

Guidelines for the Formation of Religious in the Understanding of and Assistance to the SFO and YouFra

INTRODUCTION

The Conference of the General Spiritual Assistants (CAS) has re-elaborated the “*Guidelines for the Formation of Religious in the Understanding of and Assistance to the SFO and YouFra*,” which attempt to respond to the felt need of Franciscans, religious and secular, to prepare themselves better to “walk together in the way of the Lord.”

There exists among all Franciscans a reciprocal understanding and vital communion that is required by the affiliation they all share in the same spiritual family that must constantly be encouraged. The various branches “can and must unite their efforts, with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church’s mission.”¹ This exchange of gifts “often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate.”²

The Rule and Constitutions of the SFO consistently confirm the principles of affiliation to the same spiritual family as the First Order (OFM, OFM Conv., OFM Cap.) and the Third Order Regular (TOR), and of the need for vital and reciprocal communion among the Orders - along with its own need for pastoral care and spiritual assistance from the First Order and TOR.

The final chapter of the *Rule* of the Secular Franciscan Order expresses the intimate connection that exists between the SFO and the First Order and the Third Order Regular.

As a concrete sign of communion and co-responsibility, the councils on various levels, in keeping with the constitutions, shall ask for suitable and well-prepared religious for spiritual assistance. They should make this request to the superiors of the four religious Franciscan families, to whom the Secular Fraternity has been united for centuries.³

The challenge that is given to the First Order and the TOR to provide “suitable and well-prepared religious for spiritual assistance” is an important one. It is not fair either to the religious or to our secular brothers and sisters to assign friars to the ministry of spiritual assistance without the formation they need to be “suitable and well-prepared.”

In fact, there exists a triple and substantial bond between the SFO, the First Order, and the TOR:

1. Common origin

The orders share a common origin based on the person and charism of St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan charism.

2. A sharing in a common charism

The SFO Rule talks about a vital and reciprocal communion or “life-giving union” that must exist between the Seculars and all the branches of the Franciscan family in order to make present, in diverse ways and forms, the charism of the same Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.⁴

¹ *Vita consecrata (VC)* 54.

² *VC* 55.

³ *SFO Rule* 26.

⁴ *SFO Rule* 1.

3. Spiritual and pastoral assistance

Based on this “communion,” and following ancient tradition, it is the responsibility of the major superiors of the First Order and TOR to ensure spiritual assistance to the SFO by way of “suitable and well prepared religious” and through pastoral visits to SFO fraternities on various levels.⁵

Orientation from General Chapters of the SFO

The Secular Franciscan Order - obliged to renew its own life, formation, and organization of fraternities - must rely on spiritual assistance provided and dynamically coordinated by the other branches of the Franciscan family in its unique mission. “Consecrated persons should remember that before all else they must be expert guides in the spiritual life, and in this perspective they should cultivate the most precious gift: the spirit.”⁶

The SFO General Chapter in Fatima (1990) expressed it this way: “For whatever pertains to the proper role of animation of the Spiritual Assistance a specific formation is necessary - that is, a particular preparation of friars regarding the SFO. This preparation must be conscientious and incorporated in the program of formation - initial and permanent - of all the friars. Even if not all friars are or will be Spiritual Assistants it is certainly necessary that all know, understand, and affirm the truly essential role of the SFO for the realization of their own personal vocation.”⁷

The SFO General Chapter in Rome (1996) in its conclusion also states: “The CIOFS Presidency, in collaboration with national councils, will find the time and methods to.... stimulate a more profound formation of all friars regarding the SFO so that it might help the brothers to better live their own form of life.”⁸

The SFO General Chapter of 2002, held also in Rome, confirms “the importance to giving full attention to the dictates of the Rule regarding the suitability and preparation of Assistants, both religious and lay, through a meaningful insertion of appropriate historical, theological, and spiritual topics in initial and permanent formation programs of religious brothers and sisters and of seculars.”⁹

Responsibility of Major Superiors

The religious Franciscan Orders, in which is placed the *altius moderamen*, not only repeat and highlight the principle of “life-giving union” in their legislation but also, through letters and various other means, have continuously exhorted their friars to grow in their own knowledge and understanding of the SFO and have called for an adequate preparation for Spiritual Assistants.

In fact, the Conference of Ministers General has approved the *Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the SFO* (Rome, 2002) - a document that directs the spiritual and pastoral care of Secular Franciscans which every friar should know.

For this reason these present “Guidelines” have also been prepared as an aid to be utilized possibly in the various plans or policies of formation and to encourage a better knowledge of the SFO within the Franciscan family and its mission in the Church and in the world, and for a systematic preparation for those who are called to the service of spiritual assistance.

⁵ Cf. *SFO Rule* 26.

