

FRATERNITY - Gift and Task

Rome, September 13, 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace and all good!

Francis never defined the word fraternity (*fraternitas*) in his writings – he always talked about brothers and sisters, how they should live and be toward each other. He does not use the word community either, which some might think is the same as fraternity. Francis and Clare show us that while community is about physical presence somewhere, fraternity is a matter of the heart and quality relationships between people.

Francis' dream of fraternity is best seen in the first days of living together with the brothers in Rivo Torto and the Portiuncula where:



... holy simplicity filled them, innocence of life taught them, and purity of heart so possessed them that they were completely ignorant of duplicity of heart. For just as there was in them one faith, so there was one spirit, one will, one charity, continual unity of spirit, harmony in living, cultivation of virtues, agreement of minds and loyalty of actions. 1 Celano 46

In his Testament, we discover the path that led Francis to God, himself and others. This was a path of deepening relationship with God in which God gave Francis what he needed to understand a life of relationship with all. Francis understood the words and ways of Jesus, moving from a personal to a communal response, a way of love and compassion that was open to all. Francis saw all creation as his brother or sister, from the smallest child to the grandest king, brother ... sister... from the beautiful butterflies to the tallest trees, brother cricket ... sister Mother Earth. Throughout the years, the message of Francis challenges us to remember our radical connections with each other and all creation. Our lives are more and more intertwined and we see the impact of even the seemingly insignificant acts on our land, sea and sky in the web of life. Mother Earth is mother to us all, providing us with nourishment and beauty. Every day Brother Sun shines on all and provides us with energy and life, and Sister Moon gently guides us through the darkness of night. These relationships sustain us, and they are fragile.

*Do you understand
what I have done for you?"*
~ John 13

Francis' example calls everyone to join the journey of brotherhood and sisterhood and shows us that what seems so counter-cultural is possible.

As he prayed and meditated on the Gospel, Francis understood Jesus' ethic of compassion toward all. This became a light to lead him. What touched his heart? Love, respect, non-judgment, mercy, forgiveness, purity, ministering to others, reverence, patience, humility, simplicity, sincerity, peace, love, goodness, obedience and giving -- all this he lived and put into practice. His life was the definition of fraternity that he never wrote.

Let us end with a story: (*source: Anonymous*)

Late one night a wise one sat in the dark forest with small number of disciples. Suddenly the wise one asked a question: "How can we know when night has ended and day has begun?"

One young man answered, "You know the night is over when you can look off in the distance and tell which animal is a dog and which is a sheep."

"It is a good answer," the wise one said slowly, "but it isn't quite the answer I would give."

A young woman tried to answer. "You know the night is over when you can tell an olive tree from a fig tree."

Once again the wise one shook his head. "That was a fine answer; still, it is not the answer I seek."

Finally, one of them begged, "Please answer your own question, wise one. How can we know when night has ended and day has begun?"

The Wise One looked at each one before he spoke. "When you look into the eyes of another human being and see a brother or a sister, you will know it is morning. If you cannot see a brother or a sister, you will know that no matter what time it is, for you it will always be night. And you will always be in the dark."

The message of Francis about fraternity is grounded in our good God who created each of us uniquely, loving us into being – also creating us in communion, each needing all the others. Only when we take the time to look into their eyes will we experience Jesus, our first brother, who shows us the way to live in light, the light we call fraternity, a union with God, and *fraternitas* with all our brothers and sisters in all of creation.

Sr. Deborah LOCKWOOD, President IFC-TOR
Sr. M. Magdalena SCHMITZ, Vice-President
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FRATERNITY – Gift and Task

Sr Regina Fučík SSM
Inter-Franciscan Study Group - Spiritual Path
Original Language: German

1.1 Fraternity - Sisterliness

Franciscan-Christian brotherliness/sisterliness is more than an enthusiastic feeling; nor is it an idealistic goal in unattainable distance. Rather, it is something very concrete: a relationship that connects people in a binding way, attention that seeks the good of others, concrete community that does not shy away from the everyday difficulties and conflicts, but endures them, withstands them - in the expectation that the Spirit of God will make living together possible and in the hope that the community will be experienced as the house of God.

One of the most important words in the language of St. Francis is “brother”. He saw himself so much as a brother that they did not even find it necessary to mention Francis by name when speaking of him. They simply said, *“Brothers, thus says the Brother”*. (Jordan of Giano - Chronicle 17,3)

Francis unequivocally calls the community he founded “fraternitas - brotherhood”, in order to emphasize that fraternity is a constitutive element of his alternative way of life. The fact that Francis turns the usual hierarchy upside down and calls the superiors “servants of the fraternity” corresponds to that.

Worldly differences mean nothing to Francis: young and old, poor and rich, citizens and strangers, men and women, members of his community and outsiders, Christians and Muslims, good and evil, friends and enemies, people, animals and stones - everything is brother or sister to Francis. Fraternity proves to be the central idea in the life and thought of St. Francis. Francis’ idea was to overcome the social differences of the historically or otherwise defined classes. This is a revolutionary attitude at a time of class distinctions and hierarchical thinking.

1.2 Encountering Each Other as Brother - Sister (Egger, W., Lehmann L., Rotzetter, A.)

For Francis, the Holy Spirit is not only the leader of the entire fraternity but of each individual brother. Francis did not want uniformity.

