

The Sponsor as an Agent of Secular Franciscan Formation

By National Formation Commission member

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From the earliest days of the Order, Francis sent the brothers out two by two to preach the good news of repentance to any and all they met. As with other things in his life, Francis' choice of two by two was Gospel-based. In his wisdom, he would probably have paired up an older member of the brotherhood with a newer member. In time, the pairs would all return and share the bounty or the sorrows of their missionary adventures.

Take time now and be present to one of these pairs. Imagine their journey. There would definitely be times of prayer; there'd be times of sharing the workings of the Holy Spirit in their lives. How they came to be drawn to this band of men following Francis of Assisi would certainly enter into conversation. They would have asked each other questions they had concerning truths Francis had shared with them. As they were preaching, they would probably have shared their personal insights into the meaning of different Scripture passages. As they walked from town to town, the beauties of creation and how creation perfectly conforms to the will of God would have come to mind. After time together, they would even come to confide in each other the parts of his mendicant life they found hard to live. They would seek each other's advice as to how to better live out poverty, chastity, obedience, charity, humility, penitence. They might even admonish the other as to how to better live this way of life. They would praise the goodness of God that had brought them to this point of their spiritual journey.

Would you think this sharing helped the brothers grow in their vocation? Would it have helped to form deeper bonds of unity within the community? Would it have caused stronger bonds of support between the brothers? This might have been one of Jesus' original intents when sending the disciples out two by two. It was probably one of Francis' ideas also.

How do we have this experience of companionship built into the Secular Franciscan Order today? In the role of Sponsor in the formation process, this role is alive and active. What is a Sponsor? Very basically, it is a journey companion: an active, professed member of the fraternity who chooses to walk the initial journey with a new Candidate. What occurs between these two persons? Much the same as occurred on the imaginary journey we just walked with the original Friars Minor. These two persons share prayer, Scripture, how they came to this vocation, the teachings of this way of life, the movement of the Holy Spirit in their own lives. When asked, the professed member might offer points on how to better live the *Rule*. Candidate and Sponsor share times of leisure with each other, as well as times of worship, times of being present to the creation that surrounds them, times of opening up to God within and God they discover outside of themselves, and; of course, times of service to others. All in all, they share how this call to live the Gospel life in the manner of St. Francis is exploding in their very being.

What are the qualifications necessary to be a Sponsor?

- A love of your own Secular Franciscan vocation and a desire to share it
- A willingness to be open to the Holy Spirit and to another
- A desire to share God's goodness in your life with another
- An openness to share your understanding of love of Saints Francis and Clare
- A listening, discerning heart

- A prayerful spirit
- A sense of nurture for another's vocation
- A lived experience of Sacred Scripture
- A call to service
- An appreciation of creation

How does the process begin? The particulars will vary from fraternity to fraternity. In some fraternities, the person who introduced the Candidate to the Secular Franciscan way of life might be the Sponsor. In another instance, the Candidates themselves may choose a professed member to walk with them. In still another case, the Fraternity Council could match up professed members with the Candidate-to-be. Your fraternity may have another manner in which to pair people. The mode of connecting one person with another can be as varied as there are fraternities.

Interaction is key to this process. Initial contact most times becomes the responsibility of the professed member. One scenario would be for the professed member to invite the Candidate for a cup of coffee or, better still, breakfast one morning. And just begin the conversation: "I first heard about St. Francis..." or "I was invited to consider a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order when..." or "I saw a brochure or announcement in the bulletin that there was an open house at the fraternity meeting and I went..." or "I became interested when I read a life of St. Francis..." or "My spiritual director thought this might be a path for me to explore..." or "I can remember first hearing about St. Francis when I was in the second grad..." Whatever your introduction to St. Francis and the Order, share it and then ask your partner to do the same.

What other avenues are there in this Sponsor relationship? Together you might try reading a biography or a book on Franciscan values and share your gleanings. You might watch a movie or see a play about Francis and share your insights. You might go to a Franciscan prayer service at your parish or a nearby Monastery of St. Clare. During Lent, you might attend Stations together. You might set aside a time once a month to share Scripture and how a certain passage has affected your life. Be ready to answer any questions that might arise in the regular formation session and try to attend the sessions when you are able. Most of all, be open to each other and the movement of the Holy Spirit. Allow the Spirit to guide your relationship, remembering that the Holy Spirit and the Candidate are the primary agents of Formation. The rest of us, including the Fraternity, the Council, the Formation Director and Team, the Spiritual Assistant, and the Sponsor are present merely to help facilitate this awesome interaction.

Companions on the journey—a tradition that goes back to the very beginnings of the Franciscan Movement, a tradition that is rooted in the ministry of Jesus' earliest disciples, a tradition that enriches all who partake in it. Partaking in the role of Sponsor is being actively engaged in the formation process as a professed Secular Franciscan. It is accepting the invitation to journey with another, following our Lord Jesus Christ in the example set forth by St. Francis himself.

So be adventurous! Take the first step! Encounter another on the Journey! Enjoy the benefits! Reap the rewards! Accept the role of formation Sponsor.