

“The Lord gave me some brothers...”

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:1-3)



Sometime in the days or weeks before his death in 1226, St. Francis dictated a document that the Franciscan tradition calls *The Testament*. It is an unusual writing. Francis describes it as “a remembrance, admonition, exhortation, and my testament, which I, little brother Francis, make for you my blessed brothers...”¹ It begins with the transformative experience of his early work among the lepers. He then describes his faith in churches and priests. He recalls the steps that led to the formation of the Order of Lesser Brothers and how they were to live. He expresses what he expects of the friars after he departs this life, and he enjoins them to obedience.

One passage in the document recounts in simple and direct language how Francis formed his nascent order: “And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.”² Francis, following the example of Jesus, would welcome a group of brothers and pursue a life together. The brothers were God’s gift.

This should not surprise us. For Francis, the Gospel life was never a purely spiritual endeavor. It was always about the whole person, body, soul and spirit. Thomas of Celano wrote that for Francis, “so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.”³ The Incarnation and the Passion both underscore that the Word became flesh. Jesus, fully human and fully divine, had a body and lived in the world. He moved among the people with his disciples teaching, healing, performing miracles. He suffered a tortuous death, and rose triumphantly from the dead in Easter glory.

In following his Lord and Savior, Francis thus affirmed that living “according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” was not an abstract idea. It was physical and sacramental, and one of its signal characteristics would be its communal nature. It would be a community of brothers who would “give themselves to honest work,” live a life of poverty, not accepting dwellings, but moving through the world “as pilgrims and strangers.”⁴ In the other forms that the Franciscan movement would take shape—St. Clare’s cloistered Poor Ladies or the secular Brothers and Sisters of Penance—the paradigm and template of Franciscan life would always be *fraternity*.

A persistent feature of Franciscan fraternity in the centuries that followed down to the present day is its physical reality. Franciscan fraternity is not an abstract idea, not a collection of names on paper; not even a virtual gathering of people in touch with one another on the Internet. It is an incarnational reality in which the brothers and sisters are physically present to one another. Fraternity is an *earthen* presence. This is why, for Secular Franciscans, a commitment to

attendance at fraternity meetings is vital to the life of the fraternity and to the authentic Franciscan vocation of each of its members.

The importance of such community for Catholic life generally was underscored by Pope Francis in a homily he gave the week after Easter, 2020. Pope Francis said he received a letter from a bishop, who observing St. Peter’s Basilica was nearly empty during Easter Mass because of the pandemic, reminded the Holy Father that the physical presence of the faithful at liturgies is vital to the Church. Pope Francis agreed, saying Christians should seek a “daily familiarity with the Lord” that is intimate and personal but always in community. “A familiarity without community, a familiarity without bread, a familiarity without the Church, without the people, without the sacraments is dangerous...It can become a familiarity—let us say—gnostic, a familiarity for me alone, detached from the people of God.” He added, in a sentence that should ring true in the ears of every Franciscan, “The Church, the sacraments, the People of God are concrete.”⁵

“The People of God are concrete.” As Franciscans we should hold those words close to our hearts, and echo them by reminding ourselves that *our fraternities are concrete*. We are passing through a time, the likes of which even the oldest among us have not seen before. For now, the fraternities in our region are not able to meet physically at their customary locations. We are using, instead, powerful tools of the digital age or tried and true technologies like the telephone to substitute. These are necessary adjustments to a situation beyond our control, but we should not be lulled into thinking that virtual fraternity is an acceptable alternative to real fraternity. The Lord has given us brothers and sisters as a gift. We should pray with eager anticipation—indeed with *longing*—that God hastens the day when we gather together again.

From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

- The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members. [*Rule*, 22]
- The fraternity must offer to its members opportunities for coming together and collaborating through meetings to be held with as great a frequency as allowed by the situation and with the involvement of all its members. [*Constitutions*, 53:1]

For reflection and meditation

With regard to Article 22 of the Rule, the official commentary on the Rule of 1978 by the USA National Spiritual Assistants' Commission stated, “The local fraternity is the basic living organism of the whole Secular Franciscan Order and a visible sign of the whole Church in miniature.”

How do you perceive your local fraternity as a “living organism”? as “the Church in miniature”?

¹ Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., et al., editors, *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, Volume 1, The Saint* (New City Press, 1999), 127.

² *Ibid.*, 125.

³ *Ibid.*, 254

⁴ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

⁵ www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/the-churchs-ideal-is-to-be-with-the-people-pope-says-15505

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