

General Chapter 2024

## Instrumentum Laboris

# You Are Love

*Rebuilding the Church, Fraternity and the World through Love*

*"The true love of Christ had transformed the lover into the image of the beloved... and he carried within himself the effigy of the Crucified."*

*(St. Bonaventure: Major Legend XIII)*

### Quiet Reflection:

As we begin our work on *the Instrumentum Laboris*, it is important to take some time for personal reflection.

**How do I love God?**

**How do I love myself?**

**How do I love my neighbor?**

These three questions, like a tripod, give us a profound base to our entire spiritual life both in our personal life and in fraternity. May these be our guides along our work.

**General note:** As you read the following document, you will find questions that you may want to discuss as a group. This may help with the process of answering the final set questions.

### Background

As Secular Franciscans, we are often asked: "What do you do?" The answers vividly explain our commitment to the poor, the Church, to peace, justice and evangelization. **BUT**, the real question should be "Who are you, as a Secular Franciscan? Who are we, as an Order?" We must answer the question of who we are as Franciscans because all that we do is based on our existence and our identity. Who we are determines what we do?

The definitive answer to this question is brief but extremely revealing, "We are love." We are the love of God, manifested in the world. We are His hands, His wishes and desires for us as His children.

Simply stated, *“God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him.”* (1 John 4:16). He made us in *“His own image and likeness”* (Genesis 1: 26), therefore, we must be love. To be love, then, we must be unconditionally present to the other, as God is for us. As love personified, God cannot, and will not, give less than the fullness of himself. Neither should we.

How can we express this fullness of God in our love for Him, in our love for ourselves and in our love for our neighbors? Can we love unconditionally, with full dedication, giving our most precious assets, whether they be the ten cents for the Church collection, our time of service, opening our homes, even sharing our children with the Church?

1 John 4: 7-12 says: *“Let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love. God’s love for us was revealed when God sent into the world His only Son so that we could have life through him; this is the love I mean: not our love for God, but God’s love for us when he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away. My dear people, since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another. No one has ever seen God; but as long as we love one another, God will live in us, and his love will be complete in us.”*

As Secular Franciscans, then, we must acknowledge and embrace fully the love that we are, and manifest it in all we do. Love is not words. It is not a feeling. It is a commitment, an action, a gift that we give to God and to one another. Love is who we are.

A Pharisee, an expert in the Law, tested Jesus by asking, *“Which is the first of all the commandments? Jesus told him, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”* (Mark 12:28, 30-31)

Our beloved Father Francis echoed these words in his *Earlier Exhortation of St. Francis to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*. He wrote: *“In the Name of the Lord!... All those who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with their whole strength (Matthew 12:30) and love their neighbor as themselves, who hate their bodies with their vices and sins (Matthew 22:39), who receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and who produce worthy fruits of Penance. ... O how happy and blessed are these men and women while they do such things and persevere in doing them, because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them.”* (Is 11:2)

Our Rule of 1978, our way of life, begins with these same words in the *Prologue*. It is a reminder to us that we are fully love – in our hearts, in our soul, in our mind, in our strength. And, we must not only live that love in all we do, but reject anything that distracts us from this mission.

## ***You are love: Central Theme for the General Chapter 2024***

### **1. What is love? Overview**

God is love – complete, unceasing, pure love and He made us in His image and likeness. Therefore, we are and reflect this love – complete, unceasing, pure. God sent His only son to us. In His complete generosity, He risked giving Christ to us, knowing that His human children might not fully appreciate and acknowledge this love, knowing that His human children might reject His only Son. And yet, despite this awareness, God our Father, in His love, gave completely from His heart - not expecting anything in return except that we become love as well – love toward others, love toward our home, love toward ourselves, love toward Him.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a says that: *“Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes. Love does not come to an end.”*

Since God is love (1 John 4:8), we can conclude that all these attributes refer to God, as well. We can also assume then that we too, as Secular Franciscans who are love, can embrace these traits as our own.