“In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprints and poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience.” Letter to Brother Leo 3

Since the first brothers were itinerant and had no permanent dwelling, mutual personal relationships were essential.



Miniature from the Legenda Major
© Museo Francescano di Roma

“With heartfelt love they loved one another, and one cared for the other and cared for him like a mother for her only and beloved son. Such a strong love burned in them that it seemed easy to them to abandon their bodies to death, not only for the love of Christ, but also for the salvation of the soul or the body of their brothers”. Legend of the Three Companions 41,8-9

Francis wanted a family model for his brotherhood. This concern is also found in the Rule: each individual should discover his or her own personal vocation and charism. Thus he wrote to Brother Leo:

“And wherever brothers meet one another, let them act like members of a common family. And let them securely make their needs known to one another, for if a mother loves and cares for her carnal son, how much more should one love and care for his spiritual son? And if one of them should become ill, let the other brothers serve him as they themselves would like to be served.”

Regula Bullata 6,7-9

1.3 Brotherly/Sisterly Togetherness (John - Paul II, Grieco G.)

This draws our attention to the Franciscan Family that Francis and Clare founded at the beginning of the 13th century. They are united by a sincere and deep friendship. They are both committed to the same goal, God's Kingdom; both feel the wish to live the gospel radically and to pass it on to the people as a life-giving power. People are drawn to their way of life. Women and men from every social class want to join them, to live the gospel as they do. In barely ten years three strong branches grow from the small beginnings: 1210 the Brotherhood of the Friars Minor, 1212 the community of the Sisters Minor and, almost at the same time, a lay community.



Miniature from the Legenda Major
Museo Francescano di Roma

Not Francis or Clare alone, but Francis and Clare together found a movement that still today is able to enthuse women and men, calling them to follow them. What is special about their charism is that sisters and brothers in the one Franciscan Family are dependent on one another. The Franciscan Family can only experience its wholeness in the fraternal coexistence of men and women. For this reason, despite the diversity of vocations, their unity and loving concern for one another should be a matter of course. It follows then that the various Franciscan Orders and communities should work together.

1.4 Living as Brothers and Sisters - Thoughts for Reflection (Mülling, Ch.)

Francis knows that a true relationship with God must prove itself in unconditional love of neighbour. Lived fraternity, as an expression of the lived love for God and neighbour, has therefore also a special meaning for him.

Whoever wants to become a true brother or sister to others like Francis is invited to love "in spite of". In the midst of conflicts, limitations and idiosyncrasies, I have the chance to accept friction as a challenge to "grow" in love.

In the "in spite of" of loving, God can remove the boundaries of my limited love with which, in spite of all, I approach the other again, in spite of all forgive again, in spite of all give the other a chance, in spite of all respect the dignity of the other. Thus every community has an aspect of suffering and an aspect of resurrection. Francis recognized that love alone is the real power that moves the world. What is meant is a love that can sometimes be pushed to its limits without giving up on the other.

2. CLARE OF ASSISI- an alternative, fraternal form of life (Berg, D./Lehmann, L.)

Sister Clare is a model for an alternative, fraternal way of life. She categorically rejects hierarchies in the sense of superiority and subordination for her women's community. As leader Clare involves her fellow sisters in decisions; her special attention and consideration are given to weak and sick fellow sisters. During the process of canonization, her sisters testify to the loving manner she manifested throughout her life. Clare understands fraternity as inclusive, not exclusive. As a women's community situated in a separate location, her connection with the Franciscan Brother Movement remains a central concern. In remote San Damiano, the city of Assisi is close to her heart. Despite the enclosure, the sisters care for the sick and - at least in the early days - admit children into their convent. Regardless of differences in content with church dignitaries, Clare always seeks dialogue. Physically tested by decades of serious illness and weakened by excessive fasting, her soul praises God on her deathbed for the wonderful gift of her life.



Panel of Clare, Maestro di S. Chiara, Assisi
© TAU-AV Medien, Stams

Clare of Assisi can help us to combine love of God and love of people, to live alternatively and to be a fraternal Church. She can teach us to accept what is unreconciled, to hide wounds, to endure tensions, to overcome misunderstandings, to respect limits and to find life in death. She is a model for non-violent resistance. She is a model for us that solidarity strengthens, heals and bears us along our own path. Only a few comrades-in-arms were sufficient for her to dare a new beginning and to keep her vision alive until death.

From Knowledge to Life

A. Shaping Sisterly and Brotherly Life (Beirer, G.)

“For the Love of God”: The love of Jesus has to be spelled out in the present time. This love for one another has to have a concrete face in our human actions. It must show itself in works, in practical action. This is evident in the path of love which the following lines show (as a kind of school of loving). It is the way of loving in common cooperation, especially when there is a "downward slope": need (old age, illness ...), above - below, lack of orientation, lack of hope in life, lack of faith, darkness ..., there, where people need each other.

“Mutual Love”: Mutual love makes God’s love transparent; it is God’s love for the human person. Mutuality is not retaliatory, calculating, but opens up to each other, giving,... simply giving. Love can be measured according to the love of Jesus for us, for the people (of his time). He is orientation, inspiration. From him we can recognize how "loving" acts.

