

## **BUILDING the KINGDOM of GOD by BUILDING the BONDS of FRATERNITY**

Did you ever notice the special, significant numbers throughout history? Especially throughout our faith history? Throughout Scripture, Old Testament and New? Throughout the Church's history? Throughout our own Franciscan history? The numbers all have a significant meaning, 40 days, 10 commandments, 8 Beatitudes, 7 Gifts of the Holy Spirit, 6 Days of Creation, and the most notable – 3! Three days in the whale, 3 days in the tomb, and 3 persons of the Trinity. For Franciscans we have 3 companions, 3 churches repaired and 3 branches of the Franciscan Family.

We are going to explore the idea of “three” in our Catholic, and specifically our Franciscan history up to our present vocation. How does the movement of the three speak to us as Franciscans, and more importantly, how should we respond to the call of the Three?!

Let us begin at the beginning, where all Franciscans do, with the study of Scripture:

*John 21:15-17*

*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,*

*“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”*

*He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”*

*He said to him, “**Feed my lambs.**”*

*He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”*

*He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”*

*He said to him, “**Tend my sheep.**”*

*He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”*

*Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”*

*[Jesus] said to him, “**Feed my sheep.**”*

We all know and understand that Christ was not asking Peter a simple question about love, Christ already knew Peter's answer. Was Christ giving Peter a chance to redeem himself three times for denying Him during the crucifixion? Maybe. The deeper thought is that Christ is impressing upon Peter's heart, mind and soul (another threesome) how to outwardly and physically show his love for Christ by caring for others.

Christ was telling Peter that loving Him was shown by an outpouring of love for God's people. To serve others in whatever ways they need served, not in the ways we think they need served. And all the while to serve preaching the “Kingdom of God”!

As humans, within our vernacular languages when we hear the word “kingdom” what do we think of? A place, a castle, a country, or a video game where you build your own empire? Do we think of the Roman empire which was in power when Christ was born?

Christ referred many times to the “Kingdom of God”, yet He never specifically stated what it was or when it was to come. He used words like, “it is like this” or “what shall I compare it to?” or again “the Kingdom of God is in your midst”.

He led His followers to discover on their own, and through His teachings and works of charity, to come to their own realization of the meaning of the Kingdom of God.

When the disciples and apostles would fret about many things, Matthew's gospel tells us that Christ would teach them saying:

*"Instead, be concerned above everything else with the **Kingdom of God** / and with what he requires of you, / and he will provide you with all these other things." Matt. 6:33*

After Christ's death, resurrection and ascension (another threesome) Paul's conversion to Christ emboldened him to go among those he previously persecuted and the Book of Acts states:

*"He preached about the **Kingdom of God** and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking with all boldness and freedom." Acts 28:31*

The Book of Acts also tells us that when the days passed by, and when Christ did not return in their lifetimes, when the disciples may have gotten in a rut, or they stated they were too old to serve, or they had already served their turn:

*"They strengthened the believers and encouraged them to remain true to the faith. "We must pass through many troubles to enter the **Kingdom of God**," they taught." Acts 14:22*

As Franciscans we would refer to those "many troubles" as "perfect joy". I personally cringe when I hear that reference used because we throw it out every time something does not go "our way". But I challenge each of you to re-read the story of Francis and perfect joy. The story is not about all the troubles that will befall the follower of Christ. The story is about how we deal with all those troubles, but even more importantly, how we move *forward* beyond those troubles that befall us!

Let us now discover the movement of three in our Secular Franciscan vocation, starting with our Profession ceremony. Before we publicly state the formula of Profession to the Church and to our fraternity, we are questioned by the Celebrant. Interestingly enough, we are asked three questions! Just as Christ asked Peter three questions, we are asked three questions about our intent and to "express our will" to live the life of a Secular Franciscan.

Let us listen again to the words we professed, or to the words you will profess as you enter the Order:

### ***Rite of Commitment to the Gospel Life***

#### ***The Questioning:***

*Celebrant:*

*Before this fraternity and the other members of the People of God gathered here, I ask you to express your will:*

*Celebrant:*

*Do you wish to embrace the gospel way of life by following the example and words of St. Francis of Assisi, which is at the heart of the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order?*

*Candidate:*

***Yes, this is what I want.***

*Celebrant:*

*You have been called to give witness to the Kingdom of God and to build a more fraternal world based on the gospel together with all people of goodwill. Do you wish to be faithful to this vocation and to practice the spirit of service proper to Secular Franciscans?*

*Candidate:*

***Yes, this is what I want.***

*Celebrant:*

*You have been made members of the People of God by your baptism, and strengthened in confirmation by the new gift of the Spirit, in order to proclaim Christ by your life and your words. Do you wish to bind yourself more closely to the Church and to work intently to rebuild the ecclesial community and fulfil its mission among all people?*

*Candidate:*

***Yes, this is what I want.***

During the Profession ceremony, you have one more chance to accept or deny the challenges laid before you as you promise to consecrate yourself to the service of His kingdom as a Secular Franciscan. By this moment, you have certainly discerned His will for your life and you are ready to say "Yes, this is what I want!" You understand fully that this is a life-long commitment and being in an Order comes with privileges, but also comes with duties and responsibilities.

