**FRATERNAL CARE OF SECULAR FRANCISCANS**

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There are two areas that we need to consider under this topic: Firstly, Initial Formation and secondly, On-going Formation of OFS members. I think both aspects can be considered together as all that can be said about Initial Formation applies equally to On-going Formation.

**A Perennial Problem**

How often have we found that someone shows interest in joining the Secular Franciscan Order and comes to the Fraternity meeting a few times but then loses interest and does not come again? Or, worse still, someone comes and joins the formation program and even becomes a professed member of the Order but soon after gives up? We ask, “Why?” “What went wrong?” “Was it poor preparation in our formation program? Or was there another reason we need to investigate? Could it have been that the new member felt she or he was not accepted? Did that person feel that she/he did not belong? Were we to blame because we did not “walk with her/him along that path”?

In this session, I want to discuss **the importance of fraternal care in our Fraternities**. We must insist that our formation does not cease at profession. There is an on-going formation which can be formal or informal. Personally, I think that the latter is far more effective than the former. I am referring to what is called “Fraternal Care” in the form of “accompaniment”.

During the formation process up to and after profession, accompaniment plays a very important role. This is not something new. Remember, St Francis sent his brothers out, two by two, to preach the Good News and the call to repentance to the people. They did not go alone. It was not a solo effort. Francis had the wisdom to know that this new field of work needed to be supported by the presence of another brother. Then when they came home, they shared their experiences with the rest of the friars. This gave them that feeling of being bonded to each other. They felt they belonged to the one family and that the others in the Fraternity cared for them and shared in what they were doing.

We know that God is the One who calls us to follow our vocation and He is the principal Formator but we also share in this work. Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote about “accompaniment” and said:

. “Formation ... is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of men and women. Those in charge of formation must therefore be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to accompany others on this journey. Sensitive to the action of grace, they will also be able to point out those obstacles which are less obvious. But above all they will disclose the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism by which this is accomplished. They will combine the illumination of spiritual wisdom with the light shed by human means, which can be a help both in discerning the call and in forming the new man or woman, until they are genuinely free. The chief instrument of formation is **personal dialogue**, a practice of irreplaceable and commendable effectiveness which should take place regularly and with a certain frequency.” *(Apostolic Exhortation on Consecrated Life no. 66)*

Before we consider the idea of “accompaniment’ more deeply, I would like to make another point which has been mentioned by others a number of times. When someone approaches you and asks about the Secular Franciscan Order and says, “What do you do in the OFS?” your reply must always indicate that Secular Franciscan Order is not so much as what one does, but what one is. It is a calling to a state of life, a way of living and thinking. I had the experience of a member of a Fraternity who had spent some years in an executive position in the OFS and when she finished her time in that position, she said, “I’ve done my bit, so now I can retire from the Order” and she stopped coming to any further meetings. I wonder what the Order really meant to her. She certainly could not have seen it as a way of life. That is one of the major points we should insist on to all new members of the Order so that they appreciate the nature of the Order as a commitment to live a Franciscan way of life. Here is a story that may help us understand our role in accompaniment:

**The Sculptor** There once was a sculptor working hard with his hammer and chisel on a large block of marble. A little boy who was watching him saw nothing more than large block of marble and small pieces of stone falling away left and right as the sculptor chiselled away at it. He had no idea of what was happening. But when the boy returned to the studio a few weeks later, he saw to his great surprise a large, powerful lion sitting in the place where the marble had stood. With great excitement the boy ran to the sculptor and said, “Sir, tell me, how did you know there was a lion hiding in the marble?” Cf. Nouwen, Henri, “*Clowning in Rome”.*

Just as the sculptor had in his mind’s eye the image he wanted to create, so too we, in our journey towards growth, keep present an ideal that will give life to a new identity, something that will stir up the one being formed to proceed on this journey. In other words, every person should have incentives which will shape his/her life like a sculptor who carves marble. In this way her/his formation will take shape and be the outcome of the process where she/he brings her or his potential to maturity. She/he comes to understand what she/he lacks and to consolidate her/his capabilities and will be able to experience personal relationships. The ideal, in this case, is the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. That is your inspiration that will guide you. The values presented there are not simply ideas but affect your style of life, values that are not spoken but which continually remind us of the choice of fraternity and minority and, above all, the choice of following Christ in fidelity. To do this requires someone who will “walk with” the person in formation.

