room. We pray in common the prayers of old; psalms that touch us where we are at.

The National Executive Council has had some tough times this year. The months leading up to our June meeting were particularly stressful. We felt at a loss in many ways. We came to this meeting with radical trust, longing for the way to become clear. As we gathered on Thursday evening there were hugs, of course, and an evening meal shared in joy and laughter. But the work before us was daunting.

*Pursue what you should desire above all else, namely, to have the Spirit of God and God’s grace working in you, to pray always with purity of heart and to have humility, patience in persecution and in infirmity....” (cf. Earlier Rule XVII 15-16)*

We listen and savor the Word of God in Scripture and other rich readings. We pause, opening our hearts to what the Holy Spirit is saying. After a time of silent prayer, we begin gently sharing.

*“It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some*

*“To listen to a living word flowing from the heart of someone is not the same thing as to read the same message from a book. As we listen to a person, it is a life and spirit that are communicated. And God uses this living word to give life.” (Jean Vanier, Community and Growth, rev. ed. p. 175.)*

We savor the words that flow from the heart of each brother and sister as a precious gift of our Lord; words that reflect individual experiences, but also speak of our common human experience. We feel the closeness of our oneness in Christ. How we need that unity!

United in Christ we become aware of each other's holiness as a beauty in itself. We see the gifts each member brings to our Council – gifts that will help us as we work together. Former JPIC Chair Kent Ferris spoke to us once of the “nourishment of human contact as we all reflect who God is.” And so it is. The Spirit is with us to lead and guide. With God's help we can do the work that is ours to do.

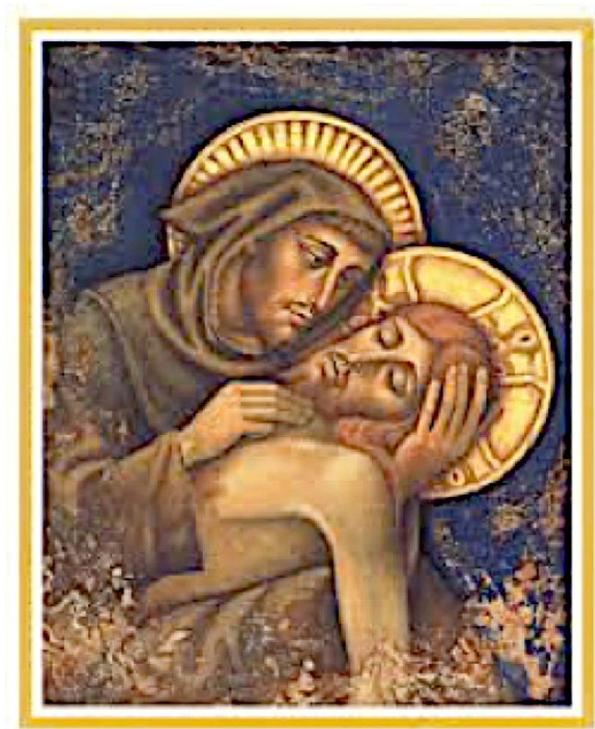
Prayer and faith sharing calls us back to who we are. From there comes honest dialogue that builds a transparent decision-making process; this leads to care in action and to active witness in the world. Blessedly aware of our communion in Christ, we move from self-centered concerns to a place where we can work together. It is a place where all is in God's time. There's no frantic hurry, no need to push our own ideas ahead. It is a place of trust and hope. Agenda items can be discussed without running over each other's feelings. It is where we know we have work to do but we don't become so serious that we lose our joy. We delight in the fact that God has brought us together for this purpose and trust that God does not invite us to failure. We remember we are Franciscans, but this is not our Order. It's God's Order. Our work is rooted in simplicity and littleness. It is not overbearing or complicated. Our individual concerns are caught up in God's great love for each and for all. God knows our needs. We come to see God's providential care for us as we become aware of our need for each other. We are bound together in love.

*“Spreading the Gospel means that we are the first to proclaim and live the reconciliation, forgiveness, peace, unity and love that the Holy Spirit gives us.” (Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*)*

United by prayer and transformed into a community of love, we can walk with each other through the bitter valley and make it a place of springs; we can go from strength to strength as we make our way to God on this path to the sacred.

At our June NEC meeting, our Brother Francis was truly among us. He held us up to the Father as if holding a little sparrow named “Humility” in the palm of his hand. He coaxed the wolf named “Fear” from the shadows and invited us to befriend him. With the little sparrow and the tamed wolf we stood in a close circle, hearts united in a closing prayer, singing the

words that Jesus taught us. We then turned to our work, eager for the holy activity of the Spirit in our lives.



The quotes and images interspersed throughout this article were part of the formation material we used during our June NEC meeting. I am grateful to Mary Bittner and Br. Bob Brady, OFM, for their contributions. I appreciate all formators who prepare by asking the Holy Spirit, “What words will give life and light to us at this time?”

Prayerfully prepared material is only one part of formation. Just as important is the participation and contributions of those gathered. The heartfelt sharing, inspired insights and careful listening by each of the NEC and Commission Chair sisters and brothers during our time together shows their love and commitment to fraternity building. This love and commitment to fraternity is vital, especially in stressful and difficult times, to help us walk that path to the sacred. As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si'*, “It is no coincidence that, in the canticle in which Saint Francis praises God for his creatures, he goes on to say: ‘Praised be you my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love.’ Everything is connected.” Praise be to you, my Lord, for how prayer and formation connect us in Love! May prayer and contemplation always be the soul of all we are and all we do.