***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**November 2024**

**DISCERNMENT AND DECISION MAKING**

# *Never act without reflection, and you will not regret your actions*

# (*Ecclesiastes* 32:19).

In the Secular Franciscan Order, the decision-making bodies are the Chapters and Councils. Individual Ministers and Councillors have a co-responsibility to animate and guide the Order. Ministers and Councillors should inspire and make suggestions to fraternities for “the development of the life of the Fraternity and of apostolic activities in the light of the fundamental Franciscan options.” The fundamental Franciscan options are those guided by the Gospel, the Church, the Rule, the General Constitutions, and the example of St Francis.

While all members of the Council have a role in decision-making, the Ministers have a special responsibility for ensuring that the decisions made are implemented. The Spiritual Assistant has a voice on all matters except financial decisions and voting in elections.

The Secular Franciscan Order encourages all the brothers and sisters to be co-responsible for the life of the Fraternity and for the unity of fraternities. Every member has a role in animating the life of the community. The General Constitutions call on Ministers and Councillors to promote collaboration among the brothers and sisters.

The Secular Franciscan Order is not a democracy, but a family guided by the Holy Spirit. Fraternity members should be consulted on issues that affect them but decision-making lies with Chapters and Councils. If ministers and councils take an autocratic approach to decision-making, they alienate people and risk fragmenting the fraternity. A purely consensus approach, however, may allow the fraternities to be held hostage by a minority who fear change.

Leaders are called to make “concrete and courageous choices” (GC Art 50.1), as are all members (Art 12.2; 22.2). Leaders need to be “open to dialogue, and ready to give and receive help and collaboration” (Art 31.2). Leadership and authority in the Franciscan tradition are to be seen as humble service to the fraternity which is always guided by love and compassion. The role of leadership is only temporary (Art 32.2).

The CIOFS document, *Animation and Servant Leadership*, lists some of the hoped for characteristics of the servant leaders in the Secular Franciscan Order: be prayerful; ready to listen to the Holy Spirit; have a profound sacramental life; be devoted to the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist; be willing to correct oneself; have a spirit of service; have a spirit of responsibility; be able to see the big picture; be dedicated to individuals; have ideas, vision and dreams; be prepared to listen but also to act; be capable and open to dialogue; be able to evaluate a situation; to see through the lens of the Bible and the teaching of Jesus; and, most importantly, to follow Jesus who “loved his own in the world and loved them to the end” ( John 13:3).

When St Francis of Assisi was asked to name the perfect friar, he did not name one person. Instead, he listed the unique talents and skills of several friars (cf. *The Little Flowers of St Francis*, Chapter 6). He often said that he would have preferred the Rule of the Order to have named the Holy Spirit as the Minister General rather than one person (cf. 2 Cel 193). The Franciscan sources show a balance between the obedience that an individual owes to his Minister and the need for the Minister to seek counsel and to act always with mercy and compassion.

Collective discernment through Chapters is a distinctive mark of the Franciscan Family, inherited from the Cistercian monastic tradition. This form of decision making has come to the fore in recent times in the Church with Pope Francis’s renewal of the concept of synodality in the Church. In many ways, this sees the discernment and decision-making processes of religious congregations being reflected in the broader Church.

Part of the Synodal process is the promotion of *Conversations in the Spirit*. In many ways, this already mirrors how we reflect on the Scripture and the way that St Francis sought counsel before deciding. It involves the prayerful listening to many voices in the light of the Gospel and the signs of the times. We are called not to listen to the loudest voice but to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the fraternity. The *Conversations in the Spirit* process is ideal for consulting members to address complex and significant issues at a Chapter.

The steps of *Conversations in the Spirit* applied to the Order may involve:

Round 1: Gathering:

#1. Members individually take time to pray and reflect on the question that is to be addressed.

#2. The meeting listens to the Word of God from a passage that is fitting for the question at hand. Together, they pray and ask for God’s guidance, reflecting on the issue in the light of the Gospel and their own experience.

#3. Around the table, each member of the fraternity takes time to say what they feel that God is asking of them in the question before them. They should not be interrupted or questioned but listened to in silence. People should not comment on what others have said. Everyone is encouraged to speak from their heart. Ideally people should speak for two minutes. The fraternity could be divided into smaller groups of about eight people so that this phase lasts for around sixteen minutes.

Round 2: Group Listening:

#1. Around the table, each person briefly responds to what struck them in the initial round of sharing. “What did the group say?” “What did I feel?” “What struck me?” Ideally, this should allow each person to speak for two minute each.

Round 3: Moving Forward:

#1. After a period of silence, the whole fraternity should engage in free dialogue with other participants so that the fraternity collectively identifies differences and commonality of approaches to the issue at hand. Together, the fraternity is listening to where the Holy Spirit is leading it so that it can seek to move forward in a common direction.

#2. A concrete statement of agreement is sought which has the approval of a significant majority of those present (two thirds). This may involve a nominated person taking time to draft a set of words that summarises the consensus reached. The issues of difference and commonality are also recorded.

#3. If this is a fraternity meeting, then the final decision is made by referral to the Council for consideration. If this is a Chapter, those present may make the final decision, or refer the discussion to its Council for further reflection and implementation, depending on the complexity of the issue.

*Conversations in the Spirit* do not take away the responsibility of Councils to lead and make “courageous choices,” but they do provide a method of consultation that allows members to speak from the heart. The process acknowledges differences but strives for unity. Synodality processes do not absolve leaders from making difficult decisions, but they help to ensure that the members are consulted and that everyone is better informed about the issues.

**Further reading**

CIOFS*, Servant Leadership in the Writings of Francis and Clare* (2024).

https://ciofs.info/offices/formation-2/

CIOFS, Animation *and Servant Leadership*. (2024)

https://ciofs.info/offices/formation-2/

Julian Paparella, *How to have Conversations in the Spirit? Steps towards a Synodal Church* https://slmedia.org/blog/how-to-have-conversations-in-the-spirit

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