

Reflections on Formation Topics in the "For Up To Now" Manuals

Called to a Franciscan Life Style: Discernment

This Reflection is based on material found on page 11 of 18 ff, in the "Vocations" section of the F.U.N. Manual

You're reading a book, or listening to a talk at your Parish, and mention is made of the Franciscan Order, friars, sisters, and lay people. One of the components of the Franciscan family is the Secular Franciscan Order, an order for Catholic lay people, single or married. As a "bona fide" order of the Church, joining this group needs some thought, and a lot of ***Discernment***.

On Page 11 of 18, in the F.U.N. Manual (The FUN Manual is a Resource Manual developed by our National Formation Commission, approved by the NEC for our National Regions), that has been issued for every OFS Fraternity in the entire world), we have a basic definition of Discernment: "Generally to discern means to make a judgment about something that is not clear. For our purposes discernment is a word that describes the *process* of coming to understand whether or not the Lord is calling and inviting an individual to a Franciscan life style."

There are all sorts of ingredients involved in the discernment to come to a decision if you should join or not, and the best thing is that such decisions do not have to be made all at once. That is why it is a "process." Joining an Order is basically an act of unselfishness - an extension of yourself out of your comfort zone, one needs to ask the Holy Spirit, is this for me, will I fit in, and, are those already in the fraternity eager to have the applicant around. That's all very important. As a long-time professed member of the Order, I have found that all sorts of people come to us. Most of them, once they discern a vocation, will eventually reach profession, but some of them eventually realized it wasn't for them. That is the reason, why more than ever, we now begin these introductory "get acquainted" formation sessions early on.

Back to page 11 of 18, "A very strong fraternal communion," is part of that authentic Franciscan vocation. That means potential joiners must have the capacity to reach out to others. "Our spirituality includes the support and encouragement and inspiration of others in our Order." Hallmarks of our spirituality are Simplicity, Poverty, Humility, a sense of Minority, a complete and active abandonment to God, Conversion, Transformation, and, Peacemaking. Let's talk about these hallmarks....

- *Simplicity*: "There is no pretense in the Franciscan Spirituality. We who live by the Rule of St. Francis, strive to be the genuine article, that is, people who do not care much for fame or wealth - people who live in simplicity."
- *Poverty*: "Love of Gospel poverty develops confidence in the Father and creates internal freedom."

- *Humility*: "The truth of what and who we really are in the eyes of God; freedom from pride and arrogance."
- *A Genuine Sense of Minority*: "The recognition that we are servants, not superior to anyone."
- *A complete and active abandonment to God*: "Trusting in God's unconditional love."
- *Conversion*: "Daily we begin again the process of changing to be more like Jesus"
- *Transformation*: "What God does for us, when we are open and willing."
- *Peacemaking*: "We are messengers of peace as Francis was."

These characteristics that make a Franciscan (no matter which group within its diverse family) should be an initial part of discernment before even delving into prerequisites to join the Secular Franciscan Order. Now, I am sure you will wonder if we discerned all these characteristics right from the start of our life as Franciscans? The answer is, of course, no. Discernment is a slow process and this is why the applicant is given time to work all this out. Do you feel that you have at least an inclination into this direction, and if, after prayer and reflection you feel you do, then we can begin to talk about inviting you "the applicant" to a fraternity meeting. Often people who wish to join just show up.

On page 12 of 18, are found ten signs that a person *may* have a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order. These are as follows:

The individual:

- *Is a good, practicing Catholic.*
- *Has a desire to follow Jesus and His Gospel, the heart of our life.*
- *Has a personal faith relationship with Jesus, not just simply as intellectual knowledge about Jesus.*
- *Is hope-filled and willing and able to deal with life's issues.*
- *Realizes that we are all sinful and in need of conversion.*
- *Has some knowledge of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi.*
- *Is willing and able to commit to the Rule of the SFO* and to live in fraternity.*
- *Trusts God and realizes the importance of God in their life.*
- *Has a reverence for all creation and a sense of courtesy and respect for it.*
- *Is willing to embrace a counter-cultural stance that is part of life in fraternity and are able and willing to share creative ideas and life with others.*

(*) SFO = "Secular Franciscan Order"; our official name is "Ordo Franciscanus Sæcularis" hence the use of the initials "OFS" after the name of the Professed.

Thus, discernment takes in a big area of concern - how do you feel about this, are you able to "see yourself" living that type of life style? Profession in the Order is a life-long commitment so you should be fairly sure what you aspire to. As mentioned, all of this takes time, and that is why the Order has allotted certain time periods to these phases in your preparation.

On page 13 of 18, in the above-referenced text, are four very important items every Secular Franciscan agrees to:

- *Personal presence at gatherings.*
- *Witness to the Gospel.*
- *Daily Prayer*
- *Active collaboration, in accordance with each one's situation and possible obligations for animation of the fraternity.*

(Article 30.2 Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order)

"During the formation process one will learn more about the Secular Franciscan way of living by studying the *Rule*, constitutions and many other resources. A person can learn even more about the Order by experiences with the brothers and sisters in a local fraternity. They inspire, encourage and support us in our efforts to live the rule of life we profess."

Those who feel called, will find this process of formation a rich experience, and will experience a growing love for God and neighbor. They will experience God's transformation in themselves.

As a professed Secular Franciscan I have always felt this vocation is truly a gift of God. It has put a positive direction into my life and my commitment deepens every day. When you respond to this call with all your heart, you will come to feel a joy and firm commitment to God and to others. If you discern this Call - please come join us.

Peace and Good,

Fred Schaeffer, OFS

June 19, 2012