

**Letter from our National Minister, Tom Bello, OFS:
Regarding the concept of FAIR SHARE in our order.**

Permit me to proceed in three steps. One, the confusion over, yet the importance of understanding, what "Fair Share" is. Two, a look at some "Scriptural help." Three, a look at our documents, plus some commentary.

ONE: Questions continue to arise from across the membership and country about what exactly "Fair Share" means. At every election, every three or six years, different individuals, groups or even nationalities get confused about "Fair Share." For two examples, a professed Secular Franciscan recently wrote our beloved National Treasurer an email saying he lacked a fraternity, but wanted to send an \$85 check for "fair share dues" so that he could continue receiving the TAU-USA. Then, a newly elected Minister of a non-English speaking fraternity "assessed" each member of the fraternity with set "dues" to be paid at each meeting AND suspended members of the fraternity for non-payment after several meetings.

This whole matter is very important for us at National not only during Lent when we are called to sacrifice, to give charitably and always to care for our own, but additionally because the National Fraternity is responsible to provide "fair share" numbers to the International Fraternity (CIOFS) at their Election Chapter in 2014, numbers for which the National family will be held responsible for the next three years, as they (CIOFS) do not perform year to year accounting as Local, Regional and National Fraternities do, but hold us to numbers for each three-year cycle.

This is one reason we recently sent out to all the Regional Ministers that dreaded, numbers-heavy Annual Report from which we try in good faith to report our true "Fair Share" to International for the next three years. Our job becomes harder when if every year as last year, 1/10 of our Ministers (3 of 30) do not even bother to submit their Regional Reports. Yikes! Please, Regional Ministers, submit your reports!

TWO: Let's look for "Scriptural help" with one reading from the Old Testament, two from the Gospels and one from St. Paul.

Let's start with the Old Testament. My favorite Lenten reading on the Biblical meaning of "fasting" is this passage from Isaiah 58:5-7:

"Is this the manner of fasting I would choose, a day to afflict oneself? To bow one's head like a reed, and lie upon sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own."

Please note the "not turning your back on your own" even if they are in nursing homes or unable to contribute financially, but are still "your own," and continue to pray and offer what service they can.

From the Gospel of St. Matthew, our Lord evaluates us: "'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and visit you?' And the king

will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:34-40).

Please remember these words when Secular Franciscan Rule 25 stresses the FOUR necessities for our expenses.

And in Luke's Gospel, our Lord says: "Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you" (Luke 6:38).

In my local "St. Thomas More" fraternity, which meets between the Pentagon and Reagan National Airport at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church, each month with the Newsletter a brown envelop is inserted which members return with whatever contribution they measure. We have always had enough to meet "Fair Share."

Finally, St. Paul encourages us, "Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. Moreover, God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:7-8).

THREE: Keeping these Scriptural passages in mind, let's look at our Secular Franciscan Rule #25: "Regarding expenses necessary for the life of the fraternity and the needs of worship, of the apostolate, and of charity, all the brothers and sisters should offer a contribution according to their means. Local fraternities should contribute toward the expenses of the higher fraternity councils."

Please note at least three things here.

First, this is where the notion of "Fair Share" originates, and as you can read, there is no mention of individual responsibility. Rather, the responsibility is a collective one: "all the brothers and sisters should offer a contribution according to their means."

Second, the Secular Franciscan Rule has only 26 Paragraphs or Rules, so we only get to "expenses" at the next to the last one, thus offering some sense of their overall importance.

Third, the word "necessary" is paramount, but note the four "necessities": the life of the fraternity, the needs of worship, the needs of the apostolate and the needs of charity. How many of us in leadership think persistently about all four of these "needs" in our budgets? Remembering Matthew 25 above, how many of us have line items in our budgets to cover the needs of the apostolate and the needs of charity?

