

Incorporation of the Youfra members into the SFO

1. Introduction

Franciscan Youth (Youfra) has existed, as an organized structure within the Franciscan Family, belonging to the reality of the SFO, since the middle of last century. Before then, it did not exist and the only option for young people was to choose a commitment to the evangelical life through one of the three Franciscan Orders. Francis, Clare and Elizabeth all made their final religious commitment when they were still very young, as was the case for many other young Franciscans.

Obviously, in the past, the need to have a distinct structure was not felt. In fact, the Rule of 1883 by Leo XIII allowed for the admission into the Order of those who were only 14 years old!

So, why, at a certain point, has the need been felt to establish an organized Franciscan Youth within the framework of the SFO?

During the last century, the world has experienced many changes, including changes to the way we live in relation to one another. Many of the fundamental values of society have radically changed. The world, once strictly divided into social classes, now tends to be divided by age groups, which often do not talk to one another and often live their challenges in conflicting ways. As a result, intergenerational relationships have changed.

In recent decades, the Franciscan Family, supported by its base and with the Church's help, has made an effort to respond to the changing needs and dynamics of youth in an effort to offer answers, space for discernment and support for the realization of young vocations. The Youfra is the privileged place for Franciscans to achieve all of this.

When the time arrives for youth to be confronted with the challenges of life, and they feel attracted particularly to the Christian life and St. Francis' spirituality, they are at a point in their lives when they are still completely "secular" and living in the world. Through Youfra, they are offered the possibility of entering a vocational journey into the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO).

The Secular Franciscan Order, part of the Franciscan Family and composed of members living in the secular state, is the Order that is best suited to accompany this journey, including encouragement and assistance as required. That is why the Church has entrusted Franciscan Youth to the SFO.

"The SFO, by virtue of its very vocation, ought to be ready to share its experience of evangelical life with the youth who feel attracted to Saint Francis of Assisi and to seek the means of adequately presenting it to them". (SFO General Constitutions, Art. 96.1)

The journey of the Youfra has a precise timeframe. Once young people understand and accept their own vocation, the members of the Youfra embrace it, whatever it is and enter into what will be their permanent state of life. Among these possible vocations, there is the option of committing oneself to live a Franciscan "form of life" while remaining in the secular state;

that is, entrance into the SFO. Choosing the SFO, in fact, fully corresponds to an authentic vocation, a precise condition and form of life (*"The vocation to the SFO is a specific vocation that gives form to the life and the apostolic activity of its member"*, SFO General Constitutions, Art. 2.1). Entering the SFO, therefore, is a definitive project of life which imparts a very precise "character".

The vocational discernment may occur while a young person belongs to Youfra and, if this discernment leads to a vocation as Secular Franciscan, the Youfra members may start the process of admission, formation and profession into the SFO, while still remaining in Youfra. This is what this document refers to as simultaneous belonging, or "double belonging."

Such incorporation into the SFO is highly recommended because, once an authentic vocational discernment has been made, entry into the state of life that God has prepared for the young person should not be postponed.

2. Fraternal Animation

Fraternal animation is the best means that the SFO and Youfra Fraternities can use to more naturally incorporate members of Youfra into the SFO.

Fraternal animation is synonymous with accompaniment. Its primary goal is to be present with youth on their journey of Franciscan, as well as human and Christian, growth. For this reason, the Fraternal Animator becomes a fundamental presence to support young people in their discernment, especially discernment regarding a secular Franciscan vocation.

This accompaniment becomes an important point of reference from the very beginning. The Fraternal Animator becomes a focal point for Youfra members in helping them to authentically understand what it means to be Secular Franciscan and what the SFO represents. For this reason, it is necessary for every Youfra Fraternity to have a Fraternal Animator from the SFO Fraternity to which it is connected. This will ensure a better knowledge of the Secular Franciscan vocation and of the Fraternity into which the Youfra members may enter.

The accompaniment provided, the close relationship developed with the Youfra fraternity and the fact of being a point reference will allow the Fraternal Animator to be a witness of life for Youfra members, a witness who offers himself/herself, always freely, to serve the Franciscan youth and to help them to discover their vocation in life.

The Fraternal Animator's presence in the group, together with that of the Spiritual Assistant, will give Youfra the assurance that they are linked to the Franciscan Family and will provide a unique opportunity to enrich their lives. Both individuals, in addition to their specific responsibilities of accompaniment and guidance, must also be engaged in the formation of the group.

In addition to his/her direct contribution of accompaniment to the Youfra group, the Fraternal Animator also has a secondary responsibility, as clearly defined in the Conclusions of the 1st International Youfra Assembly: to serve as a connection or bridge between the SFO and Youfra. In this sense, the Fraternal Animator must work with the SFO Fraternity to implement what is described by the General Constitutions in Article 97.1 of the General Constitutions: *"The SFO Fraternities will promote the vocation to the Franciscan Youth by means of appropriate and dynamic initiatives. They should see to the vitality and the expansion of the*

Franciscan Youth fraternities and will accompany the youth in their journey of human and spiritual growth with proposals for specific activities and contents.”