## **2. Definition of Terms: How do we distinguish between philanthropy; acts of love, acts of charity, agape love and sacrificial love, eros, philia?**

If we, as Secular Franciscan, are so bold as to say that “We are love” we should have a full and in-depth understanding of who we aspire to be. In fact, throughout our lives as seculars, we wear the banner of love at different levels of experiences, commitment, and understanding. Each level has a beauty and a purpose.

In attempting to explain these distinctions, we find ourselves with the same dilemma that translators of the Bible had. Some levels of love overlap in meaning and context. While we try to make the distinctions as clearly as possible, we realize that the terms themselves are often used interchangeably. But, the essence of meaning should be very clear: as we go deeper into love, our experience and understanding of God, who is complete and unconditional love, is based on complete truth, becomes more tangible and requires a higher level of commitment and self-sacrifice.

**Love:** The term love offers a whole spectrum of meanings – from “I love my classes” to “I love helping people.” This generic level of love needs greater context before we can exclaim with joy and fulfillment that “We are love.”

**Eros (romantic love):** As seculars, some of us are married or expect to be married. With such a level of love, we open ourselves to romantic love with a special intimacy between two people. As the couple grows in love and age, the depth of love may bring them closer and closer to a love where they give fully to the other, sacrificing and putting the other first. We often comment on such a caring love but, even with such self-sacrifice, it is not a Godly love until the couple brings Christ to their center and sees Christ in the other.

**Brotherly love (philia):** The love of a parent or a child or brother or our neighbor takes us into a different sphere of caring. Our relationship with the other is still one of love, self-sacrifice, caring, but the romantic component does not exist. Again, it only becomes a Godly love when the person sees Christ in the other.

**Philanthropy:** The philanthropists of the world see a human problem and offer to assist by giving of their assets, time, talents – money, property. If it weren't for philanthropists, hospitals, schools, museums, medical and scientific research and other projects which benefit mankind would be stifled. This too is love. The level of love is again determined by the reason for their decision to give and the sacrifice it required. We might say that St. Francis of Assisi was a philanthropist. He gave everything he had to the poor and downtrodden, even his own coat. But it was not Godly love until he experienced the Christ living in the other, until He kissed the leper and discovered the sweetness of Christ in the other. In his *Testament*, Francis wrote, *"When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I became acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became the source of spiritual and physical consolation for me."*

**Charity:** We can talk about charitable giving as an act of love. But a true act of charity can only be realized when the individual performs this action -- not just because he sees a need, but because he sees the truth and love of God in the other.

**Agape Love:** As Secular Franciscans, agape love is our goal and our mission. Agape love is the complete surrender to God's wishes. It requires a total commitment and self-sacrifice. Christ is at the center of this commitment. His clear and unquestionable truth is fully present in our actions.

**The Amplified Bible**, which provides parenthetical commentaries in the body of the text, explains agape love this way: *"Love never fails [it never fades nor ends]. But as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for the gift of special knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part [for our knowledge is fragmentary and incomplete]. But when that which is complete and perfect comes, that which is incomplete and partial will pass away. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now [in this time of imperfection] we see in a mirror dimly [a blurred reflection, a riddle, an enigma], but then [when the time of perfection comes we will see reality] face to face. Now I know in part [just in fragments], but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known [by God]. And now there remain: faith [abiding trust in God and His promises], hope [confident expectation of eternal salvation], love [unselfish love for others growing out of God's love for me], these three [the choicest graces]; but the greatest of these is love". (1 Corinthians 8-13)*

St. Francis, in his love for lepers with whom he shared meals, lived agape love. But he had that same love for the worm on the road. In the **First Life of Saint Francis**, Thomas of Celano (c. 1185–1265), relates a story in which the saint of Assisi was so transformed by the *"burning fire of God's love that he even saw the dignity of worms. Even for worms he [Francis] had a warm love,"* writes

Celano, “since he had read this text about the Savior: I am a worm and not a man. That is why he used to pick them up from the road and put them in a safe place so that they would not be crushed by the footsteps of passersby.” This simple act was lifted to a level of agape love because he saw the face of God in His creation.