⁶ *VC* 55.

⁷ Cf. Conclusions of the SFO General Chapter, Fatima 1990, in *Bollettino CIOFS*, XII, n. 2, 1990 p. 6.

⁸ Cf. *Koinonia*, 1996, n. 4; *Statutes for Assistance* 5.4; *SFO Constitutions* 95.3.

⁹ Cf. Acts of the Chapter, p. 210.

1. PROGRAMS OF INSTRUCTION ON THE SFO

1.1. Initial Formation

A. Postulancy:

- Francis “founder” of Three Orders.
- History:
 1. General introduction of the Franciscan Family;
 2. First Order of Friars Minor (OFM, OFM Conv., OFM Cap.);
 3. Second Order, the Order of St. Clare;
 4. Third Order of the “brothers and sisters of penance”:
 - Secular Franciscan Order (SFO, Franciscan Youth);
 - Third Order Regular, male and female;
 5. Other Franciscan movements: Secular Institutes, etc.
- Experience:
 1. Contact with an SFO Fraternity and with YouFra;
 2. Visits by Secular Franciscans to houses of formation;
 3. Visits by postulants to secular fraternities;
 4. Common celebration of principle Franciscan feasts.

B. Novitiate:

- repeat in a more profound way everything covered during the time of postulancy;
- in the general discussions on the universal call to holiness and the specific call to religious vocation, some time needs to be dedicated to the vocation of the Secular Franciscan in sharing the common charism - and in the vital and reciprocal communion in the mission of the Church to “Go and repair...”;
- in the discussion of the history of the Franciscan Family the place of the penitents and of the origins of the Third Order needs to be included;
- reading the Rules of the First, Second, and Third Orders (*Regula Bullata*, 1223; *Rule of St. Clare*, 1253, and the *Rule* given to the Second Order by Pope Urban in 1263, *Seraphicus Patriarcha* of Paul VI in 1978 for the SFO; and the *Rule Franciscanum vitae propositum* of John Paul II in 1982 for the TOR);
- introduction to the *Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the SFO*;
- experiences: participate in some meetings of secular fraternities, moments of shared prayer, celebration of the various important events in the life of secular fraternities.

C. Post-novitiate:

- history of the Franciscan Family, including the SFO, and its development through the centuries; its presence and development in one’s own country; the relationship between the First Order and TOR; and the birth of new congregations from the SFO;
- the nature, identity, structure, and organization of the SFO according to its new Rule and Constitutions underlining its essential secular nature and unity;
- highlight the vision of the Church as the “people of God” and as a communion (cf. LG, GS, Final Document of the Synod of 1985);
- deepen the understanding of the role of the lay faithful, the coresponsibility and collaboration between clerics and lay, religious and seculars in the mission of the Church (cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, *Christifideles laici*, *Letters of the Ministers General regarding Secular Franciscans*);
- in the study of the social doctrine of the Church (from *Rerum novarum* to the present) giving specific attention to the responsibility of the laity;

- deepen the understanding of the nature of spiritual and pastoral assistance to the SFO and the collegiality and identity of Spiritual Assistants through an attentive reading of the *Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the SFO*.
- readings: *Regula non Bullata* (1221), *Memoriale propositi* (1221), *Supra Montem* of Nicholas IV (1289), *Misericors dei Filius* of Leo XIII (1883), and *Seraphicus Patriarcha* of Paul VI (1978);
- provide common pastoral experiences guided by Spiritual Assistants and participation in the meetings of local fraternities, moments of prayer, and celebration of the various important events in the life of the secular fraternities.

It would be well to keep in mind that the proposals mentioned in this section should not be presented only as supplementary material added to the formation programs but need to be developed as integral to the formation curriculum under the following topics: history, spirituality, ecclesiology, social doctrine, etc...

1.2. Permanent Formation

Based on a common charism and as a sign of witness in the Church, it would be important to concretize the “life-giving union” in accord with the intent of the *Constitutions* and *General Statutes* of the First Order and TOR and the *General Constitutions* of the SFO:

- plan and celebrate together principle liturgies - focusing on Franciscan feasts - and experiences of common prayer;
- program and embrace common charitable and social pastoral activities with “courageous” initiatives according to local needs in response to the signs of the times;
- arrange times for friars and seculars to study the documents on the theology of the laity together (cf. 8.3);
- organize common meetings, assemblies, retreats, days of recollection, and spiritual exercises;
- include Secular Franciscans in times of formation and in the celebration of chapters both through messages and personal witness.