“Trusting”: Trust is the fundamental attitude of a culture of love. It requires continuity, fidelity, trustworthiness. Lived love requires not only an appropriate atmosphere but constantly new confidence-building measures, the risk of ever new, unprejudiced effort in loving (concentration, absolute interest, patience and discipline).

“Let the other (s) know your needs”: Not blaming oneself or one another but sharing the distress of (self-) alienation and limitedness (brokenness). The need is determined in the first instance by the individual. What he or she experiences and subjectively perceives as a need, is a need. He or she lays it open and so it exists and must be taken seriously.

“Accepted in Obedience”: a (total) listener, listening with the heart. It requires a fundamental letting in and letting go with regard to the other. In this way what helps each to grow in their humanity and open up God’s space within them can be reciprocally given and bestowed (grace). Distress requires and needs encounter but encounter opens our own being, the personal centre.

“Humbly ask forgiveness of one another”: Openness to one another prevents an empty “asking for forgiveness”. The path of forgiveness and asking for forgiveness are a (lifelong) process of change, a path of rapprochement to one another, to one’s own personal reality, to communion and to God himself. It often takes time and many small steps, much patience and the courage to risk surrendering oneself to the other, to advance trust...

"He should be admonished" (correctio fraterna): It is about a loving reminder of their own path, their own life and human maturing. Love is the basis of the healing and liberating encounter. The basic attitude of togetherness makes me willing to be admonished, to be corrected. The loving affinity to the

others freely accepts what the others mirror to me, what they see in me from the outside through their brotherly / sisterly critical gaze. Admonition encourages true humanity.

“Show great mercy”: Mercy restores the dignity of the other and guarantees their value. Through a merciful approach others experience their true freedom and identity, because mercy reminds them of their complete humanity in God, their value before God. And this mercy should be “great”.



B. My Dream of a Fraternal Community

I do not wish for a perfect community but for one that is aware of its weaknesses and that draws strength from them to constantly begin anew.

I would like a community in which we can be mirrors to one another, in which our resemblance to you can be seen.

I would like a community where we can openly say what does us good or what our wishes are, where we try to fulfil these needs of one another.

I would like a community in which we respect and love each other as unique, distinctive people.

I would like a community where the virtue most practiced is forgiveness.

I would like a community in which everyone encourages each one to become and to be themselves.

I would like a community in which the inner voice of our heart points the way.

I would like a community where feelings are taken just as seriously as thoughts.

I would like a community that encourages and embraces, that mourns and celebrates, that shares and unites, and in which YOU God alone are the source, the breath, the pulsating blood, visible in your word, in your body and blood and in every single member of this community.

Sr. Gudrun Schellner SSM

Francis relates his experience:

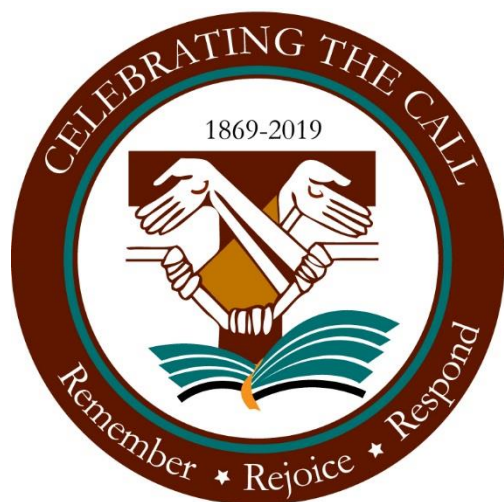
"And after the Lord had given me brethren, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel."

Testament 14

Which experiences regarding fraternal community would I like to share with others?

The Third Order Rule, Chapter 7, as lived out in the Community of Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity

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This article is inspired by the logo for the 150th anniversary of our Congregation. It is fitting to begin with the explanation of the logo. “The logo with the title ‘Celebrating the Call’ was designed using our Coat of Arms which shows our Franciscan roots along with a stylized book which represents the scriptures from which we draw our strength just as Francis did. Our Rule is to live the Gospel way of life. It is God who first called us to religious life. As we respond to His call we continue to live our 150 year history.”

Several words such as call, conversion, prayer, poverty, minority, and community/fraternity stand out as we reflect upon Chapter 7 of the Third Order Rule of St. Francis. Our response to God’s call is so essential to living our lives together in community with deep love and respects for each member especially for the sick and those in special need. The love of Christ must be the center of our lives. However, sometimes indifference, lack of genuine passion for Christ and His mission and discouragement come about as we face the challenges of our post Christian era. So we make efforts to deepen our love for Christ and not lose hope for the future.

To keep true to our calling and keep alive the fire of the Spirit within each of us, we look to daily conversion. We are exhorted in the Rule, our Constitutions, and Directory, which are read aloud each year for our reflection, to search our own hearts and daily turn to God in humility and self-emptying. In this way we realize our poverty and minority and our role to be servants to one another. We attend Mass daily and pray Morning and Evening Prayer together; spend an hour in contemplation daily and do spiritual reading. We are encouraged to take advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly. We take meals in common and we are encouraged to recreate together several times a week. We receive a goal each year from our General Administration along with a book, an encyclical or an inspiring article to read and discuss monthly in our convents along with the Sunday Gospel for that week. We are responsible to each other to share and contribute to the building of community. At the end of the year we are asked to summarize how this sharing has helped us deepen our lives and our community living as consecrated Franciscan Women Religious in our Church today. Our Community Director writes frequent letters throughout the year to encourage and exhort us to live what we have professed and to be a witness in the world today of hope, compassion, minority, and service to all. Community/Fraternity is a relational commitment. Our relationships with one another are rooted in Christ our Brother. It is in this relationship that God gives us the strength to sincerely love each other.

