GENERAL CHAPTER
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**BELONGING TO THE SFO**

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**Belonging as co-responsibility**

**11. Belonging to the Order.** Our belonging to the Secular Franciscan Order is based on Profession, that is, the act with which we are solemnly committed to “live the Gospel in the way of St. Francis and through this authentic Rule of the Church” (Rule N. 2). Fr. Felice in his presentation spoke to us wonderfully about Profession which Article 42.2 of the General Constitutions describes as being *incorporated* into the Order. He told us among other things that the *incorporation (profession)* “means the insertion into a living body and the merger with the same organism, in which a new reality is constituted. Incorporation involves the transformation of many realities into only one, through a process of absorption and assimilation.”

The "plan of Gospel life" outlined in our Rule is a plan to fulfill and to live "in fraternal community".  Perhaps we should reflect more often and more carefully on the definition contained in Article 3.3 of the General Constitutions.  "The vocation to the SFO is a vocation to live the Gospel in fraternal community.  To this purpose, the members of the SFO reunite in ecclesial community that they call Fraternities" and these Fraternities are cells grouped in organic union, that is to say, the large, spiritual family of the SFO, scattered all over the world.

  Speaking of belonging, it is necessary to protect oneself from the risk of "absolutizing” this identity with something of an attitude of pride, superiority, and exclusivity. "Clinging excessively and exclusively to one’s identity can become pathological.  In fact, it can breed in individuals narrow mindedness, in populations nationalism, in religions and in cultures fundamentalism, " writes Mons.  Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture.  So, with reference to identity/belonging, we should emphasize the sense of communion and corresponsibility.  The General Constitutions affirm emphatically in art. 30.1: "The brothers are corresponsible for the life of the Fraternity to which they belong and for the SFO as the organic union of all the Fraternities scattered around the world".  Here it is not about responsibility in the legal sense, like that entrusted to the Superior Major of the First Order and TOR (holders of the altius moderamen) and not even of what is expected of the Ministers, the Councils and, in general the "spirituals assistants and leaders", legitimately elected for the governing of the Fraternity at varied levels. Instead, it is about  responsibility of a theological nature: a fraternal communion, of faith and love, that needs to be nurtured by mutual prayer, by reciprocal knowledge/awareness, by assiduous attendance.

At the level of the whole Order in the world, corresponsibility means, above all, attention and availability to what is called for and proposed by various Councils at the higher levels: regional, national and international. It requires then an effort to seek to know and to understand the reality of the Order in other geographic and cultural contexts, because one cannot love what one does not know. It requires, finally, "to contribute to the expenses of the Councils of the Fraternity of the higher levels" (Rule 25). Permit me to dwell a moment on this delicate subject to emphasize the importance. We must consider the size and the complexity of the commitments that now weigh down on the regional and national Councils. They must be able to fulfill completely their responsibility of coordination and relationship to the local Fraternity. Furthermore, the Presidency of CIOFS, on the international level, should coordinate, animate and guide the SFO, improve collaborative relations with the other components of the Franciscan Family, and promote the life and the apostolate of the Order, etc.  (Cf.  CC.  GG.  Art 73).

**12.  Belonging to the local Fraternity.**  We know by memory the definition of the local Fraternity contained in art. 22 of the Rule:  "the basic unit of the whole Order … a visible sign of the Church, … community of love..”.

To clarify these fundamental assertions, the General Constitutions in art. 30.2 state how belonging to the Fraternity should be lived:  *"The sense of co-responsibility of the members requires personal presence, witness, prayer, and active collaboration, in accordance with each one's situation and possible obligations for the animation of the fraternity."* In the hope of not providing just a theoretical discourse I think we must dedicate a minimum of time to these essential "requirements" of corresponsibility.  We see, therefore:

1.  *personal presence*, namely regular participation (not optional!) at the meetings of the Fraternity, that cannot be called any more the well-known "monthly meetings", but "frequent encounters (gatherings)", organized by the Council to stimulate everyone to the life of fraternity and for growth of Franciscan and ecclesial life (Rule. n. 24);

2.  *witness*, of Gospel life and of fraternal life also as a means of promoting vocations (C. C.  G. G. art. 45,2) and as assistance in the formation of new members (Rule. n. 23 and C. C.  G. G. art.37.3);

3.  *prayer*, it is the soul of this “community of love” (Rule N. 8)

4.  *active collaboration*, of each and everyone, for the good of the Fraternity, for dynamic meetings and with good participation, for completing its charitable and apostolic initiatives (C. C.  G. G. art.53.3);

5.  *possible commitments to bring life to the Fraternity,* particularly, when it comes to candidates taking on  office/service (C. C.  G. G. art. 31.4)

6.  *Economic contribution,* based on the ability of the individual members (CC. GG. Art. 30.3), to provide for the financial means required for the life of the Fraternity and its religious, apostolic and charitable work.

But it’s still not enough: corresponsibility requires all of its members to take care of the human and spiritual “well-being” of each of the brothers and sisters (CC. GG. Art. 42.4): no one should be left alone in the face of problems and difficulties, but in the Fraternity one should find help (even material), sustenance and comfort.

In essence, to live and work today in the Fraternity means to be conscientious of some firm points, such as: meeting with others in their real situations, accompanying them on their growth as a human beings, experiencing prayer in its different forms, educating themselves on the commitment to the building of the Kingdom and a degree of ecclesial belonging that makes us perceive the sense of the global goal; the growth and actualization of the new person in Christ (OFS Rule. art. 14).