**FRANCISCAN FAMILY MODEL**

***“How Should an Order like the OFS be managed at all levels?”***

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap, National Spiritual Assistant OFS-Australia

When Saint Francis recognised that, among the friars there was a problem in exercising authority in the Order, he turned towards the model of a family rather than to the power of hierarchy. Yes, the Order would have to abide by Canon Law and would have to use Canon Law structures as an Order within the Catholic Church, but Saint Francis had a new vision based on the Gospel life, and he refused to accept the Rule of Saint Benedict or Saint Augustine.[[1]](#footnote-1) He did not wish his Order to follow the community structures of the monks, but rather the evangelical, itinerant life of Jesus and the Apostles. He said he was called to live in “simplicity and humility” that the Lord wanted him to be a fool in this world.[[2]](#footnote-2) His Order ultimately became a new *family* in the Church. The word “family” here is not just a description. It is a spirituality of relationship.

To this end, Saint Francis constantly says that those in charge should act towards the others as in *a family*, as a mother towards her children. In Chapter 9:10 & 11 of the Earlier Rule Saint Francis says: “*Let each* (person) *confidently make known* (their) *need to another that the other might discover what is needed and minister to* (them)*. Let each one love and care for* (the other) *as a mother loves and cares for her son* (or daughter) *in those matters in which God has given* (them) *the grace.”* The place where Saint Francis sets up the whole fraternity as a structure of mother and children is in his Rule for Hermitages. The mothers take care of running the place while the sons live a contemplative life.

In the Letter of Approval of the new OFS Rule, Pope Paul VI, taking his cue from the very first chapter of the New Rule, uses a special Italian word to describe the origins of the Secular Franciscans. Let me give you the Italian first and highlight the word, then explain what I mean.

*Il serafico Patriarca San Francesco di Assisi, mentre era in vita ed anche dopo la sua preziosa morte, ha invogliato molti a servire Dio in seno alla famiglia religiosa da lui fondata, ma ha attirato anche innumerevoli laici ad entrare nelle sue istituzioni rimanendo nel mondo, per quanto era loro possibile.*

The whole sentence has been officially translated for English-speaking Seculars this way, and, take note, without any reference to this word:

The Seraphic Patriarch Saint Francis of Assisi, during his life and even after his beautiful death, not only attracted many to serve God in the religious family founded by him but also drew numerous members of the laity to enter his communities as far as possible while remaining in the world.

It is also translated with *seno* still in the text:

The Seraphic Patriarch St Francis of Assisi, while he was in this life and even after his precious death, has encouraged many to serve God in the bosom/womb of the religious family founded by him, but has also attracted numerous lay people to enter in its institutions remaining in the world as far as was possible.

The wording of this text is not as direct and clear as I would like it to be. The words *“but has also attracted numerous lay people to enter in its institutions”* does not convey directly that Saint Francis founded the Secular Franciscan Order as a third and authentic way of living the Franciscan way of life. This direct founding by Saint Francis is extremely important to our understanding of how we see the Secular Franciscan way of life as an authentic way of Franciscan life.

There is a derogatory tendency to explain the first, second and third order as if we were describing a horse race. In fact, all the wonderful forms of religious life that follow the Franciscan Third Order Rule are authentic expressions of Franciscan life. We need to celebrate the richness of the Franciscan tradition that gives birth to such a variety of charisms.

So let’s be very clear. The Secular Franciscan Order with its Rule and Constitutions is an authentic way of living the spirituality of Saint Francis. In fact, the fullness of the Franciscan charism is only visible when the Third Order founded by Saint Francis is present. The Franciscan family finds “its coronation” in the Secular Franciscan way of life.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is the word *“seno”* however that is my focus. It seems to be important to our question: *“How should an Order like the OFS be managed at all levels?”* This motherly or feminine image is in both the Rule and the General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order. We find this word in the Italian text in Article 1:2; Article 62; Article 66; and Article 70. In the same sentence, the Secular Franciscan Order is said to belong to the same “family” indeed of having “a special place”[[4]](#footnote-4) in this family. In these texts, the English greatly lacks the sensitivity of the Italian text. The Italian text uses the word *“seno”* to describe a relationship. What does it mean?

The word “seno” is the same in both Italian and Spanish, and it is richer and warmer than the word “heart” in English, in the sense of “core reality”. It is a little more interesting even than “bosom” as we see in the third translation. It would be better to say, with all the Latin emotional expressiveness of *“seno”* that the Secular Franciscan Order came to birth from the *loving heart*, core or even more evocatively, the *womb* of the religious family founded by Saint Francis. Saint Bonaventure would take this one step further and say it was born, as was the whole Franciscan way of life, out of the spiritual womb of Saint Francis himself.