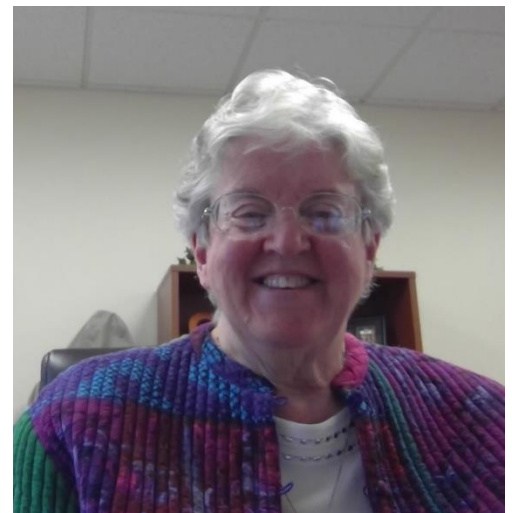
FRATERNITY

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Fraternity – our life based on the reality that Jesus is brother to us all. It is about loving relationships that enrich our lives with joy. Because God has first loved us we are called to love one another as sisters and brothers. This loving is both global and local. We are called to love everyone no matter how far removed they are from us. This type of loving often entails the need to work for systemic change so that those who are poor or marginalized are treated in accord with their dignity as human persons.

But we must be careful that our love is not removed from the reality of our community lives. It is easy to love in thoughts and words, but not always so easy to love in the here and now. The differences in personalities that make up a community can make loving a challenge. The need for acceptance of these differences goes way beyond tolerance and demands that we love as Jesus loves, unconditionally and extravagantly.

The call to love in community requires that we see beyond the externals and recognize the family connection we have as children of our loving God. We are called to show that connection in the way we greet one another with not only respect but with love. Living as sisters and brothers in a Gospel sense goes beyond the way we may have related to our siblings in our family of origin. Sadly, families can lose (or may never have had) the deep connections that are inherent in the words “sister” and “brother”.



When we live together in community there may be different roles that each takes, some having more active participation than others. The Rule challenges us to care for and respect those who are sick, aged, or challenged physically or mentally. Our care for our sisters and brothers with dementia requires a great deal of patience and we may need to remind ourselves of the person who still resides inside a mind that may no longer even recognize itself.

The Rule exhorts us to not let our righteousness lead us to anger and annoyance because of another’s imperfections. It does challenge us to work with our sisters or brothers so that we may all grow in the life we have professed to follow. Kindness must always be the guiding principle for mutual opportunities for growth. Asking for forgiveness when we have failed takes a great deal of humility as does accepting another’s request for forgiveness.

Relationships are the key to how we live out the Rule about fraternity. There are daily challenges to living our Franciscan way of life - we can each give examples of the ups and downs of community life and can each confess the ways we have lived up to or failed to live as sisters and brothers to all. Living fraternity well brings joy not only to our lives but to those with whom and to whom we minister.

Fraternity according to a Franciscan Sister

*Sister Gabrielle Marguin
Inter-religious Committee of the Franciscan Family
Original Language: French*

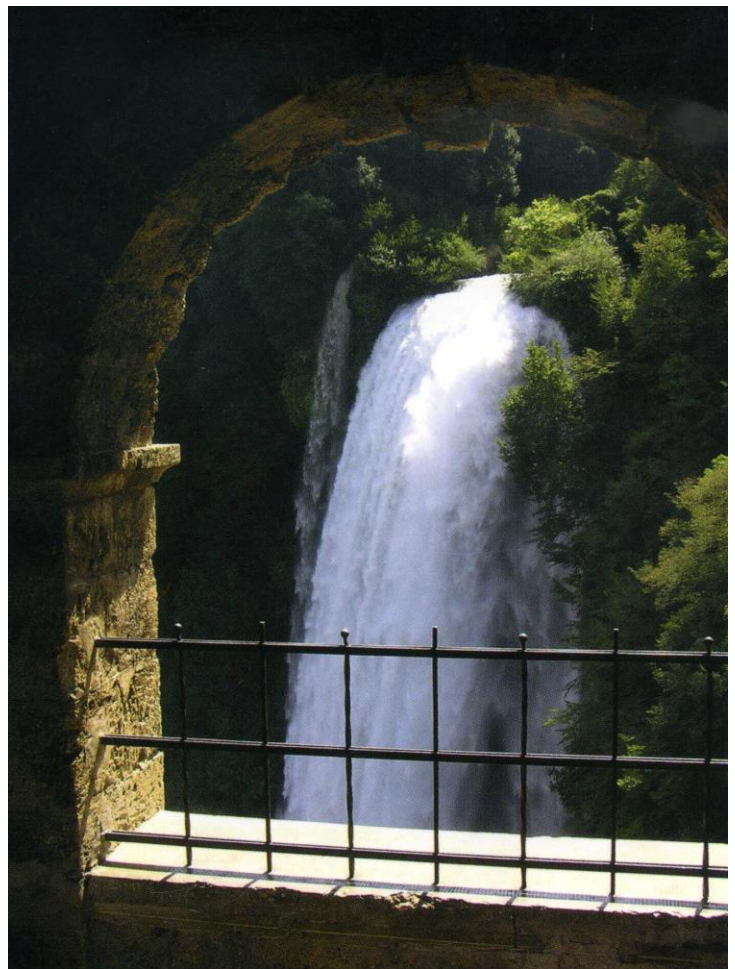
In his Testament Saint Francis of Assisi says: "And after the Lord gave me friars, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I had to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel". This is the origin of fraternity in religious life: we are not the ones who choose, we are received by another. The fraternity is made up of people who are often very different from one another, but who have in common the perception of a call from God; the appeal to follow Jesus Christ. This for us means doing it according to the style of Francis of Assisi, that is consecrating our whole being to live the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience.

