

Care and Feeding of Fraternity Councils



Secular Franciscan Order

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Table of Contents

Purpose of this Booklet	3
The Fraternity Council	3
Article 49.....	3
Article 50.....	4
The Offices in the Fraternity.....	5
Article 51.....	5
Article 52.....	5
Participation in the Life of the Fraternity	7
Article 53.....	7
Getting Started	8
What does a Fraternity need?.....	9
It needs nourishment:.....	9
Environment, formation, prayer	11
It needs exercise:.....	15
It needs periodic check-ups:.....	16
When to call the doctor:	18

Purpose of this Booklet

The purpose of this booklet is to serve as a guide to assist newly elected councils become aware of their duties to animate and guide their fraternity. Fraternity life is based on servant-hood and leadership in the Order is servant leadership.

Congratulations, your sisters and brothers have asked you to guide and assist them in this part of their Franciscan spiritual journey. Your major role as council is to create that loving, safe, trusting environment where they can for a few moments retreat from their hectic everyday lives to a moment where they can be fed and refreshed in body and soul. As council your goal is to invite them (and of course yourselves) into this holy place, this privileged place we call fraternity, where we can just BE ourselves and enjoy each others' gifts and blessings.

The Fraternity Council

From the General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order, approved January 1, 2001

Article 49

1. The council of the local fraternity is composed of the following offices: minister, vice minister, secretary, treasurer, and master of formation. Other offices may be added according to the needs of each fraternity. The spiritual assistant of the fraternity forms part of the council by right¹.
2. The fraternity, meeting in an assembly or chapter, discusses questions regarding its own life and organization. Every three years, in an elective assembly or chapter, the fraternity elects the minister and the council in the way established by the Constitutions and statutes.

¹ See *Constitutions* 90,2.

Article 50

1. It is the duty of the council of the local fraternity:
 - a. to promote the initiatives necessary for fostering fraternal life, for improving the human, Christian, and Franciscan formation of its members and for sustaining their witness and commitment in the world;
 - b. to make concrete and courageous choices, appropriate for the situation of the fraternity, from among the numerous activities possible in the field of the apostolate.

2. The duties of the council are also:
 - a. to decide on the acceptance and admission to profession of new brothers and sisters²;
 - b. to establish a fraternal dialogue with members in particular difficulties and to adopt consequent measures;
 - c. to receive the request for withdrawal and to decide on the suspension of a member from the fraternity;
 - d. to decide on the establishment of sections or groups in conformity with the Constitutions and the statutes;
 - e. to decide on the destination of available funds and, in general, to deliberate on matters concerning financial management and economic affairs of the fraternity;
 - f. to assign duties to the councilors and to the other professed members;
 - g. to request from the competent superiors of the First Order and the TOR suitable and prepared religious as assistants;
 - h. to perform such other duties as are required by these constitutions or which are necessary to carry out its proper purposes.

² See *Constitutions* 39, 3; 41, 1.

The Offices in the Fraternity

Article 51

1. While firmly upholding the co-responsibility of the council to animate and guide the fraternity, the minister, as the primary person responsible for the fraternity, is expected to make sure that the directions and the decisions of the council are put into practice and will keep the council informed about what he or she is doing.
2. The minister also has the following duties:
 - a. to call, to preside at, and to direct the meetings of the fraternity and council; to convoke every three years the elective chapter of the fraternity, having heard the council on the formalities of the convocation;
 - b. to prepare the annual report to be sent to the council of the higher level after it has been approved by the council of the fraternity;
 - c. to represent the fraternity in all its relations with ecclesiastical and civil authorities. When the fraternity acquires a juridical personality in the civil order, the minister becomes, when possible, its legal representative;
 - d. to request, with the consent of the council, the pastoral and fraternal visits, at least once every three years.
 - e. to put into effect those acts which the Constitutions refer to his or her competence.

