

**XV General Chapter
Secular Franciscan Order
November 4-12, 2017**

1. Introduction:

St. Bonaventure tells us that the Trinity is a relationship of unbounded and uncontainable love. This is the model we must follow as a Franciscan family if we are to maintain our unity. We must love and support each other without conditions. As a family, we are united by a common charism. “In various ways and forms, but in life-giving union with each other, [we] ... make present the charism of [our] common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.” (OFS Rule, Art. 1). Therefore, the entire Franciscan family has a responsibility to maintain this relationship. The words “life-giving union” are important if we are to preserve our Franciscan family connection.

Saint Francis calls the Holy Spirit the “Minister General” of the Franciscan movement, and so He is (Cf. Celano’s *Second Life of Saint Francis*). We believe the Holy Spirit continues to play a crucial role in our family by enlightening, purifying and inflaming the hearts of our people and our leaders. This gives us hope. We must continue to pray for the Spirit’s guidance as we explore the future of spiritual assistance in the life and mission of the Secular Franciscan Order.

When we speak of spiritual assistance in the United States, we speak of **hope** and we speak of **reality**. Our **hope** is that by the grace of God, there will be more Franciscan friars and religious available to serve as spiritual assistants. The **reality** is that at this point in time, we need to train and certify secular Franciscans to meet the needs of our fraternities.

Some countries may have plenty of friars, and if they do, they are blessed. But in the United States, too many of our fraternities have not had a spiritual assistant for years.

The assistant is a vital link in maintaining the family connection. When the local assistant is a **secular** Franciscan, it takes considerable effort to maintain this connection. If the regional assistant is a **secular** Franciscan, he or she must maintain regular contact with the provincials and provincial spiritual assistants to maintain vital reciprocity.

I have been “formed” in part by deeply spiritual and knowledgeable friar assistants who saw in me something I didn’t see in myself. Because of them, I was delegated as a regional spiritual assistant and as one of the trainers for our certification program.

When I was professed 33 years ago, all the spiritual assistants I knew were Franciscan friars. The idea of training secular Franciscans to fill that role was unforeseen and inconceivable. In a recent report submitted by 28 of our 30 regions, we learned that 27% of our fraternities are without spiritual assistance. We consider this a crisis, and so we began to design and implement spiritual assistant training courses. This doesn’t mean we stopped asking the major superiors for suitable and well-prepared friars to serve our fraternities. Many of us visit the houses of

formation and speak about our place in the family circle. And we will continue to do so until the Holy Spirit blesses us with so many Franciscan friars and religious that we no longer need to train secular Franciscans.

2. General Constitutions 89.4.b and The Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance Article 15.4(b)

At the General Chapter in Hungary, November 2008, a document was approved that outlined the *Practical Interpretation and Application of General Constitutions Article 89.4(b) and the Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the OFS, Article 15.4(b)*. I call your attention to the second option of Article 89.4 of the General Constitutions, which states:

89.4 When it is not possible to give such a spiritual assistant¹ to the fraternity, the competent major superior can entrust the service of spiritual assistance to:

b. diocesan clerics or other persons, specially prepared for such service, who are members of the Secular Franciscan Order;²

In almost identical words, The Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance (Article 15.4(b)), states:

15.4 When it is not possible to give the fraternity a Spiritual Assistant who is a member of the First Order or the TOR, the competent major Superior can entrust the service of spiritual assistance to:

b) secular Franciscans, cleric or lay, specially prepared for such service;

In recent years, many competent major superiors have been entrusting the care of fraternities to suitable and well prepared secular Franciscans.

Now let us consider the Practical Interpretation and Application of the guiding principles in this document.

(1) *The competent major superiors retain the responsibility to appoint the secular spiritual assistants to the various levels of fraternity: local, regional and national. This is **not** an optional principle. The responsibility continues to rest on the major superiors' shoulders because this is a service he provides and a sign of communion and co-responsibility with the OFS. To accomplish this, the major superiors should foster interest in the OFS in their friars.*

¹ GC 89.3 specifies that the spiritual assistant should be a Franciscan religious member of the First Order or TOR.

² GC 89.4.a specifies the first option as religious brothers or sisters of other Franciscan institutes.