Saint Bonaventure in speaking about the beginning of the Order tells us that Saint Francis turned to the Blessed Mother and asked for her intercession, and so the whole process was like a conception and a birth:

While her servant Francis

was living in the church of the Virgin Mother of God,

he prayed to her

who had conceived the Word full of truth

imploring her with continuous sighs

to become his advocate.

Through the merits of the Mother of Mercy

he conceived and brought to birth

the spirit of the Gospel.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Later Saint Bonaventure writing about the vocation of Bernard of Quintavalle calls him “the first-born son of our blessed father.” And then he tells us, “God’s servant (Francis) was filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit over the conception of his first child.”

In the first Chapter of his Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, Saint Francis used mystical terms to describe the Secular Franciscan way of life. In commenting on the words of the Lord Jesus: “Who is my mother, and who are my brethren?” (Matthew 12: 48 – 50.) Saint Francis gives us what becomes a Canticle of Relationships:

O how glorious it is to have a holy and great Father in heaven!

O how holy, [and] consoling to have such a beautiful and wonderful Spouse!

O how holy and how loving, gratifying, humbling, peace-giving, sweet,

worthy of love, and, above all things, desirable

to have such a Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Saint Francis is talking about the essence of Secular Franciscan life as being children of the Father, spouses of Jesus Christ, conceiving and being impregnated with the Word of the Gospel, and bringing Christ to birth through the good works we do. It is quite an extraordinary vision given to us in few and simple words. However those who think that this mystical explanation is really too much, need to take a look at Saint Bonaventure’s commentary on the same text of the Gospel. In his short mystical work called *The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*,[[6]](#footnote-6) Saint Bonaventure elaborated this mystical process even further than Saint Francis did.

Once you put the *Exhortation* and the *Five Feasts* together, you have both Saint Francis and Saint Bonaventure giving you a treatise using the mystical language of relationships, which speaks of a spiritual process; a transformation of the person. The Franciscan vision is for them all about relationships; it is all about love and compassion – on every level.

So, I want to focus again on *“in seno”* and here I am not looking as a translator of the text, but rather searching for a quality of relationship. To emphasise this, not by accuracy of translation, because *“seno”* certainly does, in this context mean “heart” or “bosom” but I want to make an evocative point that the most devotional place where Italians encounter this word *“seno”* is in the Italian version of the Hail Mary:

Ave Maria, piena di grazia,
il Signore è con te.
Tu sei benedetta fra le donne
e benedetto è il frutto del tuo seno, Gesú.
Santa Maria, Madre di Dio,
prega per noi peccatori,
adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte.
*Amen*

“Blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.” OK, it is an emotive point, but it is a telling point. Let’s look at General Constitution Article 1.2 & 1.3 Here we see *“seno”* translated as “bosom”.

1.2. *Rule .1* The Seraphic Patriarch St Francis of Assisi, while he was in life and even after his precious death, has encouraged many to serve God in the bosom of the religious family founded by him…”

1.3. *Rule 2.*From the beginning, the Secular Franciscan Order has had its own proper place in the Franciscan Family.

Let me give you another example, Article 70, which speaks about the Presidency of the International Council.

Article 70

**2.** In seno al Consiglio internazionale è costituita la Presidenza del CIOFS, che ne costituisce parte integrante.

**2.** The Presidency of the International Council of the SFO is constituted within the international council of which it forms an integral part.

From a spirituality point of view, the English is as dry as toast. It is merely a description. May God forgive the translators for their lack of poetry to say the least. What I am saying is that the Franciscan point of view is all about relationships. Our spirituality is about the quality of relationships; our understanding of reality is about relationships. The legislation of the Secular Franciscan Order still has vestiges of this mystical language of love even if the English text is more often a mere description in most places.

The word “fraternity” so often alternated with “community” by Secular Franciscans and friars, as if they were a synonym of each other (which they are in the dictionary), but for us Franciscans, fraternity has a deeper, richer meaning. It has a completely different meaning than the secular understanding of the word. We are brothers and sisters, not because we are a group that meets regularly. We are brothers and sisters not because we are friends. We are a fraternity because we are brothers and sisters of Jesus. The dynamic of family and fraternity should be at work on every level of the OFS. It should be at the very core of each fraternity, at its very heart and womb.