Type of love	Explained	Biblical reference
<b>Love: an inner affection for something or someone</b>		
<b>Eros</b>	Romantic love	<u>John 2: 1-11</u> : Wedding feast at Cana
<b>Philanthropy</b>	Providing assistance to those less fortunate in an organized manner with strategic management.	<u>Proverbs 11:25</u> : “The generous soul will prosper, he who waters, will be watered.” <u>Acts 20:35</u> : “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving.”
<b>Philia</b>	Brotherly love; love for fellow humans, care, respect, and compassion for people in need.	<u>Isaiah 49:15</u> : “Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you.”
<b>Charity</b>	Love in action based on understanding and a knowledge of the truth; they give even when they have little.	<u>Matthew 25:35, 40</u> : For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.”

<b>Agape love</b>	Not just a feeling but a <b>choice, a matter of decision;</b> love that comes from God – only through God and his truth can we show and experience agape love. It involves faithfulness, commitment and an act of the will. It is a sacrificial love.	<u>1 John 4:8</u> : “Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love.”  <u>John 15:13</u> : “A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.”
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### 3. How do we, as Secular Franciscans, manifest who we are, as love, on the basis of our Franciscan history?

“You are love,” the theme and main topic of *Instrumentum Laboris* can be manifested in our Franciscan roots. Our Seraphic Father Francis, throughout his life after his conversion, lived and demonstrated love through his attention to the poor, his kindred spirit with Sister Earth, his undivided attention to service to the Church, his patience and care for the brothers that God gave him.

As a Franciscan Family, we are presently celebrating the *Franciscan Centenaries* which commemorate moments in our history which Francis gave us, moments which help us recognize that our love is deep-rooted and is daily calling us to conversion. In re-living and celebrating these moments in Francis’ life which truly manifest this love as a tangible and profound experience, we are reminded of our mission and charism, and our objectives as we journey as Secular Franciscans. The “*A Multifaceted Centenary in Which Several Centenaries Will Be Celebrated: 2023-2026*” delineates numerous objectives which take us to the heart of who we are -- we are love. Some of these objectives are presented here for our reflection and consideration:

- **The Rule (1223-2023)**: “*To restore meaning and significance to our way of living the Rule*” – a Rule which guides us on this journey of love to rethink lifestyles, activate new forms of service and proximity to the poorest.
- **Christmas at Greccio (1223-2023)**: “*To love and serve every human being, promoting his or her dignity as a person created by God and made in His likeness and image; To develop a more comprehensive view of humankind ... a view that is free of divisions and dichotomies.*” God so loved the world that His son humbled himself and came to this world as a vulnerable child. In this beautiful gesture of love, He has given us the opportunity to demonstrate that love also – through our attention, our sacrifice, our constant care and gentleness.
- **The Gift of the Stigmata (1224-2024)**: “*To dedicate our lives, as members of the Church, witnessing to the merciful love that flows from the Crucified One; To allow ourselves to be touched and challenged by the many instances of pain and suffering we see in the places where we live and work.*” How can we, through our love, embrace the suffering of others and help them find the hope of salvation?

• **Celebrating the Cantic of Creatures** (1225-2025): *“To become more aware of our ecclesial responsibility to foster healing in the relationship between the Creator and His creatures and to restore its original harmony.”*

• **Celebrating the Easter of Francis of Assisi** (1226-2026): *“To celebrate the gift of the charism of St. Francis in the Church. To support evangelization as an opportunity to generously return the gifts we have received.”*

These outstanding moments in the life of St. Francis should provide opportunities for us to reflect on how we can continue to follow his steps living in today’s realities.

