

THE ROLE OF THE SPIRITUAL ASSISTANT IN FORMATION

The Spiritual Assistant plays an important role in formation. It is, therefore, necessary that the Spiritual Assistant have a personal knowledge and commitment to Franciscan Charism, Sacred Scriptures and the basics of the Catholic faith.

The Statutes for Spiritual Assistance to the SFO states: (Article 13)

1. The principal task of the Assistant is to foster a deeper insight into Franciscan spirituality and to cooperate in the initial and continuing formation of the secular Franciscans.
2. In the Council of the fraternity and in elective and ordinary Chapters the Assistant will be respectful of the responsibilities and role of the Secular Franciscans, giving them priority with regard to the guidance, co-ordination and animation of the fraternity.
3. The Assistant participates actively and votes in the discussions and decisions taken by the Council or by the Chapter. He or she is specifically responsible for the animation of liturgical celebrations and spiritual reflections during the meetings of the Council or of the Chapter.

Article 24:

1. The local Assistant, together with the Council of the fraternity, is responsible for the formation of the candidates and expresses his or her assessment of each of the candidates before profession.

The Council and Spiritual Assistant work collaboratively to provide Initial and Ongoing Formation. It is important to note that the Spiritual Assistant serves as a sister or brother in St. Francis, and as a teacher and guide “in the person of St. Francis” and “in the name of the Church”.

The Spiritual Assistant, as a teacher and guide, reveals the Christ who saves, and communicates in such a way that candidates can exercise their common priesthood, the gift of all the baptized. In this way, the Spiritual Assistant fosters communion with the Church, guaranteeing the integrity of the faith.

The Spiritual Assistant tries to be present at the initial and on-going formation sessions and works with the fraternity formation director or team. He or she assists with formation but does not dominate. Above all, the Spiritual Assistant shares and promotes the understanding of Franciscanism and accompanies those joining the OFS.

Ongoing formation never ends. The Fraternity Council must give it special attention in order to ensure healthy and progressive growth in living the Franciscan way of life. As a full member of Council, the Spiritual Assistant contributes ideas and creativity, and shares knowledge and insights to enhance Fraternity life. At Fraternity Council meetings, time may be allocated for “Council Formation” by the Spiritual Assistant. The Spiritual Assistant should be open to creative liturgical celebrations which will focus on the needs of Fraternity members and be filled with the Franciscan spirit. Any liturgical celebrations should support and continue the spirit of ongoing formation.

Spiritual Assistants have a two-fold responsibility. They must deal with changes in their personal lives and to grow in their personal understandings and their own spirituality. Their role requires them to listen to Secular Franciscans who face similar issues. Ongoing formation provides opportunities for Franciscan growth and development.

Spiritual Assistants have a responsibility to support, encourage, and participate in the ongoing formation programs of the fraternity.

It is very important to note that the Spiritual Assistant is not the formation director. He/she is part of a team. Everything should be done to involve Secular Franciscans in the formation process. These are several ways to accomplish this.

- a) Involve professed members of nearby fraternities in the formation process as much and as often as possible.
- b) Give serious consideration to having several local fraternities engage in a shared or joint formation program.
- c) Encourage all members of the local fraternity to go on further studies in formation and/or Franciscanism. This can be done through retreats, workshops, private study, distance education such as correspondence courses, etc.

Creativity opens the door to fresh insights and new ways of following the Rule and the Franciscan way of life. It frees us from our normal perspectives and offers something fresh. New perspectives and creative insights allow growth and development to bloom. Ongoing formation is not only about learning about what exists, but also to dream of what might be in Franciscan life.

Spiritual Assistants of the various Regions should as a minimum, organize every two years a weekend of sharing and prayer. This can be arranged by the Regional Spiritual Assistant and should be organized so that there is ample time for growth, exploration of fresh ideas and to encourage each other.

References

1. Revised Handbook for Spiritual Assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order, CNSA – Conference of National Spiritual Assistants U.S.A. 2012 Edition. Smoky Valley Publishing, KS.
2. STATUTES FOR SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL ASSISTANCE TO THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER- Conference of the Ministers General of the Franciscan First Order and TOR, Fr. Michael Higgins, TOR, Minister General, *Rome, 2009*
3. Franciscan Family Connections by Lester Bach, OFM Cap. Smoky Valley Publishing,KS.