

Fraternal and Pastoral Visitation Report
Our Lady of the Angels Region
Saturday, November 20, 2010
Saint Bonaventure Catholic Church
Paterson, New Jersey

National Spiritual Assistant Friar Stephen Gross, OFM Conventual, and National Minister Tom Bello, SFO, conducted the Pastoral and Fraternal Visitation concurrently. All first-person references in the Report belong to Tom Bello.

Preparatory Information:

The Regional Executive Council (REC) dutifully completed the Pre-Visitation Questionnaire and sent it electronically to the Visitors well before the Visitation. I thank all the members of the REC for their diligent work.

Demographics:

Canonically established fraternities: 38 (according to the Pre-Visitation Questionnaire) 44 (according to the 2010 Formation Report) 41 (according to the Treasurer's Report)

Emerging Communities: 2

Newly Forming Groups: 0

Active Professed brothers and sisters: 810

Excused Members: 103

Candidates: 44 (according to the Pre-Visitation Questionnaire) 67 (according to the 2010 Formation Report)

Inquirers: 38 (according to the Pre-Visitation Questionnaire) 35 (according to the 2010 Formation Report)

Local Spiritual Assistants (SA): 34

Documentation Review:

I reviewed the Minister's Notebook, Secretary's Minutes and Treasurer's Documents with the respective officers, but records were only available since the most recent election, not since the last visitation. As a result, ironically as we were honoring the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Region, I had little sense of the history of the Region from the documents presented. Apparently, no documents pertain prior to 2001. That's a shame. I saw no documentation prior to 2008. At the next Visitation, please have records available since this visitation. The records that I saw, though only recent, reflect careful stewardship. Special thanks to Kate Asselin, Secretary, and Richard Spana, Treasurer, for their assistance and hard work.

Communication:

The Region has such an excellent newsletter that the National Fraternity has "stolen" their newsletter editor Anna Geraci to be the editor of the TAU-USA. The Region also has an excellent website with a good deal of pertinent information: <http://www.ourladyoftheangelsregion.org/>.

Apostolic Activities:

I don't believe the Regional Fraternity itself has an apostolate, but the Region was very generous in donating \$3, 500 to Catholic Relief Services to ease the suffering in Haiti. The Region has just established a JPIC Commission with an energetic and committed Chair in Jean Haddad. The Region is represented on the Evangelization Commission of the Archdiocese of Newark. The Region has contributed to Franciscans International and the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land. Individual fraternities and fraternity members are involved in a great number and variety of Apostolic Activities.

Formation:

The Region is blessed in that its Regional Minister Ron Pihokker is a nationally recognized Secular Franciscan scholar and catechist. He has served as Chair of the National Formation Commission. In addition, Ron is

Director of the Catechetical Office for the Archdiocese of Newark. He is well served by the very active Virginia Chin, the current Formation Director. The Pre-Visitation Questionnaire reported, “WE HAVE HAD EXCELLENT, WELL ATTENDED WORKSHOPS FOR FORMATORS. OTHER ATTEMPTS AT LEADERSHIP TRAINING WERE POORLY ATTENDED.” Virginia’s Report mentioned *Fully Mature in the Spirit* as the Region’s “recommended text” for its individual fraternities. The Annual Initial Formation Retreat sold out for 2010.

Observations and Suggestions:

Venerable, soon to be Blessed, Pope John Paul II’s Message to the Secular Franciscan Order at the General Chapter on November 22, 2002 bears repeating: “The Church expects from the Secular Franciscan Order, one and only, a great service in the cause of the Kingdom of God in the world of today. The Church desires that your Order should be a model of organic, structural and charismatic unity on all levels, so as to present itself to the world as a community of love.”

National Pastoral Visitor Friar Stephen Gross OFM Conventual urged that all of us in Secular Franciscan leadership are called to be pastors or shepherds in the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. We are called to lead, to serve, to nourish, to correct when necessary, the brothers and sisters who depend on us. We can only do this through the grace of God, the grace of our vocations and our understanding of our unique Secular Franciscan call. In Baptism, being born in the Spirit, we are all called to holiness; by our Secular Franciscan profession and our call, in fraternity, to life in the world, we must make Christ present in our world.