Let us look deeper into the second question:

*"You have been called to give witness to the Kingdom of God and to build a more fraternal world based on the gospel together with all people of goodwill. Do you wish to be faithful to this vocation and to practice the spirit of service proper to Secular Franciscans?"*

How do we in our secular lives give witness to the Kingdom of God? You have all heard it said, maybe you have even said it yourself, "I am in this world but I am not of this world", referring to ourselves as being Christians and knowing that we are redeemed by Christ. St. Paul stated it perfectly to the Galatians (2:19b-20), "I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." As Secular Franciscans, we are most certainly of this world! That is exactly where God placed us to do His will! We're in the market places, the business world and among our families. We are in the everyday mess, in the hate, in the jealousy, in the selfishness, in the violence, in the racism, in the exclusion, in the homelessness and among the fringes.

God does not need us to be preaching the Kingdom of God to the Kingdom of God!! He needs us to be witnessing the Kingdom of God to those who do not know Him, to those who do not believe that He loves them, and to those who do not believe that there are others who care about what happens to them.

That is exactly where God has placed us---in the secular world. And we choose it willingly!

Just how do we witness to the Kingdom of God? Our Profession formula gives us a clue...

***Profession to the Gospel Life:***

*I...consecrate myself to the service of his kingdom...*

*I promise to live all the days of my life the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Secular Franciscan Order by observing its rule of life.*

*May the grace of the Holy Spirit, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and our holy father Saint Francis, and the fraternal bonds of community always be my help...*

Again we see the three:

1. To consecrate ourselves to the service of His kingdom
2. To live all our days the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ
3. To observe the Secular Franciscan Rule

Christ gives us three to aid us on this life's journey:

1. The Holy Spirit
2. The Blessed Virgin Mary
3. Saint Francis

Christ also gives us close human help, "the fraternal bonds of community". As a speaker at the recent Quinquennial stated, "We do not do this alone!!"

Christ calls us to an incredible, challenging vocation yet He gives us all the knowledge, the tools, and the fraternal help to live this vocation. We only have to just reach out and live it to the fullest.

To live it to the fullest, we must know what is in this Rule which we professed publicly and is witnessed by the Church. We professed to the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. One Rule---with one Prologue, parts I and II, and 26 articles. We, as Secular Franciscans, cannot pick and choose which article we like more, or which articles we will ignore. Our Rule does not excuse us because of our job requirements, our age, or health, or location. It does not excuse us whether we like our brothers and sisters in fraternity, or if we have 'issues' with them.

We have been called by the Holy Spirit, have accepted the gift, and have promised to live our Rule "all the days of my life". I believe that statement to mean until we reach the Kingdom of God.

If we Professed to live the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, then we should know what the Rule encompasses. We should study the Rule, discuss the Rule, and immerse our own beings and fraternities in the Rule. And we should do this often!

Our Rule is not a stagnant document, or a little red book to throw in a lost corner of our lives. It is a living, dynamic call to action! It tells us who we are, how we are to live, and how we are to serve each other. Profession to the Rule is not the end of a journey, but the beginning of an exciting adventure into the lives of our brothers and sisters, our Church and our world. It is an adventure that only God knows of its path, but we know of its destiny---the Kingdom of God!!

Everyone can now pull out their Rule books. Let us specifically recall three articles which solidify our vocation, and our response to service:

***OFS Rule, Chapter I, The Secular Franciscan Order, Article 2***

*By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of Saint Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church.*

This article states that we live the Gospel by following this Rule. This Rule, the Secular Franciscan Rule! Not any other Rule or spirituality! Other spiritualities are not lesser nor greater than ours, they are just not ours. This is the reason why in Formation, both Initial and On-Going you study Franciscan resources and read Franciscan books and watch Franciscan media. You usually have only once a month to gather to feed your Franciscan vocation and spirituality, use it wisely!

**OFS Rule, Chapter II, The Way of Life, Article 14**

*Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively. Mindful that anyone “who follows Christ, the perfect man, becomes more of a man himself”, let them exercise their responsibilities competently in the Christian spirit of service.*

This article brings together three adjectives: Fraternal, Evangelical and Christian-spirit. And three concepts: The Kingdom of God, to exercise their responsibilities, and service. Let us look at these closer. What do the words mean?