#### **4. How do we, as Secular Franciscans, manifest who we are, as love, on the basis of our Rule and Constitutions?**

Our Rule and General Constitutions are guidelines which help us become love as Secular Franciscans.

Our Secular Franciscan Rule, especially Chapter 2, *Our Way of Life*, Articles 4-19, provides a roadmap for us to follow. It establishes key cornerstones upon which we can base our way of life and service – to God, to family, to Church and to the world. Each article adds one more element upon which we manifest and live our love 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

For us, as Secular Franciscans, the spiritual and practical dimensions of love are closely connected, because, according to the Rule (Art. 4), we are called to move *“from Gospel to life and from life to the Gospel.”* We should never remain at the theoretical level, without putting love into practice, because God has always been expressing His life through what He did, does and will do for us. So we too, have to express love in concrete ways -- towards God, ourselves and our neighbors. The starting point is with Christ as our center: *“Christ, the gift of the Father’s love, is the Way to Him, and the Truth to which the Holy Spirit leads us.”*

Often the spiritual aspects of love lead to their practical applications which can be readily recognized in the other Articles in Chapter 2.

Articles 4-19 of the OFS Rule remind us:

- to focus on our brothers and sisters (Art. 5),
- to rebuild the Church and life of communion with its pastors (Art. 6),
- of our commitment to daily conversion and prayer (Art. 7, 8),
- to imitate the self-giving of our Blessed Mother (Art. 9),
- to fulfill our responsibilities based on our individual circumstances (Art. 10),
- to seek a spirit of detachment, be good stewards of the earth, live the spirit of the Beatitudes (Art. 11),
- to put ourselves in situations where we are free to love God and our brothers and sisters (Art. 12),
- to create conditions of life worthy of the people of God (Art. 13),

- to build a more fraternal and evangelical world (Art. 14),
- to promote justice, peace, integrity of creation, harmony through dialogue (Art. 15, 17, 18, 19),
- to esteem work as a gift (Art. 16),
- to cultivate the Franciscan spirit in family, especially our children (Art. 17),
- to serenely prepare for Sister Death (Art.19).

Our OFS General Constitutions reinforce and provide practical ways to live our love. A few examples are:

- to maintain continually a renewed journey of conversion (Art.8.2 GGCC), a constant change of heart that gradually leads to the rejection of sin which prevents love from being expressed,
- to follow a plan for life centered on the person and on the following of Christ (Art. 9.1 GGCC),
- to live the spirit of the Beatitudes (Art.15.1 GGCC),
- to proclaim Christ by our life and words. (Art.17.1 GGCC),
- to be true worshippers of the Father (Art. 12.3 GGCC),
- to discover in Christ the value of contradictions for the sake of justice and the meaning of the difficulties and the crosses of daily life; to accept the will of the Father even under the most difficult circumstances; to live the Franciscan spirit of peace, rejecting every doctrine contrary to human dignity. (Art. 10 GGCC),
- to live the spirit of poverty. Evangelical poverty demonstrates confidence in the Father, creates interior freedom, and disposes (us) to promote a more just distribution of wealth; to provide for our own families and serving society by means of our work and material goods. To understand and achieve it, requires a strong personal commitment and the encouragement of the Fraternity in prayer and dialogue, communal review of life, and attentiveness to the instructions of the Church and the demands of society. (Art. 15.1 & 2 GGCC).

In reflecting on the full rule and constitutions, focusing on one article at a time, we will re-discover the love that God has placed in our hearts, in our minds, in our souls and, with prayer as our foundation, we will find the courage to live that love together as family.

### **5. What are the challenges in evangelization?**

The world is a different place today. Social media has infiltrated the minds and hearts of children and adults alike, and filled their minds with distractions, misinformation and attacks on our faith and way of life. They leave no time to focus honestly on important issues of the soul.

