

The Formation of a National Organization

“On November 28 and 29, 1917, a conference of the Third Order friar Directors and Tertiaries met at St. Joseph College in Teutopolis, Illinois. It was an epoch moment in the history of the Third Order in the United States. At this meeting, the first Third Order Province was formed under the auspices of Sacred Heart O.F.M. Province.”⁶⁶ Also, at that meeting the idea of a National Congress was proposed, to take place in 1921, the 700th anniversary of the first approved Rule of the Third Order of St. Francis.

Forty three hundred were present at this first national congress held in Chicago in October, 1921. At that congress, the delegates proposed that a national organization be formed. A year later, in 1922, a national constitution was approved thereby officially establishing a National Third Order Federation.

The Third Order of St. Francis was legally incorporated in the city of Cincinnati in September of 1976.

Organizational Structure

In 1921, it was proposed that a “National Directive Board [be] composed of the Ministers Provincial of the First Order representatives of the Friars Minor, the Capuchins and the Conventual, likewise the Ministers Provincial of the Third Order Regular... [A] second...governing board was called the National Executive Board consisting of one member from each of the three branches of the First Order, together with the representative of the Third Order Regular; one of these to be appointed chairman, another vice-chairman and a third, secretary; these appointments to be made by the National Directive Board. Three consultors were likewise to be members of the National Executive Board, one a Tertiary priest and two Tertiary laymen.”⁶⁷

It was written into the national constitutions that a national congress be held every five years – hence the title, Quinquennial Congress. By the time of the fifth Quinquennial Congress, held in Pittsburgh, PA, twenty-four provinces comprised a North American Federation – a positive indication of the success of the forming of a national organization. It should be noted that the North American Federation included Third Order Provinces in Canada. It should be noted that the early congresses were the venue for conducting the business of the national organization. Although some business continued at future Congresses, these events took on a thematic emphasis.

The early Congresses were the place where the official business of the national fraternity took place. The most recent Quinquennial Congresses were organized around a theme.

It should be noted that a Central Office operated by the Executive Secretary had a major role in the the successful operation of the national fraternity, especially in the early days. It

⁶⁶ Wicks, William, SFO, A History of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States, Volume I, 1917 – 1942, Barbo-Carlson Enterprises, Lindsborg, KS, 2007, 29

⁶⁷ Poppy, and Martin, Survey..., 12

was a publishing house, a clearing house and a major player in the setting the direction for the national fraternity. That position was in place from 1928 – 1977.

Commissaries were delegated by the Ministers Provincial. They represented the various Third Order Provinces at the combined Executive Board and Commissary meetings. The Commissaries initially were a consulting entity at the annual meetings, but eventually were given a vote.

Emergence of Lay Leadership

Lay leadership was officially directed by the 1957 International Constitutions which defined the External and Internal governance of the Third Order. The External was the domain of the Church, the hierarchy, whereas the Internal was the domain of the Tertiaries. The Internal governance paragraph authorized lay Tertiaries to serve in the principle positions of fraternity leadership.

This structure shift was evident at the 1967 Quinquennial Congress held in Philadelphia: Provincial Ministers represented their Third Order provinces along with the friar Commissaries. Lay Tertiaries held principal leadership positions in the Executive Council at all organizational levels of fraternity.

The documents of the Second Vatican Council advanced lay leadership in the Church in general, and catalyzed the move toward lay leadership in the Third Order.

In the late 1980s, the Commissaries, at that time called Spiritual Assistants, opted not to vote in the Third Order national elections. Restructuring called for a representative of each branch of the First Order and Third Order Regular (four in all) to serve with the Third Order Ministers Provincial as members of the National Council; the Executive Council included one friar representative – a president in turn, of the four members of Conference of National Spiritual Assistants (CNSA)

It should be noted that the International Constitutions were revised in 2000 to abolish the voting privilege of the friars at elections (Article 90.2).

With lay members in leadership positions, Regionalization was the next step towards embracing Third Order autonomy.

Regionalization

The process of Regionalization, first called for by the 1957 General Constitutions and then by the new Rule, began in the United States in 1987 and was completed in 1997; the process divided the country into 31 geographic regions, thus doing away with the Provincial jurisdictional structure. This geographic restructuring helped bring to fruition this aspiration of Third Order autonomy. The argument was that the Secular Franciscans are one Order,

not made up as four branches, as are the friars, which virtually was the case for the Third Order when they were organized under a specific province umbrella.

This restructuring was not a complete separation from the friars, nor was it planned to be. Canon 303 ordained a connection to the Friar Provinces via *Altius Moderamen*, a Latin term used in Canon 303 to mean that the friars of the First Order and Third Order Regular are to guarantee the fidelity of the SFO to the Franciscan Charism, communion with the Church and union with the Franciscan Family.

