



January 31, 2014

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I wanted to write to you about an increasing problem that I have encountered in some of our fraternities leading to discord and disunity among our membership. I see it as a failure to respect one another by listening and learning the skills of dialogue. The first place we need to look for guidance in this matter is our Rule which of necessity, needs to be the pattern of our lives. St. Benedict taught his community to “Listen with the ear of your heart.” I would offer the same advice to you as you read these excerpts from our Rule:

As the Father sees in every person the features of his Son, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, so the Secular Franciscans with a gentle and courteous spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ....

A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, ...

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 they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon...

What I seem to find at times, is that instead of real dialogue as the pattern of fraternity life, where the truth of one's heart is shared non-judgmentally with the truth in the heart of another, we instead engage in a kind of double monologue or “duologue” that is, talking *at* one another without listening. And when another is speaking, instead of really listening to them, we instead are preparing in our own minds, our response. This attitude of conflict has no place in fraternity life. Instead, our fraternities must become “schools of friendship” where we can gain the confidence and the skills of listening and dialogue which we can then bring to bear in our daily lives, at work and in our families. In this way, our fraternities become that “privileged place” where we can relate to one another in love and friendship.

Nor should our fraternities degenerate into “debate societies” where we try to force our particular theological or political perspective upon others or to try to become the “censors” or “thought police” for others insisting on our point of view. Rather, we come to the fraternity to be formed in Franciscan spirituality and theology with an open and courteous attitude. If this is not our reason for coming to the fraternity, we need to seriously reconsider the purpose of our Franciscan commitment.

We need also to respect the role of the fraternity council in its decisions of leadership and especially the role of the spiritual assistant, whose job it is to see that what is taught in the fraternity is theologically sound and not to usurp this role by imposing our own particular point of view. It is the spiritual assistant whose role it is to guarantee the theological correctness of what is shared in fraternity formation as well as to see that the Franciscan charism is lived.

So, dear sisters and brothers, as we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the true Light who illumines the world, let us open ourselves in the spirit dialogue with one another so that we may build our fraternities according to the vision of the Rule:

The local fraternity... 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.

May the Lord give you his Peace!

Fraternally,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Ron Pihokker', written in a cursive style.

Ron Pihokker, OFS
Regional Minister