Article 52

1. The vice minister has the following duties:
 - a. to collaborate in a fraternal spirit and to support the minister in carrying out his or her specific duties;
 - b. to exercise the functions entrusted by the council and/or by the assembly or chapter;

- c. to take the place of the minister in both duties and responsibilities in case of absence or temporary impediment;
 - d. to assume the functions of the minister when the office remains vacant³.
2. The secretary has the following duties:
- a. to compile the official acts of the fraternity and of the council and to assure that they are sent to their respective proper recipients;
 - b. to see to the updating and preservation of the records and the registers, noting admissions, professions, deaths, withdrawals, and transfers from the fraternity⁴;
 - c. to provide for the communication of the more important facts to the various levels and, if appropriate, to provide for their dissemination through the mass media.
3. The master of formation (USA – formation director) has the following duties:
- a. to co-ordinate, with the help of the other members of the council, the formative activities of the fraternity;
 - b. to instruct and enliven the inquirers during the time of initiation, the candidates during the period of initiation formation, and the newly professed;
 - c. to inform the council of the fraternity prior to profession, concerning the suitability of the candidate for a commitment to live according to the Rule.
4. The treasurer, or bursar, has the following duties:
- a. to guard diligently the contributions received, recording each receipt in the appropriate register, with the date on which it

³ See *Constitutions* 81,1.

⁴ Each local fraternity is to have at least a register of enrollments (admissions, professions, transfers, deaths, and every other important annotation relative to the individual members), the register of minutes of the council and the register of administration.

- was given, the name of the contributor, or the one from whom it was collected;
- b. to record in the same register the items of expense, specifying the date and the purpose, in conformity with the directions of the fraternity council;
 - c. to render an account of his or her administration to the assembly and to the council of the fraternity according to the norms of the national statutes.
5. The provisions regarding the rights and duties of the vice minister, the secretary and the treasurer apply, with the appropriate adaptations, to all levels.

Participation in the Life of the Fraternity

Article 53

1. *Rule 24* The fraternity must offer to its members opportunities for coming together and collaborating through meetings to be held with as great a frequency as allowed by the situation and, with the involvement of all its members.
2. *Rule 6; 8* The fraternity should come together periodically, also as an ecclesial community to celebrate the Eucharist in a climate which strengthens the fraternal bond and characterizes the identity of the Franciscan family. Where, for whatever reason, this particular celebration may not be possible, they should participate in the celebration of the larger ecclesial community.
3. Insertion into a local fraternity and participation in fraternity life is essential for belonging to the SFO. Appropriate initiatives should be adopted according to the directives of the national statutes, to keep those brothers and sisters united to the fraternity who — for valid reasons of health, family, work, or distance — cannot actively participate in community life.

4. The fraternity remembers with gratitude its brothers and sisters who have passed away and continues its communion with them by prayer and in the Eucharist.
5. The national statutes can indicate special forms of association with the fraternity for those who, without becoming a member of the SFO, want to participate in its life and activities.

For other administrations duties and responsibilities please consult the General Constitutions and National Statutes.

Getting Started

Care and Feeding of Fraternity Councils

So, you find yourself elected to Council. Now what?

If you're feeling somewhat "in over your head," you're probably in the right place.

Our Franciscan tradition gives us the story of one of the first friars, John the Simple, who likewise felt insecure. He was so unsure of himself, in fact, that he decided the only way around it was to copy Francis in absolutely everything. It got to the point that when Francis coughed, John the Simple coughed; when Francis spat, John the Simple would spit (*Omnibus*, 996).

Francis soon put a stop to this sort of blind imitation; but the story of John the Simple is a powerful reminder that the Franciscan charism is not meant to produce carbon copies, but rather to **consecrate individual uniqueness**.

So, don't expect your Council or your fraternity to conform too closely to any other group you've belonged to ... or any other fraternity, for that matter.

