**RENEW YOUR VISION**

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

I greet all of you who are here with us on Zoom, and I extend my greetings to all your local fraternities in the Regional Fraternity of NSW/ACT, and in the other Regional Fraternities as well.

I was deeply affected by Pope Francis’s Message to the OFM Friars in our General Chapter in July 2021, so much so that I was convinced that it carries a strong message also for you Secular Franciscans. You are confronted by the same problems as are your Spiritual Assistants and all the friars.

Because of the pandemic, we have found ourselves living in emergency situations of isolation, lockdown, and suffering, for many months now. On the one hand, this critical experience encourages all of us to recognize how much our earthly life is a journey to be made as pilgrims and strangers. We need at times to lighten our load of personal goods and demands before we continue.

On the other hand, it has been a favourable opportunity to intensify our relationship with Jesus our Lord and St Francis, and with our Franciscan brothers and sisters. I am thinking of your local fraternities. You are called to be a humble, prophetic presence in the midst of God's people, and you witness to a simple and joyful life in fraternity.

In these difficult and complex times, there is a risk of being "paralyzed", but you are experiencing the grace of *celebrating* your secular Franciscan vocation, which is already a reason to praise and thank God. Pope Francis calls us, “May you *renew your vision* and *embrace your future*. Be guided by the words of St Paul: ‘*Arise... and Christ will give you light’*" (*Eph* 5:14). It is a word of resurrection that plants you firmly in the Easter event, because there is no renewal and no future except in the risen Christ. So, open yourselves with joyful thanks, and welcome the signs of God's presence and action, and rediscover the gift of your Franciscan charism and your fraternal identity.

Renew your vision! This is what happened to young Francis. He himself attested to it, when he recounted the experience that he placed at the beginning of his conversion in his *Testament.* It was his encounter with the leper, when "what was bitter was changed into sweetness of soul and body" (*Test* 1-4). At the roots of your Franciscan spirituality is this encounter with the least and the suffering. It’s marked by the sign of "doing mercy". God touched the heart of Francis through the mercy that Francis offered to his poor brother, and he continues to touch our hearts through our encounter with others, especially those most in need. The renewal of your vision after the pandemic can start only from this new gaze whereby you contemplate the poor and marginalized brother or sister, who is a powerful sign of the presence of God in your life.

From this renewed gaze, this concrete experience of encounter with our wounded neighbours, we can gain a renewed energy to look to the future as brothers and sisters. That is who you are, according to your beautiful name, Brothers and Sisters of Penance of Assisi, which St Francis and his early followers were called.

The renewing strength that you need comes from the Spirit of God, from that "holy operation" (*Regula Bullata* 10, 8) that is the sure sign of God’s action. That Spirit, who transformed the bitterness of encounter of Francis with the leper into sweetness of soul and body, is still at work today to give new freshness and energy to each one of you if you allow yourselves to be stirred by the least ones of our time. I encourage you to go out after lockdown to meet the men and women who suffer in soul and body, to offer your humble and fraternal presence, without grand speeches, but making your closeness felt as secular Franciscans.

Go towards a wounded creation, our common home, that suffers from a distorted exploitation of the earth's goods for the enrichment of a few, while creating conditions of misery for many. Go as men and women of dialogue. Seek to build bridges instead of walls. Offer them the gift of fraternity and social friendship in a world that is struggling to find the path of a common vision. Go forth as “messengers of joy and hope” (OFS GC 26), men and women of peace and reconciliation. Inspire those who sow hatred, division, and violence to be converted. Offer their victims the hope that comes from truth, justice, and forgiveness.

From these sought-after encounters, you will receive an impetus to live the Gospel ever more fully, according to your way of life: "The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the centre of his life with God and people" (*Seraficus Patriarca* art. 4, 24 June 1978)

Although your secular Order faces the daunting challenges of declining numbers and ageing, don’t let anxiety and fear prevent you from opening your hearts and minds to the renewal that the Spirit of God brings about in you personally and among you as a local fraternity. You have a spiritual heritage of priceless value, rooted in the Gospel life, and marked by the spirit of prayer and fraternity. Don’t forget that you receive a renewed gaze that can open you to God's future, from your closeness to the poor, the victims of modern slavery, the refugees and the excluded of this world. They are your teachers. Embrace them as St Francis did!

Dear brothers and sisters! May the Most High, Almighty, Good Lord make you ever more credible and joyful witnesses of the Gospel. May God grant you to lead a simple and fraternal life, and may Jesus lead you on the paths of the world to sow the seed of the Good News with faith and hope. May God bless you abundantly. And, please, pray for me, too.

Fr Carl Schafer OFM

Channeling Pope Francis

Oh! I’ve composed a little ditty that I’d like to share with you:

*After the war is over, after old Covid’s through;*

*When the Pandemic’s beaten, we’re coming back to you.*

*We’ll enjoy the Fraternity’s tea break, with the Office,*

*and Mass, and more.*

*After old Covid’s busted, after the war!*