We have to ask ourselves, “Do we really share Christ’s love with the world?” Perhaps, it might be more realistic to ask if we have the courage to venture into a world where we profess a life which is often counter-cultural. Are we afraid to speak the truth in a world that is constantly attacking and undermining us as believers?

We need to feel assured that if we dare speak openly and honestly, we have an Order and a fraternity that will support us. Armed with this love and support, we may be able to operate in the social reality and go out into the world with the truth of God.



This leads us to another question, "Can we speak honestly and openly within our own fraternities, even if we disagree on an issue? Is Article 19 of our Rule lived within our fraternities? Do we *"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...(Are we) messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance? (Do we) strive to bring joy and hope to others?"*

## **6. Do our formation programs emphasize the importance of love?**

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to *"love God with our whole heart, our whole mind and our whole soul,"* and the second greatest is to *"love our neighbor as ourselves."*

If love is such an important aspect of our life, can we live it concretely and welcome it? Do we know how to forgive and ask for forgiveness from our brothers and sisters? Is love manifested in fraternity life? When are such essential questions raised in our formation programs? We can only live love through our brother and sister who form us through the exercise of love.

During fraternal and pastoral visitations, the visitors should review formation programs. They verify if we really live as an Order; if there is a fraternal union between the members. They encourage mutual acceptance and an open and sincere relationship. They also ask questions about the spiritual life of the fraternity, the finances, the struggles and the joys. Do they ask how love is manifested in all these areas of fraternal life and in our formation? Or do we all just take love for granted because "it's obvious" that love is part of all we do?

Is this enough? Should we take more time to address the gift of love – the love we receive and the love we give, the love that we are? Should our formation time focus more on the love that is a part of our foundation of bringing Gospel to life and life to Gospel?

## **7. Love in our social life**

Pope Pius XI in his address to the leaders of the Catholic University Federation on December 18, 1927, said that *"politics is the highest form of charity."*

Our Rule, article 15, builds on the pope's message, saying: *"Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith."* Such a commitment requires love and courage.

Article 12 of the OFS Constitutions clearly states that as an Order that lives and works in the world, our relationships with others must be raised to the level of agape love. It says: *"Inspired by the example and writings of Francis, and above all with the grace of the Spirit, let the brothers and sisters live each day with trust in the great gift which Christ has given them: the revelation of the Father."* (GGCC Article 12.1)

Our first step in this life of love is opening ourselves in prayer and dialogue to our beloved Father in heaven so that we can embrace the gift of love.

Article 12 of GGCC continues: *“Let them bear witness to this faith before others: in their family life; at work; in joy and suffering; in their meeting with others, all of whom are brothers and sisters of the same Father; in their presence and by their participation in social life; in their fraternal rapport with every living creature.”*

As seculars, we must transfer God’s gift of love in every sphere of our lives – where we work, where we play, where we pray, where we enjoy and share joys and where we experience sufferings. This love should also be shared with all God’s creatures. As professed members, spreading this joy, is not a suggestion, but a responsibility and it should become visible in all our actions.

Article 12.2 GGCC reminds us: *“... In their lives in society, let them calmly but firmly accept the risk of making courageous choices.”*

Considering the challenges of today’s realities, Secular Franciscans should accept the fact that making choices based on our love can sometimes be criticized and downplayed. Despite such criticism, we should boldly profess the truth, joy and love of the Lord, never wavering in our trust that the Lord will guide us through these societal hurdles.

Article 12.3 GGCC continues: *“...May they try to discover the Father’s presence in their own heart, in nature and in human history, where God’s plan of salvation is being fulfilled. It is by contemplating this mystery that they become ready to work together within this loving plan.”*

We must seek God in our own hearts, in the world around us, in nature itself and in our history. Personal prayer should be our foundation -- a prayer that transforms us to ultimately become prayer itself in all we do. It is through prayer that we see the heart and love of God. It is through prayer that our love and our lives go beyond superficiality, gain the wisdom and courage to act within God’s plan and to reach the depths of agape love.