Nor will your council conform to worldly models, such as *Robert's Rules of Order*, or the efficiency of a corporate executive board.

Your model is St. Paul's image of the Body of Christ. Listening and being aware of the needs of the whole body is your goal.

This takes time. It takes practice. Becoming familiar with what's "normal" for YOUR PARTICULAR BODY doesn't happen overnight. And *your* body is not necessarily going to behave the same way someone else's body does.

But there ARE rules of thumb to maintain the health of this body (fraternity) for which you've accepted responsibility:

What does a Fraternity need?

It needs nourishment:

Be thinking of ways to feed your brothers and sisters. Vary the diet of your monthly programs. If you've embarked on an in-depth study of one particular topic, don't belabor it for a whole year. Instead, consider presenting a series of three or four sessions and saving further material for another year.

Vary not only the topics, but also the method of pre-

sentation. Have you explored the use of video available from your diocesan audio-visual library, or from other fraternities? Are your members being heard through the use of different group processes, such as small group discussion or one-on-one sharing? Do you use the lecture format *sparingly*?

Some staples in your fraternity's diet ("ongoing formation") should include: periodic examination of different sections of the Rule; attention to Franciscan feasts, stories, and customs as they occur on the calendar; discussion of current papal and episcopal letters regarding social justice teachings of the Church; a continuing focus on personal spirituality topics such as prayer and the simplification of our lifestyle; current issues related to work, family, environment, and peace and justice.

The fraternity as a whole will benefit from at least one annual injection of a program related to the group apostolate, if you have one, or to exploring a possible apostolate, if you do not.

Also, for the health of the fraternity, a periodic presentation related to group dynamics such as building communication skills, or conflict resolution, is prudent - BEFORE problems arise.

- Who is responsible for the teachings?
- Is the group overly dependent on the spiritual assistant for spoon feeding?
- Are gifted members emerging and being encouraged to share their research and interests?
- What's happening in your fraternity's common prayer life? Is there variety and creativity?

- Do all members participate in active discussion?
- Do members come prepared to participate in formation activities, or do they just try to fake it?
- Do all members participate in various parts of fraternity life?

Environment, formation, prayer

A major part of being council is to create this open and safe environment to encourage members to be a vital part of fraternity life, and to challenge those who do not take part or offer themselves.

- Is the fraternity gathering open and inviting?
- Do we actively communicate and encourage attendance?
- Does the gathering have the basic components, prayer, formation, sharing & social properly balanced?
- How are the silent types challenged to take part in sharing and discussions?
- Do you experiment with the gathering to add interest and variety or do you remain rigid or routine?
- Do you constantly let those who are unprepared or who refuse to share off the hook?
- Does the minister & spiritual assistant provide both loving challenge and gentle fraternal correction when needed?
- Does the council remain blind to problems until it is too late, or does it intervene to head off problems and complacency?

Our Profession requires an understanding of being in an Order within the Church, we have consecrated ourselves and our lives to God. As professed members of the Franciscan Family we also have entered into a life-long journey to transform ourselves into better images of Christ, ongoing formation is a key component and active participation in the process is a requirement of profession.

- How do members view/understand “Profession”?
- Do members see themselves as “consecrated” people?
- How do we share our stories of God’s actions in us?
- Do all members actively invite new people to explore a Secular Franciscan Vocation?
- Do all council members actively and joyfully fulfill their individual council responsibilities? Or does everything get dumped on the minister?
- How are council members held accountable to each other and to the fraternity?

We are called to live the Gospel, following Jesus in the model of St. Francis and that process was not finished when we professed. We share with all parts of the Franciscan Family the obligation to pursue continual conversion/transformation (this is the essence of the penitential movement that has been our foundation for over 800 years).

- Is the fraternity environment/atmosphere truly a privileged place.
- *The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible*

sign of the Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members.⁵

Formation begins with the council, which should have a brief formation period at every council meeting, learning to be fraternity helps in building up the larger fraternity.

