

## WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL ASSISTANT?

### THE FRANCISCAN VISION

The Secular Franciscan must know who he or she is *as* a Secular Franciscan. Our lives must be focused on Jesus, who is the center of Franciscan life. We are to emulate Mary's self-giving and prayerfulness. We must be faithful to our duties in our secular life. Above all we must accept all people as a gift of the Lord. Our Rule tells us that we are to lead lives dedicated to building a more fraternal and evangelical world, while at the same time being in the forefront of those promoting peace and justice. Because we are part of the working world, we should esteem all work. In our families, we should be the leaders in promoting family and married life. As Franciscans we respect all life, because all life was created by God, and to exploit God's created life is wrong. We are to serve one another, and that means being willing to serve each other in our fraternities. We support our Order by each one contributing financially to our fraternity "according to our means." Knowing who we are supposed to be and what we are supposed to be about, then, where does a spiritual assistant fit into our communities?

The leaning on, and reliance on, members of the religious orders by the SFO is of relatively recent vintage, i.e., the 20th century. It was not envisioned by Francis to be that way. Instead of being schools of gospel life, as the Code of Canon Law of 1917 requested, the fraternities returned to devotionalism. In the pre-Vatican II days, all friars working with fraternities were spiritual *directors*. If you read Bill Wicks' first volume on the history of the SFO in the United States, you'll find that in the first forty years in this country, our fraternities were totally run by the First Order.<sup>1</sup> However, that was not the way Francis envisioned the seculars living as a community and that is not the way it should be. A spiritual assistant is NOT a director, NOT a leader, NOT in charge of all spiritual teaching and he or she is \* NOT the secretary or treasurer or minister.

Work began after the end of World War II, in about 1946, to bring the Third Order into the modern era, . Pius XII, himself a Franciscan tertiary, in 1956, referred to an "organic stagnation" and "spiritual cooling" of the Third Order and clearly designated the program of renewal and leap in quality that the secular fraternities had to make to become "a school of

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<sup>1</sup> Wicks, William, *A History of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States*, Vol. 1 1917-1942.

Christian perfection, or genuine Franciscan spirit, of daring and prompt action for building up the Body of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> This work, begun in the middle 1940s, eventually resulted in the Rule of 1978 for the SFO, the one we follow today, that is referred to as the Pauline Rule, having been confirmed by Pope Paul VI.

Rather than the reliance on the religious, then, the fraternities of the SFO are to be autonomous, to manage and support themselves, with duly elected councils who animate and guide each fraternity. The secular Franciscans are not an appendage to the first and second orders, but an integral part of the Franciscan family,<sup>3</sup> called to live the charism of Francis within the secular dimension.

The councils of fraternities at every level are to request a spiritual assistant who is “suitable and well-prepared,”<sup>4</sup> which includes being well grounded in the history of the SFO. There should be constant interaction between the spiritual assistant and the members of the fraternity, and especially its council, always emphasizing that we all belong to the same spiritual family and we are all called to carry out the mission of the Church in the charism of Francis. A major aspect of that interaction is involved in the vision of how the SFO can and should be working in the world to spread the Gospel message.

A spiritual assistant should be a peacemaker, should mediate differences before they evolve into a major dispute within a fraternity between brothers and sisters. It goes without saying that a spiritual assistant should be a model of the gospel life, for a peacemaker can only be effective where he or she has the respect of the members. “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”<sup>5</sup> A constant dialogue must be maintained between the spiritual assistant and the council of the fraternity.

A spiritual assistant is an active member of a fraternity council, with a vote in all things except matters of finance and in elections. The spiritual assistant should have the same amount of input into fraternity issues that every other member of the council has. He or she is also part of the formation team, as are all of the council members. Those elected to a council, including

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<sup>2</sup> Manual, 1.6.1 & 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Rule SFO*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Rule SFO*, 26; *Constitutions*, art. 87.3.