Thus, ours is a collaborative ministry: minister, council and fraternity share individual and collective gifts for the good of all. We all have, therefore, the responsibility to learn, grow and mature in our Secular Franciscan call so that we might indeed present ourselves to the world as a community of love, a truly Trinitarian reality.

In God’s great grace, the strength of this Region, as in any Region, lies in its good people, their commitment to their vocation, guided by the Holy Spirit, along the footsteps of Sts. Francis and Clare, closer to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In particular, this Region is blessed in having so many good people living so close to one another. The Regional Minister reported that Our Lady of the Angels Region is the largest in the United States in terms of membership and the smallest in terms of geography, noting that a healthy person could walk the entire region without great difficulty. As many people attended the Annual Chapter of Our Lady of the Angels Region as there are in the whole Hawaii Region.

The Regional and fraternity leadership that I saw on display at this Visitation Chapter/Annual Ministers’ Meeting was excellent, and I hope they will continue to support and pray for one another. I have already mentioned the Regional Minister, the Regional Formation Director and their Regional Newsletter Editor. At the Visitation, I mentioned Michelle Kim, National Councilor, who comes from this Region and who was present and contributed to the Chapter. In addition, National leadership hopes to call on Diane Menditto, the Regional Vice Minister, called by Ron as his “right hand,” for her expertise to help improve the National webpage.

Special mention focuses on Regional Spiritual Assistant Friar Richard Trezza, OFM, who was present and was gracious enough to provide housing for the Visitation for both of the National Visitors. He is not only a Regional, but also a National, treasure. His dedication to the Secular Franciscan family is a gift from God. (The other Regional Spiritual Assistant was not present, but the Pre-Visitation Questionnaire reported, “WE HAVE TWO EXCELLENT SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS WHO REPRESENT TWO OF THE OBEDIENCES TO WHICH WE ARE BONDED (OFM AND CAPUCHINS).”

I was delighted to read in the Pre-Visitation Questionnaire that “REGIONAL EXEC IS LIKE A FAMILY,” and that the Regional Executive Council (REC) is able to meet once a month. Very few Regional Executive Councils are able to meet monthly for geographic, financial and other reasons. I hope the frequency of gathering and the family feeling will continue in the REC.

I challenged the REC at the Visitation, and I repeat that challenge, to find ways to increase the frequency of gathering and family feeling between and among the individual fraternities. This takes time and expense. If possible, even if only on a one-time trial basis, please attempt a longer Annual Regional Chapter: perhaps a Saturday morning to a Sunday morning Chapter, with Saturday concluding with a Vigil Mass of Celebration, a dinner and social. Please consider more Cluster Gatherings in and among the four Cluster areas of Manhattan, Westchester, North and Central Jersey. Consider a Regional Memorial Service for those throughout the Region who have returned home to the Lord in the last year.

John Murawski at Sts. Elizabeth and Louis Fraternity reported that three local fraternities shared formation duties, each taking turns once a month. Other ways for local fraternities to share, pray and bond closer include:

1. Shared retreats open to the whole Region and other shared “Franciscan Days” within Clusters.
2. Greater participation at Regional Gatherings, such as at Regional Retreats or maybe Biannual Regional Meetings, one perhaps being a Regional Memorial Service and meal and/or social.
3. Sharing of Newsletters.
4. Shared apostolates.

I stress this challenge because of the immense talent and generosity I saw displayed at the Chapter. Various individuals and fraternities reported a great sense of community, of outreach, and a rich spiritual life in their local fraternities that did not seem shared by all. For example, Tom Scheuring with Servants of God Fraternity noted a “hunger for holiness” among the people and a desire to live the Gospel in the spirit of the Lord. All efforts to build spirituality in our fraternities and in the greater world are to be commended and encouraged.

The generosity of individual fraternities is to be applauded as well. Jozef Krawontka and, I believe, his wife reported that their Divine Mercy (Polish) fraternity collected and sent \$15,000 to help flood victims in Poland. They also had outreach in Kenya and Tanzania. Madge Cooke reported on the Food Pantry work of the All Saints Emerging Group. Frank Catalano with Assumption Fraternity also reported on their work with their Food Pantry, as did Jean Haddad with the Most Holy Name of Jesus Fraternity. Dolores Jules with St. John Vianney Fraternity reported that they had started St. Anne’s Soup Kitchen in Newark. Nancy Ihnat with St. Francis Fraternity in Ringwood reported on her fraternity’s outreach to the Holy Name Friars in their nursing home.