In the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 15, Jesus tells his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you". This same concept is expressed by the first article of the Chapter of our Constitutions on the Fraternity, n. 39: "The evangelical life, in the style of Francis, is a life in fraternity. The Holy Spirit has united us in our differences to follow Christ together and to build together, each of us, the Kingdom of God".

When I entered the Franciscan Congregation, I knew nothing about Saint Francis and neither did I know the lifestyle I was engaging in! I was responding to the experience of an encounter, of an inner appeal: to give my life to God to make Him known, to be a witness to his love for humanity, to all of creation. Only after I discovered the gift that the Lord gave us by giving us brothers and sisters who are our journeying companions. It seems to me that fraternity is neither spontaneous nor natural. It comes from beyond persons and things. It comes from the heart of God, Creator and Father. If Francis of Assisi gave to everything and to every person the name of "brother" and "sister", it is precisely because, beyond every creature, he recognized another face, the face of the Father, which constitutes beauty and dignity of all that is.

The fraternity, with a small "f", or with a capital "F", must be built day after day, with the look of faith on the other and in the other, a look that means: "You are greater than what I see of you and you are loved by God as I am".

In chapter 7 of the Rule of Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular, we rely on two articles that indicate that it is possible to live fraternity only thanks to the love given us by God.



23: The brothers and sisters should love each other out of love for God, as the Lord says: "This is my commandment, love one another as I have loved you." Let them manifest their love for each other in deeds. With confidence let them make known their needs to one another so that each can find and offer to the other that which is necessary. Blessed are those who love the others when they are sick and unable to serve, as much as when they are healthy and of service to them.....

24: If discord caused by word or deed should occur among them, they should immediately and humbly ask forgiveness of one another even before offering their gift of prayer before God. If anyone seriously neglected the form of life all profess, the ministers, or others who may know of it, are to admonish that person. Those giving the admonition should neither embarrass nor speak evil of the other, but show great mercy. Let all be carefully attentive not to become angry or disturbed because of another's sin. For anger and disturbance impede charity in themselves and in others.

In number 24, we are in the heart of brotherly / fraternal love that goes as far as forgiveness and great respect for the other as it is, and not as I would like it to be. Paul Baudiquey speaks of "cruel differences" to indicate that sometimes what is different in the other is truly unbearable. It is necessary to recognize that the serene, respectful and affectionate acceptance of the other is not easy to live day by day whether in the restricted group of a fraternity, a family or with any other person. Personally, it is an important point that I try to cultivate with the grace of the Lord, and I realize that the experience of the diversity that we live in the C.I.F.F. (Inter-religious Community of the Franciscan Family) helps us to become more and more brothers and sisters: a great door that opens before us towards peace.

We carry this treasure of fraternal life in "clay vessels", as Saint Paul says. It is not a gift only for us, but also to be put at the service of our world, so that it grows in humanity. We want to be universal brothers and sisters, especially little ones and poor ones, to witness hope in any situation, to wake up peace, to tell every man, every woman: God loves you.

Our Franciscan vocation opens our hearts to universal brotherhood in welcoming and respecting all creatures. And this is why we will do our utmost to ensure that our fraternity does not confine itself to itself, but remains attentive in the first place to its neighbors, then expanding to a real solidarity with all the humanity that Christ loved and gave himself for.

An experience of fraternity

Irmã Leda Inês Rabuske

Franciscana da Penitência e Caridade Cristã

Original Language: Portuguese

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you may go and bear fruit and your fruit may remain." (Jn 15:16)

The beauty of a vocation to the Franciscan religious consecrated life stems from the grace and beauty of living the time of God. It is not an utopia, nor even a dream: it is a possibility that becomes reality when God turns his gaze on us.



I responded positively to the invitation addressed to me by God and I have lived in intimacy with Him. Human life is enriched by many experiences and one of them, for me consecrated Franciscan, was the experience of fraternal life. It is, in reality, a process of growth of faith and love, a process that lasts a lifetime. My experience of fraternity is an experience supported by the dynamics of faith, of the Gospel, of the charism, of the TOR and of the community. During my 53 years of consecrated life, the experience of accompaniment has been very important

for me, because it allowed me to express more humanity in the relationships of everyday life. This relationship is part of my personal and community growth. Accepting the sisters that God has sent, living community life means entering into a dynamism that transforms us into disciples of Jesus Christ, the only Master. Thus, we are forever apprentices of each other and this dynamism is very demanding in the life of fraternity. It requires a lot of attention, welcome, autonomy, reconciliation, responsibility, patience to understand and respect the rhythms of each of us, the recognition of different cultures, experiences and family and personal customs and habits.