#### **8. What is our commitment to our youth and, specifically, YouFra? How do we show them that we are love?**

Fortunately, some of our youth are receiving the love and attention they need. They have balance with their activities – prayer and a spiritual life, a good education which challenges their minds and their creativity, parents and families who participate in their lives and have on-going positive dialogue to help them see the world and themselves in a productive way.

Some of these youth may have discovered YouFra. As Secular Franciscans, our journey with YouFra, our younger brothers and sisters, should be one of love, in which we animate and support them. We want to reinforce the love and joy they have for St. Francis as we accompany them.

We celebrate when they consider the Franciscan way which surrounds them with others with whom they can journey joyfully. In a world that keeps trying to pull them away from Christ as their center, the Franciscan way can be their support and their salvation.

We must respect their choices, no matter how strange they may seem to us. At the same time, we hope that they are open to those thoughts and beliefs that are precious for us, that their search for the truth that is God is foremost in their lives. While we try to help them gain perspective on life's choices, it is our responsibility to ensure that they feel empowered and prepared to make their own decisions. Through our dialogue and open conversation with them, we must see Christ in them so that our love for them will shine through.

It often surprises us that, as much as we may believe that we are the ones animating them, they are the instruments of God who animate and support us. It truly becomes a relationship of love. In a special way, YouFra are teaching us synodality, the ability to be open to dialogue.

At the other end of the spectrum, reality sometimes takes our youth on a lost and isolated path, one that is embedded in a culture of death, a culture of pleasure, a culture of on-line gaming which produces nothing but boredom and precious time lost. They have nothing to show for their time and talents but a flat, dark computer screen. If they are not on the internet, they may be so involved in other time-consuming distractions that they leave little room for truly healthy diversions or a spiritual life. Or, worst of all, they may find solace in illegal drugs or other activities which may momentarily make them feel good but takes them on a road to destruction.

During his public life, Jesus spent most of His time among the lost and downtrodden such as those described above. He wants us there, too -- among our lost children and their families.

Genuine love for our youth is demonstrated by actively giving of ourselves to them. Through our lives, we should impart to them a faith and an appreciation of the God who created them and the Christ who died for them.

The time is now to reach out to our youth and young adults, to engage them in fruitful conversations, to show them how to pray and have a relationship with God, to invite them to joyful gatherings and outings, to give them hope, to offer them positive choices, productive outlets – to embrace them in our love.

Today, our youth have incredible opportunities within the Church and its Synodal process. Their voice has always had a space in the Church and the synod has given a wider platform for them to feel included. We should remind them that their voice matters, that they matter.

#### **9. How do we show our love and our will to rebuild the Catholic Church? Have we been protagonists of the synodal path?**

The contribution of the laity is *"indispensable for the Church's mission."* The different charisms must therefore be brought to light, *"recognised and fully valorized, not be belittled [...] ignored,*

*underused and 'clericalized'" (Final Report of the Synod 28/10/2023. no. 10. Consecrated life and lay aggregations: a charismatic sign).*

As Secular Franciscans this synodal path has challenged us to live as love through the experience of Church. The OFS should follow the spirit of the Synod by encouraging it now, by taking an active role throughout the process and by supporting and assisting, as the Church begins to implement change or reaffirm its foundational beliefs and traditions.

## **10. Challenges**

Some in our world today do not truly understand the meaning and scope of love, but this is not a new phenomenon. There is a famous story of St. Francis roaming through a town, pounding on doors, and weeping, *"Love is not loved!"* (**Fonti Francescane**, no. 1413). So, who is the love that is not loved? Are we today, like St. Francis, vulnerable to the various manifestations of lack of love -- for God, for our families, for our fraternities, for our children, for our communities and society, for our Church, for our world?