- (2) *To be considered for appointment, the secular Franciscan must have been professed for a minimum of five years.* Since this is a call within the original call to become a secular Franciscan, I consider five years to be the absolute minimum time of profession. The candidate must be secure in his or her identity as a secular Franciscan before taking on this new role. We find some of the best qualified secular assistants are former leaders of fraternities at the local, regional and national levels. These members have solid knowledge of our Order's structure and governance and are better able to serve within the boundaries of the assistant's role.
- (3) *The secular Franciscan spiritual assistant cannot belong to the same fraternity that he or she provides assistance to.* In the United States, we have difficulty adhering to this particular principle. In the northwestern portions of the United States, the distances between fraternities are vast and the areas are sparsely populated. One region has a fraternity in Alaska, which is separated from the continental United States by Canada. In the Hawaiian region, a spiritual assistant must fly from one island to another. Admittedly, these are extreme examples, but they illustrate a problem that is unique to a country as geographically large as ours.
- (4) *It is understood that the secular Franciscan must be suitable and well prepared.* What does it mean to be suitable and well prepared? These terms have to be defined. To be suitable is a matter of discerning a call and meeting certain requirements. It is similar to discerning a call to become a secular Franciscan. To be well-prepared, however, is the responsibility of both the trainers and the candidates. And I believe the primary responsibility rests on the one seeking certification. An old saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." People learn what they choose to learn. We cannot force them to do what they must do for themselves, but we can disqualify them as not being well prepared.
- (5) *He or she must have moral rectitude—live an authentic Christian life—be faithful to the Catholic faith and the Franciscan charism and live a life in conformity with the Secular Franciscan Rule and Constitutions.* This needs little comment since it is crucial that an assistant be an authentic witness of Christian Franciscan spirituality. Nevertheless, we always check all references and sacramental church records.
- (6) *The secular Franciscan spiritual assistant must possess a solid Franciscan formation and good working knowledge of Sacred Scripture, Franciscan sources, the OFS Rule and General Constitutions, and Church documents.* To follow the poor and crucified Christ, we must have heart knowledge of what Jesus said and did, and be able to apply it—examining our lives in the light of the Gospel. We call that conversion. In 2005, John Sanborn, OFS, and I published our first edition of the book *Essential Document of the Secular Franciscan Order*. We believed it was important to have all the documents relevant to our secular Franciscan life in one publication and available to all our members.
- (7) *It is understood that in the fraternity the secular Franciscan spiritual assistants [serve], they will not vote in financial matters, nor will they have an active or passive voice in the*

financial matters. This needs no comment. It is a statement that is easily understood and must be observed.

Our certification programs stress these principles insuring that the fraternities served by secular spiritual assistants retain their true identity and fidelity to the Franciscan family, the Franciscan charism and the Catholic Church.

3. Instrumentum Laboris – Spiritual Assistance

Number 7 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* correctly points out that the spiritual and pastoral care of the OFS is entrusted by the Church to the First Order and Third Order Regular. They bear the responsibility of providing assistants for our fraternities. However, they cannot give us what they don't have. Like us, provinces are dealing with an aging membership and declining vocations. Although the basic problem stems from lack of available friars, the fact remains that many friars are not aware that we exist, that we are a branch of the Franciscan family, and that they have an obligation to serve us.

I find the second paragraph of the working document to be consistent with my own experience in that many of our well-formed secular assistants are pleased to be asked and willing to assist the major superiors in their initial and ongoing training programs.

If I could make only one suggestion it would be, “Don't assign a friar, religious, diocesan priest—anyone—to a fraternity without first giving them some basic information and training.” Unless they are familiar with the OFS Rule, General Constitutions, and Ritual, they are at a serious disadvantage and cannot fulfill their role as a member of the council or as an active participant in the fraternity. As an example, recently, a newly assigned friar regional spiritual assistant was to make his first pastoral visitation. He sent an email asking, “Since I am visiting a local fraternity, is this a ‘fraternal’ visitation or a ‘pastoral’ visitation and what is the difference between them? Who sets the agenda? Is there an agenda? ...” Fortunately, he sent the email before the visitation, and we were able to give him the information he needed. This is not only unfair to the fraternity, but it is unfair to the friar. He was assigned without any training.