In addition, the Official Commentary to the Rule "prepared by the national spiritual assistants' commission, Benet A. Fonck O.F.M., coordinator" might be helpful here as well:

Secular Franciscan Rule 25 "points out that the voluntary contributions of the members finance the fraternity's spiritual and temporal needs and activities. The fraternity, according to its means and agreed-upon arrangements, also contributes to the support of the regional, provincial, national and international fraternities. This paragraph is a contemporary application of the traditional Secular Franciscan values outlined in the very first rule that the members are responsible for taking care of their own in whatever way is necessary."

This sense of co-responsibility is stressed in the General Constitutions Article 30, which, to this reader, puts the question of "Fair Share" into a wider context of co-responsibility that includes, but transcends, mere "expenses":

“1. The brothers and sisters are co-responsible for the life of the fraternity to which they belong and for the Secular Franciscan Order as the organic union of all fraternities throughout the world.

2. The sense of co-responsibility of the members requires personal presence, witness, prayer, and active collaboration, in accordance with each one's situation and possible obligations for the animation of the fraternity.

3. *Rule 25* In a family spirit, each brother and sister should make a contribution to the fraternity fund, according to each one's means, to provide the financial means needed for the life of the fraternity and for its religious, apostolic, and charitable works. The brothers and sisters ought to provide the means necessary for supporting the activities and the operations of the fraternities at higher levels, both by their financial assistance and by their contributions in other areas as well.”

In his Spiritual Commentary on the immediately preceding and very similar version of our current General Constitutions entitled “Called to Rebuild the Church,” Friar Lester Bach O. F. M. Cap., in his observations on an almost identical Article 30.3 to the one given above, contrasts how the world views and how we Franciscans should view money:

“Money is used in buying and selling in the world. But it is not meant to be so engrossing that God is forgotten and our neighbor receives no love. Instead, it is a gift to share. Within fraternity life, we share our resources in a way that builds up the common fund. . . . For Franciscans money is a tool to build up, with living stones, a vibrant community centered on Jesus.”

How many of us really think of money as “a gift to share,” as “a tool to build up, with living stones a vibrant community centered on Jesus”?

Friar Lester’s final words on this Article 30.3 make good Lenten reading: “Money is a source of power and control. It can drag us into making it our golden calf. Part of the goal of sharing this resource with the fraternity is to gain freedom from such idol worship. Generosity for the sake of others replaces self acquisition for one’s own sake. When we have little money, we give the gift of our service and love in other ways within fraternity life.”

Combining Secular Franciscan Rule 25 and General Constitutions Article 30, we now visit the National Statutes, particularly Article 18.7, which reads:

“The Local Fraternity is responsible for contributing to the Regional Fraternity on a fair share basis from its common fund to underwrite the costs of that fraternity [cf. General Constitutions, article #30.3]. A fair share contribution is made based on the number of active and excused brothers and sisters, but not for those who are deemed lapsed.

a. An active fraternity member is one who participates both by attending fraternity meetings and by providing financial support to the community, or whom the fraternity has excused from such obligations.

b. Those brothers and sisters who neither attend meetings, support the community financially, nor have valid reasons due to health, family, work or distance, and who, after personal invitations to return to fraternity, consciously and deliberately reject or ignore the invitation, will be termed ‘lapsed’ and will not be carried on the fraternity membership roll nor be reported as a member to higher fraternity Councils [cf. General Constitutions, article #53.3].”

Similarly, National Statutes Article 25.3 reads:

“The Regional Fraternity is responsible for contributing to the National Fraternity on a fair share basis from its treasury to help provide for the expenses of NAFRA.”

Please note that from Local to Regional and from Regional to National AND from National to International, the responsibility is on the whole fraternity, not the individual member. And remember from the Official Commentary to the Rule that all of this goes back to “the traditional Secular Franciscan values outlined in the very first rule that the members are responsible for taking care of their own in whatever way is necessary.”

In summary, again: “Fair Share” is not dues. “Fair Share” is not a tax on individuals. “Fair Share” is not even, really, an individual responsibility. “Fair Share” is the fraternity taking care of its own, members (plural) caring for members.

Please, perhaps especially during this Lenten Season, but always, let us consider creative ways to care generously for all our members.

Again, please accept my prayers for a Peaceful and, yes, Joyful Holy Lenten Season,

Tom