Today, the experience of fraternity is the great prophecy of our consecrated life. Recently I am a member of a community that is in a periphery, and I work with the poor. With them I experience what the term "fraternity" means. I prepare myself to serve them, beside them, I bless them and just as Francis created his brotherhood of brothers open to the world of the poor, I too am having a little experience of fraternity with the poor, leading them, comforting them in their human dignity. Most of them survive thanks to the recycling of the rubbish, of the leftovers of the material that the society throws away, discards. They are people who suffer because of injustice, they are weak, vulnerable, those who live at the margins of society. Next to them, as a Franciscan I am, I try to be myself a "minor" to share their life a little. I try to love Christ Crucified in those who suffer in our time. I want to be the voice of those who have no voice. By dealing with garbage, we want to take care of Creation, and fight for the rights of the poor. This process requires relationships imbued with humanity and compassion. Fraternity transforms and generates personal and social PEACE. The Peace that Francesco, Chiara and Mother Magdalen have bequeathed to us!



Ministerial Fraternity: Source and fruit of mission

Bro. Franco Kannampuzha MMB,
Superior General
Original language: English
India

Franciscan Fraternity

A summer in 1218. An evening of the full moon. The valley of Porciuncula and surroundings are in the mild cool. Outside, on a carpet Francis laid down just for a rest. When he saw the moon and stars on the sky, his heart rose to the creator of the universe. His thought was on the unending providence of God. When he was resting, a new idea came to his mind. The number of little brothers became thousands. All were in pastoral activities and prayers in far-away places. An assembly should be convoked by gathering all. This place with the name of Mother, Queen of Angels, was quite suitable for the gathering.



Though the idea rose in the mind of Francis, he thought of the other practical sides also. No place to live. Food and drink are also problems. He consoled himself. It is summer, brothers can stay here and there. The bridegrooms of the bride poverty should not be worried. Depend fully on God. Francis believed that He will fulfil everything. He slowly got up with the firm decision that assembly should be conducted in the valley of Porciuncula filled with elegance of nature and calm. He told this matter to his co-brothers and arranged to send messages to all the brothers in their service areas. When all received the circular they started the journey to Assisi, the town folks and villagers happily watching the fervour journey of little brothers.

More than five thousand brothers reached Porciuncula. St. Dominic was a close friend of Francis. He was in neighbourhood and knew about this assembly. Dominic who was moving from Bologna to Rome came to the assembly place with his seven co-religious. They are also very happy to participate in this gathering. Francis had not made any scientific arrangements for this kind of great assembly. All things went on systematically and in simple way. Brothers in small groups discussed about the divine matters. They shared their pastoral experiences. Above all they spent more time in prayer. They were very interested in helping each other. Each group sang the evening prayers devotedly. For prolonged times they were in meditation. They repented for their sins and prayed for the salvation of the benefactors and friends. They rested in the huts thatched with mats. Thus, this assembly was known as *chapter of mats*. They slept on the earth and hay. They used stones and wood as pillows.

Francis advised: brothers should pray for everybody. Be calm in the unfavourable situations. There should be tolerance in worldly affairs. Be careful in keeping chastity and celibacy. Behave to all with simplicity and humility. Love the spirit of poverty and don't go after wealth. Prayers and hymns should be fostered. Surrender our hopes and anxieties before the Christ. He is our redeemer.

Ministerial Fraternity : Source and fruit of mission

Communion represents both the source and fruit of mission. This statement from the post-conciliar reflection of the Church finds a visible image in the community that religious create. It is always a religious for mission. It is not simply that the community has an apostolic outreach. The mystery of the saving God emerges as a source in the community; it is lived among the religious and finds expression in the Church's mission. It returns to the community and nourishes its life from the reality experienced in the mission.

Encouraged by their respective founding charisms, Institutes of religious create communities which are situated within the mission, in some small part of the great ecclesial mission, be they active or contemplative or mixed. The community acts as an ambassador of God's love in the world, an instrument of salvation among those who are suffering, among

the marginalized, among the lowly and the weak. It embodies the saving presence of God within human reality in need of salvation. That is why it is easy to identify it as a sign that points directly to its meaning. This is a group of religious who strive to live in communion around Him who has gathered them, and they communicate that experience as the message of the One who sends them.

It seems appropriate, then, to refer to these communities of religious as fraternities of service, in the sense that the ecclesial ministry assumed by the community of religious gives it its distinctive identity in the Church. In addition, the community stresses the fraternal relationship between its members and with those who participate in its mission. The ministry is not carried out by an individual but by the community. The members of a ministerial community can perform many different functions; some may even be unable to carry out any outside task due to illness or age. The ministry is not identified with any particular task. It is the whole community which carries it out through the various services of its members, including that of prayer, the offering of their suffering by the sick, and solidarity with one another. The entire community is responsible for the mission that the Church has entrusted to it.

Religious communion and common life

Common life, an essential characteristic of the religious, is intended to strongly encourage brotherly communion, but fraternal living does not automatically become a reality through the observance of the rules governing common life. While it is true that the structures are necessary, community among religious is expressed mainly through their attitudes. They come together to participate more fully in the life of mission of Jesus, to give witness to brotherhood or sisterhood to which all the faithful are called.