Pope Francis, in his address on the World Day of Prayer for Peace in 2016, said: *"... we Christians are called to contemplate the mystery of Love not loved, and to pour out mercy upon the world. On the cross, the tree of life, evil was transformed into good; we too, as disciples of the Crucified One, are called to be 'trees of life' that absorb the contamination of indifference and restore the pure air of love to the world."* If we want to become *"trees of life"*, inhaling indifference and exhaling love, we need to unite ourselves in love to the *"Tree of Life"* Himself, Jesus Christ.

We face challenges when we try to be love in a world which is often self-absorbed and fearful of truth and justice – a world that rejects the existence of God and rejects His love. We ourselves become fearful of evangelizing and spreading the Good News, of witnessing Christ in all circumstances. Because of this fear, we find it difficult to make responsible decisions and take those initiatives necessary to change the world. We become fearful of personal attacks, being ostracized, and even being martyred.

Our world has distorted the true meaning of love. Even some Secular Franciscans have gotten lost in the confusion. False versions of love are defined by worldly standards based on needs, desires, feelings, expectations, satisfaction – all centered on us. True love is always centered on the other – centered on Christ.

We must face the fact that we are weak, and we can be misdirected. That is why Article 7 of our Rule reminds us that we must *"conform our way of thinking and acting to that of Christ through a radical inner change which the Gospel itself calls 'conversion'. Because of human frailty, this needs to be put into effect every single day."*

## **11. What are some of the challenges we face in a world that may not understand or undermines love in fraternal settings?**

We must first look into our own hearts. Have we been brainwashed into accepting false teachings that do not have a basis in the true love of God? Are we too fearful to boldly state the truth?

Once we answer that question, we must look at a world that hurls attacks against love. The world is turned up-side down. What was once clearly understood and accepted truth, is now questioned. Even our own sexual identity of who we are is questioned by some. We face societal changes – a variety of interpretations of faith and morals which may include ideologies which do not tolerate other points of view, gender ideologies, racial ideologies, political ideologies, abortion, end-of-life issues, war and peace, cohabitation, same sex unions, child and spousal abuses, even climate change.

Before judging a situation, do we do the research necessary, as a fraternity and as individuals, to find the truth about these topics? Do we consider Church teaching? Are we prepared to boldly challenge a false narrative, or do we go along with the group? Where do we, Secular Franciscans, stand on some of these issues? Can we, as an Order, intelligently, honestly, and lovingly address these issues in the spirit of understanding, standing firm in our beliefs while respecting and acknowledging different perspectives? Can we be like St. Francis when he visited the Sultan? They dialogued. They shared their differences respectfully and even established an alliance, a friendship.

**12. What are the challenges in fraternal love, in particular, in local Fraternities? What are the problems of unity inside the fraternities and inside the councils at different levels?**

No fraternity is perfect. No fraternity member is perfect. No council or councillor is perfect either. We all have our unique styles of working together. In some models, the leader takes on the responsibilities, or tells others what they should do. In other models, the leader relinquishes all responsibility and lets the fraternity flounder for lack of true leadership and animation.

Our goal, as Secular Franciscans, is to take on the servant-leadership model in which those who are responsible respectfully guide, support, offer assistance, listen, dialogue, allow compromise, and, most importantly, lead the members with love and in prayer to help find solutions.

The list of fraternity conflicts could include such issues as: the lack of dialogue, difficulty in expressing brotherly love, a leadership style which disregards servant-leadership, issues relative to societal changes as those identified above, financial issues, lack of active and committed members, aging members that may require special attention, members who have personal agendas, and many others. Each of these issues requires thoughtful consideration on how they should be handled.

The fraternity council should try to work with the members directly to find a solution or to help them to grow spiritually and respond to the brothers and sisters with love. If the council needs assistance, it can request help from the council of the higher level. Respecting the principle of subsidiarity (Art. 33.2 GGCC), the council of the higher level should not intervene unless the council of the lower level or a brother or sister requests assistance.