The changing of the structure of the organization from provincial attachment to geographic had this effect: lay leaders were elected to regional and national positions irrespective of their affiliation with a specific friar province.

Publications and Programs Promoted By Secular Franciscans

- Franciscan Herald (1913 – 1987)
- National Newsletter (1935 – 1973) (1992 – Present)
- Catholic Action (1940s and 1950s)
- Youth (1921 – Present)
- Three Point Economic Program (1934 – 1941)
- Modesty Campaign and Sanctification of the Sunday (1953 – 1955)
- Hour of St. Francis (1946 – 1970)
- Peace Award and Achievement Award (1950 – Present)
- Retirement Homes and Shelters (1934 – Present)
- Action for Racial Understanding (1961 – 1968)
- Ecumenism (1946 – Present)
- Apostolic Commissions
- Multicultural Sensitivity
- Franciscan Action Network (FAN)
- Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC)

The Franciscan Herald, a monthly publication that was inaugurated in 1913, became an information forum and a formation device for the members of the national fraternity. It was the official organ of the national fraternity. It ceased publication in 1987.

National Newsletter - The First National Newsletter was published out of the Central Office in 1935. The Central Office discontinued publication in 1973. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, much of the national news was included in the publication, Franciscan Herald. A national newsletter was resurrected in 1992 and continues to be published today as a quarterly newsletter. It is presently named TAU-USA.

Catholic Action - Catholic Action was a program promoted by Pope Pius XI. It was defined as *the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy*. The Third Order became, for a while beginning in 1942, an auxiliary to Catholic Action. A function of the Third Order, according to the National Catholic Welfare Conference, NCWC⁶⁸, was to provide a spiritual base, especially in parishes, for the parishioners and others to become active in Catholic Action. A field agent was appointed to work out of the Central Office to travel to various Catholic Institutions and in parishes, to educate people about Catholic Action, and to provide a Franciscan spiritual base to the activities. The patron saint of Catholic Action was St. Francis of Assisi.

Youth - Youth fraternities have been a priority for the Third Order from the very beginning of the National Organization. Some youth fraternities were attached to existing adult fraternities; some were attached to Franciscan Institutions. Cordeliers were a group of youth, mostly of grade school age, formed in parishes or attached to friar provinces, with particular oversight of the Conventual friars. They were children groups that were formed in the ideals of Franciscanism.

It should be noted that the National Statutes of July, 1995 changed the age of profession from 14 to 21, thus changing the dynamic of the measure of a professed Third Order member. This preempted an avenue to profession for many youth.

The high point of the youth movement in the United States took place in the 1950s and the 1960s. Youth Congresses were held annually. Participating institutions were Notre Dame University, St. Francis College, Loretto, Pennsylvania, St. Bonaventure University, New York and Quincy University, Illinois. As many as 1000 youths attended these Congresses, most from Franciscan Institutes.

During the late 1970s the number of youth groups declined. In order to resurrect Franciscan youth involvement, a Youth Commission was formed in October, 1995.

Three Point Economic Program - The Three Point Economic Program began in the mid 1930s, in coincidence with the Great Depression. The three points called Tertiaries to: 1) commit no sin in heart or hand for the sake of goods of fortune, 2) to observe moderation in acquiring and enjoying goods of fortune and 3) to share their goods of fortune with God and neighbor.

Modesty Campaign and the Sanctification of the Sunday - These "self descriptive" programs were two campaigns promoted by the Third Order in the fifties and sixties. They were effective, mainly in the Midwest, for about ten years.

⁶⁸ The National Catholic Welfare Conference was equivalent to today's United States Council of Catholic Bishops

Hour of St. Francis - The Hour of St. Francis was spearheaded, in its popular form, by Fr. Hugh Noonan, O.F.M. at St. Joseph Church in Los Angeles, with the help of The Heralds, a Franciscan youth group. The Hour was a radio program that presented Franciscan ideals in parable form – story telling. It was adopted as a National Fraternity apostolate in October, 1946. The Third Order financed this endeavor. Movie Stars volunteered participation in the programs. In 1951, The Hour had the largest audience of any of the Catholic radio programs in the country. The Hour of St. Francis transitioned to television in 1960 and continued to be supported financially by the Third Order. Hollywood actors and actresses participated and it was a grand success. In 1964, a new TV studio was completed and dedicated by Cardinal McIntyre, Archbishop of the Los Angeles Archdiocese. T.V. productions, including spiritually oriented commercials, were presented until the early 1970s.