Thus, the community is for religious, an experience more than a place; or better still, the religious live together, gather in a place, to deeply develop that experience. In that way they are responding to the call to be experts in communion, effective signs of the possibility of living deeper relationships rooted in the love of Christ.

Mutual love is the hallmark of Christians, and this is the sign which religious offer. This love must be the criterion of discernment in each community of religious, above and beyond the effectiveness of their work. It is easy to see how, in the founding period of each of the Institutes of religious, brotherly love is signalled as the core of the initiative, and they explicitly take on the ideal of the first Christians, to be "of one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32). From this standpoint they organize their apostolic action, aware that this consists in transmitting what the religious have previously lived in community.



Religious and evangelical counsels: a counter-sign

The prophetic experience of fraternity on the part of the religious is accompanied by a commitment to take on the lifestyle of Jesus. Consecrated celibacy allows them to live community life fully and to be Brothers/Sisters to all, rather than living an exclusive love. Poverty, the choosing of a moderate and simple lifestyle, means sharing goods in order to experience fraternal communion with others. And obedience, by which all come together in the common project, "in the same witness and the same mission, which respecting the diversity of gifts and individual personalities". This prophetic experience requires an initial break with the place of origin, with family, friends and other people, only to regain them later, being deeply part of a new family, in a new framework of universal life.

The community of religious lives its prophetic mission counter-culturally, because its lifestyle, according to the Gospel, is opposed to what the world promotes. The community of religious is a "religious life born of the Spirit, of the interior freedom of those who represent him". For that reason it is a place of multiple commitments, of mutual interdependence, of harmony and solidarity that are open and reach out, in a demanding way of life, in the discernment of their lifestyle in the light of the Gospel. It should not be forgotten, however, that community is a fragile sign: it needs constant renewal; it must be lived on the path to holiness and with an evangelical dynamism that enlivens and constantly remakes the structures.

Misioneras Franciscanas de Nuestra Señora de la Paz



FRATERNAL LIFE IN COMMUNION WITH THE TRINITY

(Chapter IV of the MFP Constitutions)

*Sr. Irene Vallejo Aguilera
Mexicali, Baja California, México
Original language: Spanish*

As it is expressed in chapter 7 of the Third Order Regular Rule, we, the Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady of Peace, try and strive to live fraternal life in community and obedience, following the evangelical form of life revealed by the Lord to Saint Francis of Assisi. We are committed to manifest the love for all our sisters by works and deeds through reciprocal, special and diligent care, especially with our sick and elderly sisters in their physical and spiritual needs, as an experience of love, compassion and mercy. A gift of God that disposes us to mutual acceptance overcoming selfishness.

Fraternity as a privileged place of encounter with God, it is a self-knowledge learning process, encourages us to share joys and sorrows, successes and failures, individual and community work. Everything is ours, and fraternity is everyone's task. Called to live as sisters in willingness to give and receive to reach maturity and spiritual growth, in gratitude and joy for the gift received.

In our communities, there are always lights and shadows on the road, which we see as God's new opportunity, recognizing what we must change for the conversion of the heart. God through us fertilizes the land of life; work, rest and prayer are means that strengthen fraternal life.

From initial formation to ongoing formation, we seek to identify, understand and apply the essential contents of our own spirituality, in order to embody them in our own life and in the concrete circumstances that we have to live.

"What we are within our fraternities, we are outside in our apostolic works, since nobody gives what do not have".



LIVED COMMUNITY OF THE ST. ELISABETH SISTERS IN GRAZ

By Uta Neufeld
Elisabethinen in Graz
Original language: German

I have discarded a long theological article because it seems to me that I can only describe community, MY community from the heart. We are 13 completely different women, all with our rough edges but much love and good will. We have to take every day as it comes in sickness, joy, stress and daily life. But we journey together, we have common goals, plus one for which it is worthwhile to live this life.



At our profession we vow poverty, chastity, obedience and – and this is why our cingulum has 5 knots – care for the poor and sick, and life in and as community.

Our old sisters often recount how things were in former times when they were novices. There were still around 50 sisters, most of whom entered quite young and were then allowed to learn whatever was needed and was within the realm of possibility. They worked much and very hard, times were different and so was religious

life, the Church as a whole had other priorities - pre-conciliar and shaped by the two world wars. And yet, when our sisters of 80 years and above start talking, they become radiant, they relate numerous anecdotes about the strict but equally kind directress, who sometimes gave the novices a run around, about the giggling in the novitiate dormitory in spite of *silentium* and the mutual support and consolation in difficult moments or when the vocation wavered a little. They recount how poverty was lived and that some were better off in the convent than at home, because there was always something to eat and because the rooms were warm. They speak about humility and obedience and much of that sounds strange and incomprehensible to me. Novices at that time had to be much more subservient than I am today, and opinions, wishes or even feelings were far from being the topic they are with us. Sacrificing in obedience, the individual counted less than the community and the task that had to be completed in the work. The young ones were trained and formed by the older sisters and thus the traditions were passed on from one generation to the next. Contacts with the “outside” were rather sparing and were limited to a few letters and rare visits of relatives on special occasions. The convent was now the family and the focus lay there.