<sup>5</sup> *Evang. Nunt.* 41, taken from *Koinonia*, 1997-2, Year 4, p.2.

the appointed spiritual assistant, are to be servant leaders. While the spiritual assistant has no greater input into a council than other council members, he or she works with a council to help them all to give life to our Franciscan vision. The Franciscan spirit should be shown in the spiritual assistant by word, action, prayer and example. Spiritual assistants share their gifts for the good of the SFO and all of the Franciscan family.

Councils need the help of a spiritual assistant to help them remain true to the Franciscan charism. He or she should assist the council in preparing future leaders for the fraternity. The spiritual assistant should explore with the council members the ways in which Secular Franciscans can properly live their secular Franciscan form of life, as required by our Rule. All council members, including the spiritual assistant, have a vote on the acceptance of candidates for profession.

A spiritual assistant can be of help to a council in seeking ways to maintain a good relationship with all members of the community. He or she should be able to share meaningful experiences of peace and justice. The assistant can be a gentle reminder to all members of the fraternity that profession is a commitment for life. He or she can also be a resource for the council and for fraternity members.

The spiritual assistant can help the council understand the principle of subsidiarity and their own responsibilities towards the fraternity that elected them. He or she can encourage a council to set up meaningful relationships with their elderly and sick members who are unable to attend fraternity meetings. The spiritual assistant is charged with guiding councils in the Franciscan way of dealing with those members who regularly stay away from meetings and other gatherings of the community. Councils should always be aware of the necessity of maintaining a proper balance between the vision and the structure, and the spiritual assistant can help them to do that. He or she can also encourage councils to be creative in resolving difficulties within the council and within the fraternity. Above all, he or she must be a skillful listener. If a fraternity has difficulty in coming up with varieties of prayer forms to use, the spiritual assistant can help them find different ways of praying together.

### **Formation**

The role of spiritual assistant has much in common with the role of formation director, and the persons occupying those two positions need to be working very closely with one another, Perhaps of even greater importance is that the spiritual assistant is not only a member of the

council to which he or she is attached, but is, in many senses, the “formation director” of that council. He or she helps both council members and the rest of the fraternity remember and better understand the commitment made at Profession. The spiritual assistant should be at every meeting of the council of which he or she is a member, equal with the other members of the council, having a voice and a vote on all matters before the council except financial ones.

The proper formation of leaders in the SFO is seen as a priority in the Order. The leaders, “those to whom the animation and guidance of the members is confided, can carry out their mission only when sustained by ‘a many-sided and complete training.’”<sup>6</sup> It is the spiritual assistant who can be of great help to a council in bringing them to better understand and have the experience of belonging both to a world-wide Order and to a much larger Franciscan family that encompasses all three Orders. That will also increase their experience of identity with their Order and with the family, brought about by daily conversion and by the experience of fraternity life itself.

A spiritual assistant needs to help the leaders have the experience of secularity, knowing that each has been sent out on the mission of Jesus, sent out into the world of family, political life, business, to educational institutions, to trade unions, into the world of culture, of the sciences, of international life and of the mass media. Leaders are to be animators, and they need to understand that they are called not only to animate the fraternity by whom they were chosen, but through their secular Franciscan form of life, to animate the world in which they live, bringing and communicating to it the gospel experience and the Christian-Franciscan way of life.

Secular Franciscans must remember to balance the partners of prayer and action in their lives, and the spiritual assistant can help them to understand and achieve that balance. In initial formation, the assistant is both a counselor and a guide, helping aspirants to clarify their vocation, and accompanying them - as should the rest of the council members - along the way of living the Gospel, by being at initial formation sessions. The spiritual assistant is a very integral part of a council’s responsibilities in determining the suitability of candidates for admission to profession. He or she should participate equally with other council members in the interview of a candidate who is seeking to be professed, in the discussion which follows, and, of course, in the secret ballot by which a decision is reached. Likewise in ongoing formation, the assistant works with the council and the formation director, helping the members in their journey of

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<sup>6</sup> *Apost. Act.* 28, taken from *Koinonia*, 1997-2, Year 4, p.2.

continual conversion, and helping them to experience the discernment necessary of each individual member throughout his or her life. It is in this continuing work of formation that the assistant can be the leader in helping the council, and through them, the fraternity, to understand and adopt the vision of Francis and of the Church for the seculars. All must remember that formation must have all the following characteristics: be active, communal, ecclesial, secular, joyful, open-ended, centered on Jesus Christ and His Gospel, and always be done in a spirit of simplicity and humility.