This mandate is referenced in the CIOFS document 'Youfra, a Way of Franciscan Vocation', that underlines in Article 26: *"one of the most important means will always be the close contact with the SFO Fraternity. For this reason, the local Fraternities should create spaces for the young, either by allowing them to participate in their meetings, or by entrusting to them specific tasks in the Fraternity. It is equally important that the SFO fraternities be flexible in their organization and that they seek creative ways of forming special groups in the Fraternity, under the guidance of the council of the Fraternity"*.

The Fraternal Animator, therefore, must also work within the SFO Fraternity to foster a proper understanding of the importance of Youfra, to involve it in its activities and to encourage a sense of responsibility for Youfra. This will require, as a precondition, the building of a sense of trust between Youfra and the SFO, with the aim of promoting, supporting, helping, directing, caring and being at the service of the younger brothers and sisters who are searching and discerning their journey towards Christ, following the example of Francis, Clare, Elizabeth, Louis...

Through the accompaniment of the Fraternal Animator, the final goal is to develop an environment in which Youfra may concretely feel that it is being accompanied by the SFO at every level of its structure.

Therefore, it is important that the Fraternal Animator carry out his/her service with due care while, at the same time, taking advantage of an important opportunity to grow within his own Fraternity.

The International Youfra Assembly described the Animator's principal characteristics as: dynamism, consistency, spirituality, formation, dialogue, respect, great ability to listen, young in spirit, ability to stay in touch with young people and to be open to learning.

3. Spiritual Assistance

In the vocational journey of the Youfra members who wish to enter the SFO, the role of the spiritual assistance is of great importance. In addition to guaranteeing their fidelity to the Franciscan charism, communion with the Church and union with the Franciscan Family (SFO General Constitutions, Art. 85.2), the Spiritual Assistant has a particular responsibility in their formation and in their vocational discernment.

The Spiritual Assistant must be a witness of Franciscan spirituality and be able to communicate the fraternal affection of the religious towards youth. In addition to helping them in their vocational journey, the Spiritual Assistant will have:

- to help and accompany the young people in their continuous conversion required by the Gospel;
- to enter into a personal dialogue with the young people, to know how to listen, to wait, to be patient and, most of all, to love;
- to cooperate in forming young people in fulfilling their mission in the Church and in society; and
- to accompany the young people in their vocational discernment.

Once a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order has been discerned, the Spiritual Assistant, together with the Fraternal Animator, will help the young person to contact the local SFO Minister in order to take the necessary steps for admission into the Order.

4. Youfra – SFO relations

The relationship between the local Youfra Fraternity and the SFO Fraternity must be characterized by a spirit of reciprocal vital communion in order to create a fraternal environment which will facilitate the vocation of those who want to continue their journey within the SFO. Within the framework of vocational discernment, it would seem normal and logical for young people to enter the SFO as a result of the formation that they have received within Youfra. Notwithstanding, the Youfra journey does not necessarily have to lead all of its members to the SFO, but only those who feel called by God to embrace this form of life.

It is suggested that, if possible, the Spiritual Assistant be the same for both Youfra and SFO local Fraternities, so as to promote a more intimate communion, and a better sharing and understanding among the brothers and sisters of the two Fraternities. Furthermore, a single assistant may help the Fraternities to live their differences within the setting of unity, respecting their autonomy, the differences in the way they implement fraternal life, the difference in the methods of formation, the way they organize their meetings and their apostolic activities, etc. In any case, it is very important for the two fraternities to share some moments together - to meet, to pray, to receive common formation and to conduct apostolic activities - in an effort to give witness to a common mission.

The General Constitutions state that the SFO “*considers itself to be particularly responsible*” for the Youfra (SFO General Constitutions, Art. 96.2). In other words, the SFO has to consider Youfra as a preferential commitment and as part of its own vocational promotion; “*the members of the Franciscan Youth consider the Rule of the SFO as an inspirational document*” (SFO General Constitutions, Art. 96.3). The Rule will therefore help them in the growth of their vocation, both individually and as a group. This is why Secular Franciscan must accompany youth in the maturation of their vocation and to become active parts in the life of the SFO Fraternity.

All this may eventually help Youfra members to choose the SFO as the logical, though not necessary, outcome of their discernment.

5. Entrance into the SFO

In the document 'Youfra, a Way of Franciscan Vocation' (refer to the section regarding the relationship between SFO and Youfra), two very important points are made concerning those who want to continue their vocational journey into the SFO. The first is about the incorporation into the SFO, while the second is about the simultaneous belonging to the SFO and Youfra.

1. Admission to the SFO

With respect to admission into the SFO, the Franciscan formation received by Youfra is to be considered valid as the initiation period into the SFO.

There are two ways to be admitted into SFO: (a) as an individual Youfra member or (b) as a group of Youfra members.