- The General Chapters of the SFO, both 2002 & 2008 declared formation the number 1 priority of the entire Order. How does this compare with your fraternity priorities?
- Do all council members actively support and participate in the initial formation process of new folks or is it just a one man band?
- Do you take time to pray, form and share or just jump into the business at hand?
- *Admission into the Order is gradually attained through a time of formation, (initial formation is not less than 24 months⁶) and profession of the rule. The entire community is engaged in the process of growth by its own manner of living.⁷*

No matter how praiseworthy the structure of your prayer, it needs constant attention or it will become dry. The Liturgy of the Hours is the preferred format (and your spiritual assistant will gladly give you instruction), but the *Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order* gives other suggestions in Appendix 11.

⁵ Rule of the SFO, Chapter 3 Article 22

⁶ National Statutes Article 19 § 2

⁷ Ibid – Article 23

- Do you have the courage to experiment?

How do you feed those fraternity members who are shut-ins or who are not able to participate fully because of personal reasons?

Council members should be arranging for telephone contacts to bring absent members up-to-date about what happened at the last meeting, to share handouts or notes, to communicate to those absent that the fraternity missed them. Is someone from the fraternity making sure that Communion is brought regularly to members who are shut-in? Is there a system for remembering special personal occasions such as birthdays? Have you devised some rituals celebrating "Jubilees" of long-professed members?

- What is communication like within the fraternity? Does the word get out? Is there a good prayer chain or is communication hit and miss?
- Is there communication and relationship of the members outside the gathering or just at the gathering?
- Are external groups (e.g. KofC, Altar Society, Rosary Society etc.) and parish ministries (except ordained) generally a higher priority than fraternity gatherings and commitments? If so what is the level of understand of Order & also the members own sense of belonging?
- Do your professed members view the fraternity as “simply” another parish group, something to “join”.
- How do you emphasize vocation & profession”
- How to keep folks interested in fraternal life?

The personal touch is everything.

It needs exercise:

Living in fraternity is not just talking about it. **Making special efforts to meet with brothers and sisters will sometimes mean setting other priorities aside.** Being companions to each other on this shared journey is something we have chosen, something we have promised.

- Do fraternity members actively and deliberately pray for each other? Do you encourage prayer partners or spiritual companions?
- How is the spiritual health of your fraternity?

Once-a.-month Council meetings and once-a-month fraternity meetings are a minimum. Your Council will "stay in shape" better if other opportunities are exercised when they present themselves.

- How often does the fraternity gather? *The recent Fraternal visitors from our Minister General could not believe many SFO fraternities gather only once a month. Their recommendation was every week with a different format each time.*
- Does your current gathering frequency lead to greater communal/spiritual growth or favor the just another meeting idea?
- How often does the council meet? Does the current frequency lead to proper animation and spiritual guidance for the fraternity?

Can you offer to carpool to a seminar or a workshop or day of

Recollection or Regional meeting? Simple conversation in the car can be a powerful community builder.

- Does the fraternity regularly participate in a communal retreat, days of reflection etc? If not why not, what stands in the way of making fraternal life & growth a priority?
- How often does the fraternity have communal Mass &/or a Eucharistic Liturgy?

Do you notice if several members attend the same parish Mass on some days and may be able to go out to breakfast together? Can you invite someone over to see a good video? Is there a book or a CD you ought to share?

How about the muscles of future leadership? Are you flexing them by using the specialized gifts of your members? Can one person be asked to prepare a presentation while another is asked to organize a picnic or a trip? Do you have a newsletter? Are different people being asked to take responsibility for your common prayer?

In all of this, if the feeling of "**being stretched**" is absent, atrophy will quickly set in.

It needs periodic check-ups:

The fraternity Minister and Council have the responsibility of inviting the Regional Spiritual Assistant and appropriate Regional Executive Council Member to local fraternity meetings and to Council meetings. A triennial visitation is required, but more frequent "check-ups" are desirable.