The Secular Franciscan Order is, in some places, in danger of degenerating into a group mentality and only being concerned about those who come to meetings. Isolated members are often forgotten and we no longer have their current addresses or phone numbers. We do not send them a Christmas or an Easter Card. No one is keeping in contact with them. On the other end of this, isolated members do not communicate either. Certainly on a financial level, members who for some reason do not come to a meeting seldom remember to contribute financially to the Fraternity. In fact, these “alienated” brothers and sisters - I think they were called in the past? - often do not even make provision with their family or in their will for the OFS Fraternity to be contacted when they die. Yet in fact we say that each person, having made profession, continues to be a Secular Franciscan unless they formally send in a written request to be no longer considered as a Franciscan. Canon 120 #1 of the Code of Canon Law states that a juridical person, such as the OFS Local Fraternity, continues to exist for a hundred years after the death of the last professed member, and it can be re-activated. This safeguards fraternities that have been destroyed by war or adverse ideologies, e.g., Communism in Eastern Europe.

Family is a powerful concept that goes with fraternity. For family we will travel across the country, we will travel across the world. We would recognise their voice if they phoned us from the Moon or Mars or Alpha Centuri.[[7]](#footnote-7)

So I am saying that there is enough evidence hidden in Secular Franciscan legislation to say that a local fraternity Council is elected from the very womb, from the spiritual heart and core, of the fraternity. It is a spiritual relationship. It is a loving relationship. Anything less and you have great difficulty because the Flesh and the World and the Devil will have their way with you.

**The Flesh** will become weary, tired and frustrated at everything that can go wrong. And Murphy’s Law says: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.” Finagle’s Law adds to that, “at the worst possible moment!” Saint Francis had an antidote for this angst; he called it Perfect Joy. Old Catholics simply told you to “Offer it up! **The World** will bid us to seek esteem, to be seen as always capable, efficient and competent; to have pride in your self and your talents and to look after Number One first. Saint Francis would teach us to have mercy and compassion, even on ourselves and to place ourselves at the loving service of others as a mother does her children. **The Devil**, the clever one, who knows more than all of us put together, “hangs us by our talents as much as by our weaknesses”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Saint Francis tells us we cannot protect ourselves from him except by simplicity and humility and being willing to admit our faults and mistakes.

So you see, I am saying, that the way we must manage the Secular Franciscan Order at all levels is to see it as a loving family.

All I hear in the silence beyond that is Our Blessed Lord asking Saint Peter the same question three times. It is the most beautiful confession ever made. Jesus, with the greatest sensitivity does not demand that Peter say he is sorry for denying him three times. He does not humiliate Peter. He simply asks if Peter loves him and each time gives him something to do to prove this love. “Feed my lambs” “look after my sheep” and “feed my sheep”. Peter and the other apostles know very well what Jesus is doing. He is forgiving Peter’s three-fold denial of him. And with an exquisite tenderness Jesus is not only forgiving Peter, He is forgiving and healing all of them. They all failed Jesus and ran away except John. The three-fold command to feed the newborn lambs and the sheep as proof of this love, is for all of the Apostles; it is for all those who serve the Order at every level.

1. Legend of Perugia 114 “I do not wish you to quote any other Rule to me, whether that of Saint Benedict, or Saint Augustine or Saint Bernard, or to recommend any other form of life except this way which God in His mercy has revealed and given to me. The Lord has told me that he wanted to make a new fool of me in the world, and God does not want to lead us by any other knowledge than that.” See also the Mirror of Perfection 68. “My Brothers! my Brothers! God has called me by the way of simplicity and humility, and has revealed this way for me and for all who are willing to trust and follow me.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1Corinthians 4:10 “Here we are fools for the sake of Christ…” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pope Benedict XV: *Sacra propediem* No 4. The striking and immortal services rendered by Francis to the Christian cause, … found, as it were, their coronation in the Third Order. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. OFS Rule 1.2; General Constitutions 1:3 “From the beginning, the Secular Franciscan Order has its own proper place in the Franciscan Family” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. LM Ch., 3:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eric Doyle OFM translated *The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*, with an Introduction, available in SFO FILES (http://sfo.franciscans.org.au) at sfo13/1faw.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Just in case you have never heard of Alpha Centauri. It is the closest star system to our Solar System. It is 4.7 light years away. A light year is 9 trillion kilometres or 6 trillion mile. So if you asked a person in the Alpha Centauri star system a question you would have to wait about 4 and a half years for an answer. Just about as long as it will take the Secular Franciscan Order to answer the question before us. I just thought you would like to know this as a sort of consolation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This is a saying of Br Giles, a companion of St Francis. I have not rediscovered the exact reference to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)