2. FORMATION OF SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS

It is necessary that new Spiritual Assistants have the opportunity to be prepared for their specific service to the SFO. It would not be superfluous to have courses of preparation for Spiritual Assistants on the provincial, national, and international levels. The topics that can be covered are those mentioned above under the topic of “initial formation” above, or:

- history and sources of the SFO;
- understanding of the specific identity of the SFO;
- ecclesiology and the SFO;
- Secular Franciscan spirituality;
- the Secular Franciscan in the Church and in society;
- Franciscan values of the SFO;
- formation of friars in regard to the SFO;
- practical aspects of assistance to the SFO;
- SFO, Franciscan Youth, and Araldini;
- non-members who would like to “adhere” to a local SFO fraternity and Friends of St. Francis.

2.1. Updating

For continuing updating of Spiritual Assistants the following are suggested:

- annual formation courses, information on assistance with focus on specific problems that confront the SFO;
- attentive reading of the journals, letters, and other communications of the various Orders regarding the SFO and assistance on the national and international levels;
- awareness and sharing of programs and initiatives among Spiritual Assistants on all levels
- general, national, regional, and local.

3. THOSE RESPONSIBLE

3.1. Ministers General and Provincial:

- promote interest in their own friars in respect to the SFO and the importance of communion between Franciscan religious and seculars;
- encourage formation of formators and the interest of all religious in regard to the SFO and YouFra;
- see that the SFO and YouFra maintain an prominent place in programs of initial and permanent formation of friars;
- become familiar with the place of the SFO and YouFra during their visits with the friars and during chapters and give special attention to the quality of assistance given to the SFO and YouFra.

3.2. Spiritual Assistants:

- are the first to promote, organize, and animate courses and seminars in consultation with the major superiors and directors of formation;
- identify formators, religious and lay, who are well prepared for the required formation of friars at every level;
- encourage moments of guided experiences of the SFO especially for those friars in temporary vows;
- find time during their pastoral visits to have contact with religious houses of formation in order to provide information on the life and mission of Secular Franciscans in the Church and in society.

3.3. Formators of religious:

- know how to demonstrate to young religious the “beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism” shared with the SFO;¹⁰
- offer “opportunities to grow in their commitment to the charism and mission”¹¹ of the Franciscan family;
- “must therefore be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to accompany” Secular Franciscans “on this journey.”¹²

4. METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSALS

4.1. Experiential Methods

Experiential methods should be used at every level of formation: concrete experiences, followed by guided reflection, need to be integrated into formation programs.

¹⁰ VC 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 65.

¹² *Ibid.* 66.

4.2. Collaboration on the part of formators:

- the ministry of formation can best be developed as a *team* approach;
- the team can be comprised of religious and secular SFO formators and other members of the Franciscan family;
- an interchange of ideas and formation material is encouraged among formators in the same linguistic area - as well as with those of other areas.

4.3. Collaboration on the part of those in formation:

- common programs for those in formation at various levels with other members of the Franciscan family are encouraged.

4.4. Distance Formation

- distance formation, utilizing correspondence courses, discussion groups, or other means, can be used to enrich and deepen the formation programs at every level;
- modern means of communication, such as the Internet and E-mail, offer new possibilities of collaboration for personal and group formation.

4.5. Formation Material

- both National and Regional Assistants are encouraged to collect and continually update the specific material used for the formation of Spiritual Assistants to the SFO such as: sources, documents, magisterial texts, statutes for assistance, manuals, notes, historical sources, magazines, various other publications, posters, brochures, video, musical cassettes, Internet web pages, etc.;
- this material should be made available to formators and other friars;
- guidebooks and manuals either need to be updated or need to be developed in those areas where they do not exist;
- a brotherly collaboration and sharing of formation resources among the diverse linguistic and geographic areas is encouraged - especially for those who are in need of resources or translations of documents.

CONCLUSION

Each of the *Constitutions* of the First Order and TOR clearly point out that a full expression of the Franciscan charism requires a dynamic relationship of the friars with secular Franciscans. For example, Article 95 of the *Constitutions* of the Capuchin friars states the following: “Within the ambit of the Franciscan family, the Secular Franciscan Fraternity or Order occupies a special place that both shares and promotes its authentic spirit. It should be esteemed as necessary for the fullness of the Franciscan charism.” This article, and similar passages in the legislation of the other Orders, highlights the principle of “life-giving union” or vital reciprocity that is found in the *Rule* of the Secular Franciscan Order.¹³ It is reasonable to say that the spiritual assistance that the friars offer to the SFO plays a crucial role in fostering the expression of the fullness of the Franciscan charism. It is incumbent on all friars to ensure that this assistance is the best that could be provided both for the SFO and YouFra and for the very nature of their own Orders.

¹³ Cf. Art. 114:2 of the OFM Conv. *Constitutions*; Art. 60 of the OFM *Constitutions*; and Art. 157 of the TOR *Constitutions*, and Chapter 1 of the *Rule* of the SFO.