Finally, I would say that not only is there a need for better connection and communication between the general spiritual assistants and the national spiritual assistants, but there is a need for better communication among all spiritual assistants—friar and secular alike. I would welcome anything—listserv, webinar, *Koinonia*, etc.—that would improve the flow of information to everyone serving in the capacity of spiritual assistant.

4. Spiritual Assistant Training Courses in the United States

Recently, I contacted our 30 regional ministers to learn first-hand from them whether they had ever conducted a spiritual assistant certification program in their region. Of the 25 responses I received, 21 regions had or have a program and four did not. Five regions did not respond. It is apparent that more than two-thirds of our regional fraternities are conducting or

have conducted certification programs in their region. So you can see, the need is widespread and action is being taken.

In 2010, the diminishing number of spiritual assistants was addressed by the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants at its annual meeting. In the same year it was a topic at the National Fraternity's annual Chapter. Then again, at the National Chapter in 2012, the membership expressed a growing concern about this issue and decided to establish a task force to gather information. We found that no two regions have identical training processes, and although all use a common text and the same resources, each training program is adapted to the particular region. In regions where distances are great, training is accomplished primarily by correspondence. In smaller geographical areas, classes meet monthly or use both correspondence and group gatherings. Some meet over a weekend and some only for a day.

At a meeting in Easton, Pennsylvania, September 2015, the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants established guidelines for developing a training program for Spiritual Assistants.

This is what the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants expects all of us to do.

- Contact ALL the Provincial Ministers and Provincial Spiritual Assistants of each of the Provinces that has fraternities bonded to them in [our] Region for permission and guidance to start a training program.
- In collaboration with Provincial Spiritual Assistants (PSAs), Regional Spiritual Assistants (RSAs), the Regional Executive Council (REC), and interested OFS members, decide which format might work best in [OUR] Region. Design a syllabus.
- Get approval from the PSAs that this program will be an acceptable means of preparation for Spiritual Assistants.
- If it is not a simple correspondence course, identify qualified facilitators, possibly the PSA themselves, the RSA, recommended "mentors," and establish the location and time of meetings.
- Establish referral and screening procedures and vetting methods, e.g., letters of recommendation from pastor and fraternity council, interview by RSA.
- Educate fraternity members about Spiritual Assistance and promote the program in local fraternities.
- Invite participants.
- After screening, set-up initial meeting times and introduce scope and sequence of training program to candidates.
- Implement training program, including internship and mentoring segments.

- Certify those who have successfully completed the course and inform Provincial Leaderships of their suitability for appointment as Spiritual Assistants.
- Evaluate the program.
- Develop a program of Ongoing Formation / communication for new and currently serving Spiritual Assistants.

5. Spiritual Assistant Certification Course in St. Margaret of Cortona Region

What I have covered thus far concerns the United States as a whole. Let me briefly describe an actual training program—the one in my region.

Ours is a two-year course. It is a combination of correspondence and quarterly group meetings, with a retreat once a year. For the correspondence portion, we use the texts *Franciscan Family Connections* and the *For Up To Now Formation Manual*. For the group gatherings, we use various resources such as St. Bonaventure’s *Major Life of St. Francis*, the CIOFS’ *Manual for Assistance to the OFS and to the Franciscan Youth*, as well as articles from *Koinonia*.

We expect our candidates to study and meditate on Sacred Scripture, and each has a copy of the *Essential Documents of the Secular Franciscan Order*. We expect them to be familiar with these documents.

During our group gatherings, Brother Kip Ledger, OFM Cap., presents Franciscan spirituality, Father Vincent Cushing, OFM, presents theological reflections, and I handle basic information from our guiding documents—simply put, I define what **IS** the role of a spiritual assistant and what **IS NOT** the role of a spiritual assistant.

Our training is designed primarily for secular Franciscans, but is open to Franciscan friars and sisters who wish to take part in our sessions. In our latest class, two provincial spiritual assistants attended some of our sessions.

6. Conclusion:

We will not give up hoping for more friars and religious as spiritual assistants. Our shared Franciscan charism is expressed in different ways depending on our state of life. **Only** when all expressions of our charism are present, can we “...make present the charism of our common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church” (Rule, Art. 1).

Spiritual assistance is a response to the call of the Holy Spirit. It is a service rendered to a fraternity. It is not a position of superiority, but one of service.

May God continue to bless our endeavors worldwide.