We are all Secular Franciscans, but we are Secular Franciscans in different ways from different cultures and outlooks. By increased communication and contact, we can all learn from one another and improve our service to each other and to those most in need. This is why I challenge the REC to expand “the community of love” they feel in the REC to all the local fraternities in the Region.

Another major challenge to this great Region, and many Regions, is the aging membership. Concerning this challenge, there is no need to apologize for getting older, as we all are, but we need to find ways not to burn ourselves out and also not to lose any of those who are sick and unable to attend. This challenge can only be met by the continued good will of many good people and by the increased use of social media.

In itself, age is no deterrent to God’s great grace. Moses received God’s call to lead his people out of Egypt when he was 80. Muriel and Ernie Leckenbusch in their eighties are wise and committed leaders in their St. Thomas More fraternity and in the Region. Let us not turn our backs on our own, but let’s try to attract some younger people.

For one example, I particularly liked Sheila Tuohy’s effort with Sacred Heart Fraternity in Yonkers to engage local Catholic school youth in making 68 different posters about St. Francis for the Feast of St. Francis. All the Catholic School attended Mass on the Feast Day; everyone who participated received Rosaries from the Holy Land, and prizes were awarded for the best posters. Surely, the parents of these children, all the schoolteachers and administration noted this outreach.

To renew aging membership, we need greater visibility and more vocations. If young and not so young people can see, feel and hear our “community of love” that we live with brother and sister Secular Franciscans, then we will both make ourselves more visible and will attract new people.

Ways to be more visible are:

1. Continued individual and local fraternity activity in the local parish and local community.
2. Local fraternities might organize a special Franciscan event, like a Greccio Celebration or a Transitus Service, and invite the parish and community.
3. Announced get togethers for all Secular Franciscans for lunch, say, in Lower Manhattan, say, at noon on every third Tuesday and say all are welcome.
4. Announcements of Open Houses, Open Meetings, or Days of Recollection in parish and diocesan publications and websites.

To avoid burnout and anyone feeling left out, each fraternity, with Regional encouragement, should try to get ALL of its active members more involved. This way leadership and service come from and extend to all.

Ways to involve all are:

1. Have one person in the fraternity act as Communicator or Infirmary to contact those who haven't been to recent meetings.
2. Have a shared Mass and/or shared meal, not necessarily at the monthly meeting, where all can break bread together.
3. Have a common Day of Prayer, or common prayers such as for the fraternity or for the sick of the fraternity or for new members that all might pray individually or in community.
4. Have each member of the fraternity take responsibility for an ongoing formation session on a rotating basis.
5. I liked Angela Rodin at St. Anne's where they had a Family Album of each member of the fraternity so that each one could get to know each other better.

Yes, as with many fraternities across the country, getting our brothers and sisters to put their gifts at the service of the local or Regional fraternity in an elective position remains a constant challenge. Perhaps Ministers and Councils could do role modeling/mentoring by inviting interested brothers and sisters to attend an REC or local fraternity council meeting on occasion.

As the REC is already doing, I urge you to continue to be mindful of the importance of spirituality, formation, leadership development and fraternal life. When was the last time the Region had a special retreat, workshop, presentation, newsletter, CD, podcast on Secular Franciscan spirituality? On formation? On leadership development? On fraternal life? These are challenges we all face at every level of fraternity. As we share challenges, let us also share suggestions and solutions. Most importantly, let us pray for one another and for all.

Please request your next Pastoral and Fraternal Visitation in 18 months to 2 years from now.

With Friar Stephen Gross, I express my sincere thanks to all the brothers and sisters of Our Lady of the Angels Region and the Regional Executive Council for your warm welcome, hospitality and complete cooperation. I truly appreciated and enjoyed being a part of the life of your vibrant and Spirit-filled Region. A special thanks to Friar Stephen Gross for his opening remarks on all of us being called to be Good Shepherds, for his celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and for his closing remarks on “Feed them yourselves.” This report is submitted with him, but its tardiness can only be laid at my feet.

Respectfully submitted,

Tom Bello, SFO
National Minister
Fraternal Visitor

Stephen Gross, OFM Conventual
National Spiritual Assistant
Pastoral Visitor