When you come to think of it, the term “accompaniment” comes from the Latin *“cum pane”,* which means, “the one who shares bread with another.” It has been described in this way: “**Accompaniment** is a temporary, systematic assistance that an adult ,in his maturity and experience, gives to another, sharing part of the journey with him/ her so that this can make that person know him/herself better and decide on his/her own the future with freedom and responsibility”. To me this definition lacks the idea that it is a two-way street in both giving and receiving from each other in the formation process.

**Forming a Deep Friendship**

It is important that the new candidate or newly professed is able to share deeply with the one who accompanies her/him. Over a period of time, they are able to have a deep trust in each other and speak from the heart about difficulties or share experiences on a deeper level and being able to “open up” to each other. This is the way to true growth of the person to perceive what she/he wants most for the good of the other. This is something perceived not in words necessarily but in what has not been spoken. We see this in the letter that St Francis wrote to Brother Leo:

“Brother Leo, your brother Francis,

health and peace. I am speaking to you,

my son, in this way as a mother – because all the words that we spoke

on the road I place and advise briefly in this message and afterwards,

it is not necessary for you to come to me for counsel.

Because I advise you thus: in whatever way it seems better to you

to please the Lord God and to follow his footprints and poverty,

you may do it with the blessing of the Lord God

and my obedience.

And if it is necessary for you for your soul for some consolation to you,

and you want to come back to me, come”.

This passage seems important to me as it allows us to experience an essentially Franciscan form of accompaniment. Note these phrases: “The words that we have exchanged along the way” and “So I say to you, my son, as a mother”; from these statements we can see the Franciscan way of coming close to the accompanied person, by remaining close at hand to him or her. The terms used by the *Poverello* were brief and prudent showing the genuine way for accompaniment. Only after having reached this fundamental closeness (“my son”) would it be possible to help, reprove, and still remain in harmony with the other.

**Some qualities of this relationship**

The primary element of accompaniment is **“attentive listening”** which allows the accompanier (or sponsor) to discover the Spirit’s action in his companion, the one being formed. It also allows him/her to read the presence of conflict and immaturity, drawing out causes and consequences and offering a method for a better self-knowledge.

**Trusting listening** will make it possible for the formator-accompanier (sponsor) to obtain a deep, open communication with the accompanied which would allow the accompanier to know not only personal facts, but also the emotional states that accompany them: satisfaction, displeasure, sadness, boredom, joy, guilt, etc. Briefly, this communication will introduce the accompanier into the world of the other in his deepest attitudes and his intimate struggles.

It is important to note that it is the formator, the accompanier or sponsor, who must be ready to start the process by **opening herself/himself to the other** in sharing experiences, his own vocation, his faith, his struggles and the good that the Lord works in him. This is necessary to be a true “companion”, that is, one who “shares bread together” with the other. This “bread” is “the bread of faith, of hope in God, of the toil of seeking, right up to the sharing of one’s vocation, not in order to impose it, but rather to profess the beauty of a life that is fulfilled according to God’s plan. In fact, accompanying is celebrating together an experience of life.”

**On the part of the accompanied, there should be openness, confidence and a great deal of willingness to recognize one’s gifts and limitations, to find one’s true identity** without fear in the face of one’s own weakness, ideas and feelings; to sustain a solid and rigorous thinking; seeing the repercussions on one’s lifestyle and one’s exercise of freedom. Finally, one must be ready to pass from an unreal world to the real and concrete world of today.

Both the formator who accompanies and the one being formed who is accompanied need to **pray together, to study and to prepare for their meetings.** Improvising and not preparing for these important occasions will only leads to a waste of time, or saying too much, or dealing only with unimportant, insignificant matters. It may often be difficult to enlighten the conscience of another. However, it is important to remember that the accompanied creates a relationship of faith and that it cannot be neglected through the difficulties one must face, such as, in discovering one’s limitations, habits, or outside influences. It is easy to find excuses to avoid meeting because of what may appear to be something difficult to do.