- The world’s dictionary defines *Fraternal* as associated in union, as for mutual aid or benefit; and the Franciscan dictionary defines it as fraternity, brotherhood and sisterhood.
- The world’s dictionary defines *Evangelical* as pertaining to or in keeping with the gospel and its teachings; and the Franciscan dictionary defines it as “gospel to life and life to the gospel”.
- The world’s dictionary defines *Christian spirit* as of Christ, in Christ’s name; and the Franciscan dictionary defines *Christian spirit of service* as servant leadership.
- *The Kingdom of God* – what Christ spoke of
- *To exercise their responsibilities* – duties, accountabilities
- *Service* – the action of helping or doing work for someone

So if I re-wrote Article 14 with the new Franciscan meanings, this is what I may get:

*Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more [beneficial union for aid] and [a world based on the gospel and its teachings] so that the kingdom of God [which Jesus spoke of] may be brought about more effectively. Mindful that anyone “who follows Christ, the perfect man, becomes more of a man himself”, let them exercise their [duties and be accountable and competent] in Christian [servant leadership].*

If you notice closely, the responsibilities and duties are first mentioned in context with the fraternal part of our world. To me, that has always meant that my responsibilities, duties and service was to my brothers and sisters in fraternity first. By no means does that mean I neglect my fellow person in the world! It means that the better I serve my Franciscan brothers and sisters then together we as ‘fraternity’ can serve the community, the Church and the world. Bonded together fraternally we are stronger, smarter and more efficient than when we work alone. Recall the 30for30 projects the fraternities participated in this year! By serving each other in fraternity we learn to serve others outside of our fraternity. This is where we teach inquirers to serve and this is where we model to youth and teach them how to serve. This is where we may discover that our most in need may be the one sitting right next to us!

**OFS Rule, Chapter III, Life in Fraternity, Article 14**

*Their service, which lasts for a definite period, is marked by a ready and willing spirit and is a duty of responsibility to each member and to the community.*

This article presents us with two distinct aspects of our Secular Franciscan life in fraternity. They may be distinct in nature, yet they are intimately bound to each other by our love of the

Trinity and our way of life as we stated at our Profession to *"promise to live all the days of my life the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Secular Franciscan Order by observing its rule of life."*

Service. To some this is a natural part of their being. They serve without being asked, without being begged. They are the ones that step up and get something done even before you know to ask someone to volunteer. They come early and they stay after. They make phone calls when someone does not make a gathering, they call the ill, they send a card when they cannot visit. And when election time comes around they pray and discern if Christ is calling them to serve, either for the first time, or again, whether they think they are talented enough, or have the time in their busy lives to give to their brothers and sisters. They understand that they have a duty to serve their fraternity, that it is a privilege and a blessing to serve their fraternity! They understand that it is a part of our way of life, an obligation and duty to their brothers and sisters.

These are the ready and willing of spirit who serve.

We have the members who come to the gatherings to be 'fed' by others. Fed by prayers, by formation, by social time, and even by snacks. They are the ones who are just happy to be there. They are good people, who we love, but for whatever reason, they do not want to put forth an effort to share their many talents with their brothers and sisters in fraternity. They do not like to plan and have a ready excuse for any question that may require them to step out of their comfort zone. They do not run for office, they do not head up any apostolates, and they rarely attend anything other than the fraternity meetings.

These are the not ready and willing of spirit.

We have members, who for various reasons which include health or advanced age, cannot be as active physically in the fraternity as they once were. Many of them still serve! They are our Prayer Warriors, our Sunshine Committee sending greeting cards, or our Call Tree person who notifies other members. They check in on the sick, they keep up on fraternity news (if we send them our newsletters) and when they reach the point where they can no longer do these things, we as fraternity need to step up and take care of them.

These are the ready and willing of spirit even if their body is not cooperating.

Which member are you?

Do you notice that it is the same people at every meeting doing all the work?

*I say to you---STEP UP!*

Do you notice that it is the same people at every car pool driving?

*I say to you---STEP UP!*

Do you notice that it is the same people at every election running?

*I say to you---STEP UP!*

Do you notice that it is the same people at everything doing everything?

*I say to you---STEP UP!*

And are you the member who is doing all these things every time?

Then I say to you---TRAIN OTHERS!

I recently saw the nomination roster for the National election to be held next month. I am sad to say that I recognized many names nominated, and who accepted nominations, who served with

me on the National Council during the early 2000's. Why does this sadden me? Because it proves to me that we are not training new leaders to replace us when our 'definite time' for service is done. We are not inviting new people up through our fraternities from throughout our country to lead our Order into the future.

My beloved brothers and sisters, the future starts here. Right here! In the local fraternity and at the Regional fraternity. We need to help our brothers and sisters with younger families so they can attend our gatherings by planning activities and sitters at a time they can attend. We need to set up car pool schedules to accommodate the older members who need rides to our gatherings. We need to get out of our homes, out of our seats, out of our meeting places and take care of our brothers and sisters in fraternity / in any way that we need to / so that we as fraternity / can then help take care of our Region and our Order. Our Order did not survive 800 years by sitting around and just talking about ideas.

As we take care of each other we build stronger fraternities. With stronger fraternities we can serve the brothers and sisters of our world as Christ has called us to do. As we do this we build the Kingdom of God!

We must never forget what our Rule has called us to:

To go **“from gospel to life and life to the gospel”!**