When the old sisters tell their stories, I often get wistful. Nowadays we are mostly an “only child” in the novitiates and often there are more than twenty years between our own entrance and the last perpetual profession. So we have to do without the comical novitiate tricks, the laughter and the fun in class, as well as volleyball games in the convent garden and the comforting

conversation with other convent newcomers who come with a life similar to ours. On the other hand, we also have the luxury of our own cell right from the start, regular work and prayer times and, as with all only children, we are encouraged and protected. I am often asked if it is not difficult to live with so many older persons, and whether I miss the contact with people of my own age and the vibrant life “outside”.

And yet perhaps BECAUSE OF this age difference (in actual age as well as in convent years) I can experience community and it is enriching for both sides. I have fun explaining Facebook and the social media to the sisters and I rejoice with them when the congratulations for profession roll in from all over Austria and beyond and that within just a few hours. But I don't know most of the home remedies and gardening tips they pass on to me and there I could learn quite a lot. I smile at the bewilderment of my fellow sisters when they hear that you volunteer to run a marathon and have fun with it, and I become silent and thoughtful when a handicapped sister climbs the stairs instead of taking the lift, saying: 'It reminds me that Jesus bore the heavy cross for me.' I enjoy it when I can travel with my sisters in the hospital bus on a pilgrimage and I am amazed that one can be happy and content becoming 85 without ever having left Austria, seen Rome or been on trips and I begin to quietly examine my needs and values. Sometimes our conversations are a trifle one-sided and I hear some stories more than once. Memory loss and a diminishing view unfortunately come with age. But if I am sitting a bit sadly at Mass, often precisely one of these sisters comes over and whispers: Today I will pray the rosary just for you. Even if the mind is not working so well anymore, the sensitivity and attentiveness are still there.

Nowadays women generally only enter when they are a little older and have some training, professional and life experience. We "young people" are no longer so inexperienced, often already have our individual character and have certainly to be trained differently than the 16, 17-year-old girls of that time. I think we are quite a task for our communities with our brisk, self-aware manner of giving our opinion, our critical questioning and our generation's striving for innovation and development. And with great gratitude I experience the love, maturity and patience shown towards me. I can learn many a thing from this earlier generation, waiting, allowing time, but also insisting on values that have been found to be good, and always to fall back on the experience of: Everything is in God's hands. What the future will bring, none of us knows. How community life will develop in our lifetime only God knows.

But I am here in this place where Sisters of St. Elisabeth have prayed, worked and lived for 300 years. Now it is up to me to carry on what was good and what I can learn in the community and to add a little of what I can do and know. Hopefully the Holy Spirit will gift me with the strength and wisdom – and we younger ones will be borne up by our old sisters, those still living but also those who have passed on before us. That is what comprises our community: Where two or three are gathered in my Name, I am among them!



***“Because God loves us, the brothers and sisters should love each other,
for the Lord says, this is my precept,
that you love one another as I have loved you.”***

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As I reflect on Chapter 7 of the Third Order Rule, two words immediately come to mind: *Common Heart*. As Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, *common heart* is the phrase that captures the essence of our common life or “fraternitas.”

In the last twenty years, we as a congregation have embraced the profound realization that it is not a common place or common ministry that binds us together in fraternal love. It is our *common heart*, our love for one another, for God’s people and all creation, that continues to bind us together and inspire our charism and mission.

In 1998, our congregation made the courageous decision to divest of our Motherhouse property in order to free funds to further our current mission and to discern new opportunities to bring the Franciscan presence to our world. Like any group grappling with the issue of selling the “family home,” the decision to sell the Motherhouse was one made with deep prayer, communal discernment, professional facilitation and consultation, as well as moments of tears and tension. Undoubtedly, that decision to divest led us to a deeper understanding of our vows, especially Franciscan poverty. Most importantly, that courageous moment, as challenging as it was, led us to grapple with the fundamental question of identity: *When the physical buildings that once supported and even defined our identity are gone, what is it that truly binds us together as Sisters?* Once again through prayerful discernment, searching the Scriptures, and recalling our congregational story, especially the courage of Sisters who came before us, we were able to answer that fundamental question. It was our *common heart* that binds us now, just as it has throughout our history.

Our Sisterhood has never been defined by a common geography but inspired by the words of our Foundresses who said: “there is no place too far, no service too humble, no person too lowly.” These words have led us to service and ministry in over ten dioceses in the United States. Travelling through mountain passes and deserts of the Southwest, the bayous of Louisiana, and the superhighway of the internet, our congregation continues to find ways, big and small, to grow in our understanding and celebration of our common heart. Whether it’s meeting in small groups or “clusters” around a small apartment dinner table, celebrating a birthday at Applebee’s or attending our yearly Tau assembly each June, we celebrate and sustain each other through moments of joy, challenges of illness, and the sorrow and rejoicing that overtakes us when Sister Death calls one of us, or a member of our family, home.

Plumbing the depths of the meaning of the call to embrace all within our common heart has been an exciting and challenging journey. Our God of surprises continues to challenge each Sister to open our heart wider and wider, to include the poor, the outcast, all in need of a home. Perhaps the most tangible expression of our common heart is the call to embrace all of creation as brother and sister, through our mission to be *Franciscans for Earth*.