Those working in initial formation - which should be, at a minimum, all of the council including the spiritual assistant, need to remember to check all the required documents of those in initial formation. It also must be remembered that formation requires an interchange between the formation team and those in formation. The spiritual assistant can help determine if the material in initial formation is influencing the way those receiving it live their lives.

He or she can assist the formation team and those in initial formation to evaluate the influence of Vatican II and its documents. Those concepts are essential to understanding the Church in the 21st century. Don't diminish the fact that the Franciscan way of life is a demanding way; people in initial formation need to know that before they become candidates. Emphasize the God-given human dignity of every individual, noting the need for honest self-knowledge. Encourage all to remember that their priorities must be in favor of the SFO. Discernment in all things is continually needed and formation must emphasize this.

### **Expectations of a SFO council**

The word "assistant" is from the Latin verb *adsistere*, which means to stand beside, to stand near, to be present, to protect, to support, to help by means of one's own active participation. According to the Rule, the role of a spiritual assistant is to provide "spiritual assistance," which contains two main elements:

- (1) witness of Franciscan spirituality and of the fraternal affection of the religious;<sup>7</sup>
- (2) collaboration in the initial and continuing formation of the brothers and sisters.<sup>8</sup>

These elements are perceived by the members of a council if the spiritual assistant is living the Gospel life, is a witness to it, and is ministering pastorally to the council members. It is not expected that any spiritual assistant will tell the council or fraternity members *how* they should

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<sup>7</sup> *Constitution*, art. 89.3.

<sup>8</sup> *Constitution*, art. 90.1.

live, unless, of course, they actually adopt and propagate actions obviously contrary to the teachings of the Church, or not in conformity with the directives given to the SFO in their Rule, Constitutions, and the Ritual. A spiritual assistant, then, is one who is called, because of his or her competence, to especially help the minister and the council, as well as the other fraternity members. Since the entire fraternity is responsible for the spiritual life of each of its members, the role of the spiritual assistant must be evidenced in the “assisting” that he or she provides, not by means of “directing” as was the case at one time. That is not to say, however, that a spiritual assistant shouldn’t provide a few minutes of spiritual reflection at a meeting, if asked to do so. A council can also ask their spiritual assistant to provide longer periods of spiritual reflection, such as a Day of Recollection, or a retreat.

As a spiritual assistant to the entire fraternity, a council can rightly expect the assistant to be on the lookout for signs that a fraternity is closing in on itself, becoming only a “prayer group,” or becoming merely another “parish group.” The assistant is partly pastor, guide and teacher in a helping way, \* and needs to get to know all the brothers and sisters in the fraternity individually, in order to help them form a single, united group, at one with the entire Order. One of the frequent difficulties encountered in fraternities is the reluctance of all but a very few to serve the fraternity on the council, or even to take part in sharing. The assistant can help a lot in that respect, helping to make people feel they belong to a fraternity, persuading them to use the gifts God has given them, and assuring that no one remains isolated or on the fringes of the fraternity.

A council can rightly expect true assistance in a pastoral visitation, where the pastoral visitor can evaluate the balance between time for contemplation and time for social commitment of the fraternity members, the apostolates of the fraternity, the way formation is carried on, and, in general, the Franciscan life of the fraternity. He can and should help revive the evangelical Franciscan spirit of the fraternity members, including those in initial formation who are still discerning their vocation.

And so, the minister and council of a fraternity - at any level - can expect a spiritual assistant to foster communion with the Church, to bear witness to Franciscan spirituality, to cooperate in formation and to nourish the Christian life of the fraternity.

THE END