In the spirit of love and communication, the councils at all levels should ensure that they are working together as a worldwide order -- supporting each level, searching for the right answers to the tough questions and challenges we face in a changing world, informing the brothers and sisters of the priorities of the Order, and determining how each level can work on those priorities, humbly seeking assistance from the Order of the higher level when necessary.

### **13. Summary**

The center of St. Francis' life was Jesus who is the embodiment of Divine Love. As Secular Franciscans of the third millennium our mission is to introduce Divine Love to a generation that may not have been well formed spiritually and may not yet realize the importance of opening ourselves to a relationship with the God who loves us. In short, we face many challenges.

What does our mission of bringing God's love to the world look like today? Is it uniquely different from past generations? Does it require us to find new ways to reach this new generation? Do we truly understand this society which finds its satisfaction in interacting with a computer screen? Do we need exciting, new approaches to engage them? What is our vision? What is our love plan? How will we be able to convey to the modern world the message of love? What can the Church expect from us?

Love, in all its manifestations and meanings, is good and beautiful. It must be cherished as we cherish all of God's gifts to us, but it must also be shared. The question is "How?"

Pope John Paul II's once said that the world and the Church does not need "reformers" but "true disciples of Christ." His message is once again gaining relevance today. The world, where informational and ideological confrontations are taking place, needs witnesses of love. It needs Secular Franciscans renewed and revitalized in this mission.

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#### **Instructions:**

*After you have read and discussed the **Instrumentum Laboris**, we ask the National Fraternity and other members of the Order to reflect upon and answer the questions below. Please submit your responses to CIOFS at [ciofs@ciofs.org](mailto:ciofs@ciofs.org) by **March 20, 2024**.*

*The reflections/responses, coming from the National Fraternities, will be collated and summarized by the Presidency who will develop a proposal for an action plan based on the recommendations. This proposal will be presented at the General Chapter where the International Councilors from around the world and the Presidency will come together to form the International Council. As a body, the International Council will review the recommendations and establish the guidelines and directions for the Order and the Presidency for the next three years. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to submit the responses and be well prepared so that good on-site work at the Chapter will make it possible to establish priorities, make the necessary decisions, determine the*

*necessary projects, and develop timelines. These guidelines will help the CIOFS Presidency to animate and guide the Order.*

*Each National Fraternity should work on this document and, if possible, ask input from the other Councils at the other levels. Always seek God's plan and will, so that the entire Order will be able to help the brothers and sisters on their vocational journey to personal holiness. With your thorough preparation, the International Council at the General Chapter will be able to better animate and guide the Fraternities for the greater glory of God, making it possible for all the Fraternities and each individual sister and brother to receive from God...peace and good.*

*Rome, December 1, 2023*

**Questions for our National Fraternities and representatives of the Order at all levels:**

1. How can we, as an Order, “rebuild the church, fraternity and the world through love?” How do we convey our message of love today? What can we offer the world and the church?
2. Without a strong relationship with Jesus, we cannot truly manifest love for our neighbors. Considering the love that St. Francis had for Jesus, how can we learn from the Franciscan *Centenaries*, and grow in the love of God and neighbor within our families and communities?
3. How can we manifest our love in how we work with the other levels of the Order? in our formation programs, in our communication? in our legislation (statutes) and in how we address legal and moral questions with our brothers and sisters? Provide examples of how, through love, we can show mercy and justice toward our Franciscan brothers and sisters.
4. What are the challenges associated with the administrative and financial issues we must address as an Order and still maintain our love for each other as brothers and sisters?
5. As an illustration of the love of God and neighbor, how can we strengthen our sense of belonging to the International Secular Franciscan Order?
6. How can we journey together in one single charism between the OFS and YouFra as an expression of fraternal love, mutual care and attention?
7. Is there anything else you would like to raise which is not mentioned here?
8. Based on your responses to the questions above, what priorities should our International Secular Franciscan Order consider for the next three years?

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*\*References: All biblical quotes were taken from the Jerusalem Bible.*