Peace Awards and Achievement Awards = The Peace Award was first discussed at a meeting of the Executive Board and in 1949 and in 1950 the first award was presented. The nominees were men and women who made a significant contribution towards peace in the world. This award was, in the past, given to national and international dignitaries who were, for the most part, not Franciscan. As of late, the award has been presented to Franciscans: Seculars and friars.

Achievement Awards were presented during the 1950s, 1960's and 1970s to those, either friars or Tertiaries, who were outstanding contributors to the good of the Order.

Retirement Homes and Shelters - The Third Order, with the leadership of the friar Provinces, helped sponsor the building of retirement homes for Tertiaries. Those most prominent ones are: The Third Order Villa in Garrison, New York (no longer in existence), Mayslake Village in Oak Brook, Illinois and St. Francis Village in Crowley, Texas. The Third Order also supported, and “manned” bread lines and shelters. Some of the more prominent of these are: The Food Kitchen and the St. Francis House of Hospitality of Detroit, St. Anthony Dining Room in San Francisco, the St. Francis Center of Los Angeles and the St. Anthony Inn of Chicago, Illinois.

Action for Interracial Understanding - Action for Interracial Understanding (AIU) was born in 1961, a response to the need for the Third Order to address the civil rights of African Americans who were, at the time, in a struggle for equality. This concerted action was taken by the Third Order to help alleviate the injustices of racial discrimination that was prevalent during those days of racial unrest in the 1960's.

Ecumenism - Ecumenism was a part of the Franciscan mentality in the United States since the 1940s, although it was somewhere on the back burner until the time of the Second Vatican Council. Following that Council, Tertiary education and a Unity Movement were placed on the front burner. A Prayer for Christian Unity, promoted by the Friars of the Atonement of Graymoor, N.Y., was encouraged.

A Third Order Ecumenical Committee was formed following an invitation to join a gathering of the Third Order Society of St. Francis (Anglican Third Order) at their Quinquennial Congress in 1997.

Today (2011), an Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee addresses Secular Franciscan relations with people of all faiths.

Apostolic Commissions - The Apostolic Commissions: Peace and Justice, Work, Family and Ecology, were established at the national level in October 1984 and were dissolved in October, 2007. They were created to aid in the observance of paragraphs 15 through 18 of the Rule of 1978. The Commissions successfully helped members to transition from the “devotionally” oriented Rule of Leo XIII to the more “apostolically” oriented Rule of 1978. Commissions were established at all levels of fraternity.

Multicultural Sensitivity - A Multicultural Committee was established in 1995 with a directive to coordinate an effort directed to the understanding, and embracing, of the various ethnic cultures within the national fraternity and in the world, especially considering the cultures of the “language” fraternities existing, and growing, within the national organization. Multicultural sensitivity was the theme of the 2007 Quinquennial Congress held in Pittsburgh.

Quinquennial Congresses - Quinquennial Congresses are a national gathering of Secular Franciscans held every five years. Initially they were the venue for the conduction of the business of the national organization. Gradually, they became a teaching gathering with a theme, and a social event.

Franciscan Action Network (FAN) - The National Fraternity voted to join the Franciscan Action Network in October, 2007. “The Franciscan Action Network is designed to bring a coordinated and effective voice to matters of Justice, Peace and Care for Creation in our world. The particular focus of the Franciscan Action Network’s advocacy is the U.S. Government and related Washington, DC based institutions (e. g, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Organization of American States...)...The backbone of the

Network are the friars, sisters, Secular Franciscans, Ecumenical Franciscans and the men and women with whom they minister.”⁶⁹

Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) - The Justice, Peace and Integration of Creation Committee was established by a motion at the October, 2007 National Fraternity Council meeting. The motion was: “to accept the recommendations of the ad hoc committee on the Commissions to restructure the Apostolic Commissions to one Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Committee.”⁷⁰ JPIC encourages the living of Rule as related to the apostolic activities from the point of view of who we are; it is a departure from the structure of the Apostolic Commissions.

Epilogue

To this date the “experiment” of lay leadership of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States, as directed by the 1957 International Constitutions, has been a grand success, thanks to the continued improvement in the quality and commitment of lay leadership over the years, and the friars’ total support and assistance. Also, a success, and certainly a blessing, has been the embracing, by today’s Secular Franciscans, of the Rule of 1978 – a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, much gratitude is granted to those Friars, and Tertiaries too, who built, with energy and dedication, a national organization, and kept it very much alive.

*Those now engaged in Third Order work in this country are pioneers
Those who will continue it have not been born,
But the spirit of St. Francis is a spirit of optimism and of faith*

Maximus Poppy, O.F.M. - (1888-1972)⁷¹

⁶⁹ TAU-USA, Winter 2007 issue, Frances Wicks, SFO Editor, 13

⁷⁰ Ibid, 10

⁷¹ Wicks, William, SFO, *A History*