

Responding to Changing Times

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

May the Lord give you Peace!

It is my privilege and pleasure to greet you as your new Regional Minister.

I want to begin by expressing our thanks to Marcia Stambouljian, SFO who completed her term of office as Regional Minister in November. Marcia has served Our Lady of the Angels Regional Fraternity as Regional Minister for more than two terms and as Vice Minister immediately preceding. . She became Minister with the untimely death of Regional Minister Kevin Corbett and then was elected in her own right for two subsequent terms. She has served our Regional Fraternity both diligently and faithfully. She has been an outstanding Regional Minister and an example of Franciscan servant-leadership and we are all in her debt. It has been my joy to work beside her in these last six years as Regional Formation Director and to observe personally, her patience, her tenacity, her devotion and her love for the Order and for the brothers and sisters. As all in leadership positions are aware, it is a very difficult thing to lead—one must often make the tough choice of doing the right thing even when that choice is not the most popular one or the one that will please one's constituents. Marcia is to be commended for her great job not only locally but also in representing us at the National level where she is highly regarded. On behalf of all of the sisters and brothers of our Regional Fraternity I want to express our deep gratitude to Marcia for a job well done.

And we also wish to thank the other members of the Regional Executive Council who have completed their terms of service with this past election: John Ras, SFO, Treasurer, Carolyn Townes, SFO, Secretary, Madeline Romaine, SFO, Councilor—North Jersey, Larry Meyers, SFO, Councilor—Central Jersey. They all deserve a hearty “Thank You!” Don't let me be the only voice to express these sentiments which I know you share. Please take the time to tell these fine servant leader brothers and sisters yourself how grateful you are for their service when you have the opportunity—I know they would appreciate it.

In a recent editorial by Fr. Joseph O'Keefe, S.J, the writer quotes from the new book, “*The Faithful*” by historian James O'Toole where he says:

History matters now more than ever, both to American Catholics themselves and the nation in which they live. For Catholics, understanding the successive ages of their church may open them to accepting change that will continue whether they want it or not. The church and its people have never stood still in changing times, and they cannot do so now.

How true and how important this insight is for us Secular Franciscans. Change will happen whether we want it or not. The Church never stands still. Her resilience is due to her ability to interpret the Gospel message in changing times and respond to new

circumstances. We have just experienced a historic Presidential election in our nation. We are experiencing a serious stress in our economy unlike anything since the Great Depression. Our nation is in the midst of a terrible military conflict in more than one place and global unrest threatens other areas. Our world is suffering from global warming and the stress of disease and the scarcity of natural resources. Each one of us must ask ourselves how we have responded as Secular Franciscans to the needs and challenges of our time and place.

And what of our fraternities? Have we exhibited the kind of flexibility and adaptability which is required if the witness of Franciscans is to be effective in the light of the challenges which confront us? What is your fraternity life like? How has it changed? Are you doing the same old tired things as always or is your fraternity meeting the “privileged place for experiencing Church” of which the Rule speaks—a heightened moment of encountering Jesus in your sisters and brothers from which you draw life and energy and toward which you look forward with eager anticipation each month? If we are to be the “Gospel leaven” we are called to be, what is required of us in this time and in this place in order for the Church to be built and the Word of God to be heard? Only we can answer this question for ourselves and for our fraternities. All of us must own the responsibility for the life and witness of our local fraternities. It is not just a concern for our elected leadership—each of us must share in this responsibility. Let us collectively take our fraternity’s “temperature” and ask as did former New York Mayor Edward Koch, “How are we doing?”

I call upon you also to be aware of your “ownership” of our Regional Fraternity. Each of us has a stake in its health and effectiveness. What have you done to support the Regional Fraternity in its activities and programs? We are only as strong as our individual members make us. How aware and how committed are you to the greater Franciscan community of which you are a part? There are about 1,100 professed Secular Franciscans who make up our Regional Fraternity but only a small percentage ever participate in our gatherings and events. I challenge each of us to renew our interest and effort to take part in the Regional offerings throughout the year—your presence and participation make a difference!

Please also know that I am here to serve you and am anxious to hear your ideas and suggestions. My telephone number and e-mail are listed along with all of our Regional Executive Council. We want to hear from you. What changes do you perceive are needed for us to be more effective in “building up the Church?” And pray—pray for our Regional fraternity and its leadership that we may receive the necessary grace to be agents of change and to have the grace of discernment to be able to distinguish, on the one hand, what is essential and unchanging and, on the other hand, what must change and adapt in order to keep the heart of our mission vibrant. For any leader, balancing stability and momentum is a crucial skill. But as fraternity leaders we must also be able to call upon the deep well of our Franciscan tradition in the midst of our changing times.

Fr. O’Keefe, in the article to which I referred earlier, says:

“In the popular imagination, the Catholic Church is characterized by historical continuity, a reverence for tradition, reluctance to see familiar structures in a new way and a glacial pace of change. But there is something else. We are a people of Paschal Mystery, which is at the heart of our baptismal reality as the People of God. One of the great graces of that “paschal” spirituality is our ability to let things die when their time comes, so that new life will spring forth.”

In the midst of all the upheaval which our Church has experienced, we know that in cooperation with God’s grace, something new will be born. And so we are filled with hope for the future for our Church and for our Secular Franciscan Order. Let us begin again...

Fraternally,

Ron Pihokker, SFO
Regional Minister