**Some Reflections on the Secular Franciscan Order in Australia**

In a few weeks’ time, there will be a seminar held in Sydney on Formation in the Secular Franciscan Order in Australia. This is a very important topic to be considered as it will determine the direction the Order will take and shape the future of the Order in Australia. What should we be looking for and how are we going to achieve our goals? The Order has a Rule and Constitutions which are our guide, but putting these guidelines into practice is the challenge that faces those who gather at the meeting.

**The Goals of the Secular Franciscan Order**

Before considering the goals we should make clear the fact that the Secular Franciscan Order is a way of life and not a pious sodality that one can join and drop out if one wishes. Secular Franciscans make a commitment to follow Franciscan spirituality in the way they live and work for the rest of their lives. While it does not bind a member under oath as it does in a religious Order, it does imply a serious commitment to live this way of life until death. It is a promise, under honour, to come closer to the Lord following the example of St Francis of Assisi and St Clare of Assisi by living up to their ideals as far as possible while still remaining in a secular state.

I had the experience in one Fraternity where the Formator finished her term of office. She stated at that time that she had done “her bit” and retired from the Order! My question was, “Where was her commitment to the Order? Did she really mean what she said at her public profession of the Rule of the Order? Profession has to be lived out and deepened in the same way as a marriage or a person who takes on the responsibility of a vowed life. People have to “grow into” their Secular Franciscan state of life.

This journey that a Secular Franciscan undertakes is not done alone. Secular Franciscans join the Franciscan Family and share the same charism of St Francis that First and Second Orders of St Francis have. The bond of family is like any family and implies caring and loving one another as brothers and sisters by supporting and encouraging one another, spurring one another on to greater holiness, bringing joy and hope into each other’s lives. By doing this and faithfully and joyfully following the Rule of the Order, they become more Christ-like and, by that very fact, will draw others to take notice and, if God wants it, come and join them and follow the same path.

It is important to realise that Secular Franciscans can often achieve a greater pastoral effectiveness than a priest or religious because they are more “on the same level” by their secularity and can reach areas where a religious or priest could not. Their apostolate is to be missionary and to go out and bring others closer to God. That is what Pope Francis insisted on in his apostolic letter, *The Joy of the Gospel.* It is a privilege that always has been the ideal of St Francis of Assisi.

**How achieve our goal?**

I believe this can only be done as a Fraternity and through our Fraternity meetings. Fraternity sharing of experiences is an important part of our gatherings; praying together and studying together and especially reflecting on the Sacred Scriptures, we can grow together and become a light in the darkness to others.

I hope these few thoughts will encourage you to continue your good work for the Order.

Fraternally, Fr Norbert Pittorino ofm