The Regional Executive Council is the bond connecting your fraternity with the broader Franciscan reality. It's becoming more and more imperative to strengthen this bond in our day when so many exciting things are happening.

Have you scheduled some kind of visitation for this year? When was your last one? What topics would you like the visitor to address? How will you communicate your local needs and concerns?

Another form of check-up is peer communication with members from other fraternities. Sharing experiences multiplies enthusiasm.

Are you on the mailing list for other fraternity newsletters? Do you receive the national newsletter, the TAU?
<http://www.nafra-sfo.org/tau-usa.html>

The Franciscan Action Network (FAN) at www.franciscanaction.org is another resource which gives current Franciscan news and a call to action.

When was the last Day of Recollection or weekend retreat for your fraternity? If you feel your group is too small for an endeavor like this, have you considered joining with a neighboring fraternity to sponsor one?

Members of the Regional Council will be glad to help you make arrangements. An opportunity for annual or bi-annual reflection should be offered to all Secular Franciscans.

Is the Council doing its own "ongoing formation" by working

through one of the many checklists available, or have Council meetings become the dry bones of business busyness?

Are you rotating the responsibility for Council input, or has one person been handling it alone? Have you polled the members about current concerns?

When to Call the Doctor:

Just like the human body, the fraternity's Body sometimes signals its ill health. Contact your Regional Council Member or Regional Spiritual Assistant if your fraternity and your local assistant can't seem to shake these symptoms:

- The feeling of malaise; dryness; being stuck in a rut with your gathering format, programs, materials or even prayer types. (*Antidote: Variety; Creativity; Courage to experiment; Examples from other fraternities*).
- Factions; power struggles; competition, envy; officers or members trying to exercise authority inappropriately. (*Antidote: Attention to communication skills; Outside mediation; Conflict resolution; Group reconciliation service*).
- Lack of new vocations for prolonged periods of time or older members deciding to lapse. (*Antidote: Evangelization; Attention to the image projected by the group; Change in leadership; Renewed enthusiasm*).
- One person doing everything. (*Antidote: Honest discussion by council; Renewal of commitment; Reevaluation of priorities of group; Teaching on giftedness*).

- Difficulty in accepting our new Rule (1978) or accepting changes in formation or other policies aimed to address the life of the Order and the needs of the Church. (*Antidote: Education; Gentleness; Outside speakers; Attendance at regional and national meetings*).

Considering all this, would you say there's any easy "formula" to follow in guiding your fraternity "from Gospel to life and life to Gospel"?

The answer, of course, is a resounding "No!" Praise God that this is so.

Another story about Francis - who taught the world that Brother Sun praised God by being uniquely Brother Sun, and Sister Moon by being Sister Moon -tells why:

It seems that the early friars were caught up one day discussing the question, "Who is the perfect friar?" Francis put a stop to this seed of competition and comparison by looking around the room and pointing to each person present Brother Angelo was the perfect friar for his courtesy, Francis said. And Brother Masseo for his natural good sense. Brother Leo was the perfect friar for his simplicity. Brother Bernard for his faith. Brother Juniper, for his patience. Brother John of Lauds for his sheer physical strength ... and so Francis continued, pointing to each friar in turn.

The message is clear. The more completely we help each other offer our uniqueness to God, the more truly He is praised.

Francis did what was uniquely HIS to do. And as he lay dying, he blessed all of us with the challenge: "May Christ teach *you* what is *yours*." (*Omnibus*, 739)

These are just some of the ideas and signs to consider in helping you to evaluate the life of both your council and fraternity. Some are mentioned more than once – they are important and have borne fruit when council's have had the courage to actively animate and guide and be more engaged.

So again congratulations on your election and please consider yourself a blessing to the sisters and brother who called you forth, love and support them and expect the same back from them for your gift of yourself!



*Peace and
All Good*