**What should Accompaniment deal with?**

There are **three elements** which help us in our spiritual growth which we should keep in mind: Openness to love, faith and apostolic life. In each of these the accompaniment must lead the accompanied to make very concrete options that are consistent with the unifying value, the God of Love:

1. **Being Open to Love:** The **accompanier must make the accompanied open to firstly embrace his own personal family story**. There are many believers who cannot read their own story as a story of what God has done in them. One must try to perceive the sense of the story in relation to one’s own life, to be grateful for what God has done, and to look positively at the past without distortion, because that would change the meaning of events. The accompaniment must make it possible for reconciliation with one’s own story from the psychological point of view. The goal is the founding of one’s reality in the experience of God, recognizing one’s story as grace and as salvation. Still in the affective area, **the accompanier must lead the accompanied to an acceptance of the other as different without letting this impede his self-affirmation**. Starting with God’s salvific love, we discover that our vocation is love. And this discovery leads us to love others in their reality and to accept them as they are.
2. **In the area of Faith:** Vocational and spiritual accompaniment has the ultimate goal of helping the accompanied person **to see the loving presence of God in his life, in such a way that he can speak to God, starting from his own story and not only from his own religious culture**. Only the experience of God’s loving presence in his life will make it possible to give a believing and consistent meaning to the fragments and events of a life. The individual then will feel that he/she is the subject of his existence and will be able to make his/her faith the unifying nucleus of all of his/her life. Only in this way will faith become personal. It will involve the whole person and not just part of it and it will be transformed in the source of every life choice. In that moment God will be the absolute of life – “My God and my All” – and the person will freely choose to depend on the One who loves and who is worthy to be loved.
3. **In the Apostolic area:** vocational and spiritual accompaniment will have to lead to a choice of a way of **being and acting that is in harmony with the following of Christ according to Francis’ form of life**, so that they may become a key element of discernment at the moment of concrete apostolic options.

Br Massimo Reschiglian ofm sums this up well when he describes **the process of Accompaniment:**

Firstly, one **must build up a climate of mutual trust** between the two, the accompanier and the one being accompanied; this may mean overcoming one’s own reluctance to share one’s life with another, being open to each other, being honest with oneself, etc. What is happening in me at this time? Secondly, both **must be open to the movements of the Spirit**, being alert to those signs that become manifest in the course of the conversation. E.g., Jesus and the two disciples at Emmaus. Thirdly, **one’s spiritual needs should be expressed and appreciated**. What do I see as God’s wish for me at this time? What are my strengths and weaknesses? Do I see myself as dependent upon God? What is truly important for me at this time? What are the obstacles to my progress? We need to remember that interior transformation only comes through trials and suffering.

**Qualities of the one who accompanies**

Teresa V. Baker ofs, a well-known Franciscan, describes what she regards as necessary qualities of the one who accompanies:

* A love of your Secular Franciscan vocation and a desire to share it
* A willingness to be open to the Holy Spirit and to another
* A desire to share God’s goodness in your life with another
* An openness to share your understanding and love of Sts Francis and Clare
* A listening heart
* A prayerful spirit
* A sense of nurture for another’s vocation
* A lived experience of Scripture
* A call to service
* An appreciation of creation

She suggests also that the process can begin in various ways which can vary from fraternity to fraternity. For some, the person who introduced the inquirer to the fraternity may be chosen; in another case, the candidate chooses who she/he would like to have as companion. She continues: “Interaction is the key to this process. Initial contact most times becomes the responsibility of the professed member who invites the other person to share a cup of coffee, etc. Sharing experiences is an important part of this meeting.

**How can we apply all this to On-going Formation?**

All that has already been said applies equally to those professed members of the Fraternity as the non-professed. One should be alert to the troubles of others and show a willingness to help where possible. This must never take the form of “interfering” with other’s affairs but showing a willingness to be there for the other member if required.

Many Fraternities have “phone-trees” where they keep in touch with “isolated” or non-active members of the Fraternity. Some also share the literature of the Fraternity with them or send out information from their meetings (minutes) to let them know that they are still remembered and treasured. Fraternity has a wider membership than those actually at the Fraternity meeting and those other members should always be kept in mind. I have always advocated that deceased members of the Fraternity be remembered on their anniversaries, if possible, or at the meeting by a prayer for deceased members and those who are sick or in need.

**Conclusion**

“Following the footprints of Jesus Christ more closely” was St Francis’ purpose and it should be ours also. It is also the principal objective of his formative plan in our initial and on-going formation. The formation process must bring about a change in the one being formed. The person being formed must take on a Gospel identity through an interior transformation so much so that others in his or her community must recognize that a change has taken place. The one being formed must be able to resist the difficulties of our times and mission. This is where accompaniment – together with spiritual direction - can help to achieve this aim in bringing about such a transformation.

The ideas that we have examined should be helpful in forming our own plan and guiding us as we move together following Christ in the pattern of St Francis and St Clare. It is a task we have in hand and one in which we can be encouraged to share with others.