In both situations, each aspirant has to present an individual request to the Minister of the local SFO Fraternity. At the same time, the president of the local Youfra fraternity, to which the young people belong and where they have received their formation, will introduce the aspirants in support of their admission. The Council of the SFO Fraternity decides collegially on the request, gives a formal answer to the aspirant and communicates this to both fraternities (SFO General Constitutions, Art. 39.3). In the case of one aspirant whose admission is accepted, the candidate starts his/her formation with the other candidates of the SFO fraternity, not necessarily all coming from Youfra. In the case of a group of Youfra members being accepted, they can be admitted to the initial formation through the creation, if deemed reasonable, of an *ad hoc* group under the guidance of the Local SFO Council (refer to 'Youfra, a Way of Franciscan Vocation', 23).

The initial formation will be undertaken in accordance with the SFO Rule, General Constitutions and Ritual (SFO General Constitutions, Art. 96.4), and in conformity with the directions provided in the Formation Guidelines and in the CIOFS Presidency's Project for Initial Formation.

The formation will have to be both doctrinal and practical, based on the experience lived in the Fraternity and always done with the collaboration of the person in charge of formation, the Spiritual Assistant, the Council and the entire SFO Fraternity.

2. Simultaneous Youfra – SFO belonging

The Profession into the SFO does not necessarily exclude young people from belonging to their Youfra fraternity. The young professed member can continue his/her journey with the brothers and sisters of Youfra, who draw inspiration from the SFO Rule. In consideration of simultaneous belonging to both Youfra and the SFO, the young professed member can be assigned, by the SFO fraternity, the task of animating and accompanying the Youfra fraternity since they have a direct experience of both Fraternities and, for this reason, may possibly be very good Fraternal Animators on behalf of the SFO fraternity. It is important that the young professed members actively share the lives of both fraternities, even if their activities, in agreement with the local SFO council, should be preferentially dedicated to Youfra.

The simultaneous belonging, or double belonging, becomes another tool which can help to incorporate naturally Youfra members into the SFO. It is important to take into consideration that Youfra has a double aim: to enable young people to live their call and to provide the support for their vocational discernment. In other words, youth do not have to wait for the conclusion of their membership in Youfra to initiate, if this is their vocation, the incorporation process into the SFO. The call of the Holy Spirit may come at any moment, and the membership in Youfra must not be an impediment for incorporation into the SFO.

Likewise, the incorporation into the SFO must not prevent youth from continuing their spiritual and fraternal growth with their Youfra brothers and sisters, if this is what they wish. To prevent this would be contrary to the General Constitutions which contemplate the possibility and/or the necessity of some Youfra members being professed SFO members.

6. Conclusions

Simultaneously belonging, or double belonging, to SFO and Youfra is not only possible but also desirable. It requires a double "fidelity": to the SFO Fraternity (the first, because

Profession is a permanent and lifelong engagement) and to the corresponding Youfra fraternity.

The double belonging is desirable because the professed Youfra members can bear witness to their Franciscan vocation more effectively to the other Youfra members and because it is a tool to strengthen the link between Youfra and the SFO. Moreover, it can enable the professed members of Youfra to have active and passive voice at every level of the Order.

Youfra members often live stimulating and dynamic experiences in the Youfra fraternities which, at times, may contrast with the lack of lively activities in some SFO Fraternities. Thus, it is understandable that, in many cases, and in spite of the evidence of a clear vocation, the Youfra members may be hesitant to take the step from Youfra to the SFO, and may postpone this step as much as possible, until they are forced to leave Youfra. It is necessary, however, that the Youfra members seriously reflect about their life and the project that God has entrusted to them. In fact, if the incorporation to the SFO corresponds to God's call, it is only through the achievement of this project that they will reach their "perfection" (Mt 19, 16-26), in accordance with God's will. God's will always has to be accepted with joy because it brings us to complete self-fulfilment. Thus, the Youfra members do not have to fear taking this definitive step:

- because their relationship with Youfra has not ended (on the contrary it can continue); and
- because they will be introduced into a vital communion (incorporation) with the whole Secular Franciscan Order and, through the SFO, with the entire Franciscan family to which they will offer their gifts, and from which they will always receive in return many gifts for their life and the achievement of their vocation-mission.

The SFO is a great ecclesial and spiritual reality "*of no mediocre perfection*" (Julian of Speyer 1232), a true school of sanctity. Its importance is still largely unknown and often misunderstood. The Third Order of Saint Francis stems from the very grace of the origins of the Franciscan Family and is animated by the same charism of Saint Francis. Its secular dimension is an essential point of coming together to renew the world in Christ.

In his address to the 1988 General Chapter of the SFO, Jean Paul II, of beloved memory, clearly points out that:

"...you are also an 'Order,' as the Pope said (Pius XII): A Lay Order, but a Real Order;" and after all, Benedict XV had already spoken of "Ordo veri nominis". This ancient term - we can say medieval - "Order" means nothing more than your intimate belonging to the great Franciscan family. The word "Order" means the participation in the discipline and actual austerity of that spirituality, while remaining in the autonomy typical of your lay and secular condition, which, moreover, often entails sacrifices which are not lesser than those experienced in the religious and priestly life." (John Paul II, June 14, 1988, General Chapter, SFO).