

The care for sick and elderly brothers and sisters OFS

SECRETARIAT FOR FORMATION
CIOFS



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

OFS Fraternities

Peace and all good,

It is a great joy for us to share with you this material which invites local fraternities that have brothers and sisters who, due to advanced age or illness, find themselves more limited in their direct participation in meetings.

The Secretariat for Formation shares this formation material:

THE CARE FOR SICK AND ELDERLY BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER FRATERNITY

We have invited Marcos José Pereira and Bernadete de Lourdes Franco Pereira, brother and sister of the national fraternity of Brazil, who, as national formator and national counsellor for the service to the sick and elderly, can share with us a concrete life experience of this service and in proposing this theme so necessary for our fraternities at this time. We thank them for their generosity and fraternal sharing.

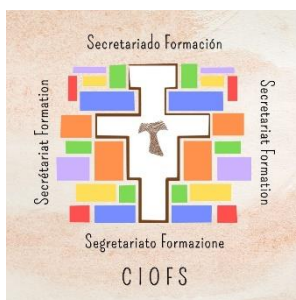
We would be grateful if each national fraternity would promote this proposal for a formation opportunity that invites us to deepen our experience with the sick and the elderly—an essential dimension of the Franciscan vocation that helps us recognize them not only as recipients of care, but as full and active members of fraternal life and witnesses of fidelity and hope.

Your brothers and sisters,

SECRETARIAT FOR FORMATION CIOFS

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THE CARE FOR SICK AND ELDERLY BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN THE FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

Introduction: A Call to Fraternity

The Secular Franciscan Order (OFS), as a fraternity of brothers and sisters who follow Christ in the manner of Saint Francis, is called to live concrete fraternity. Present in many countries, it is called to live the Gospel in the diversity of cultural and social contexts.

“The Rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to the example of Saint Francis of Assisi” (Rule of the OFS, Art. 4). Living the Gospel is recognizing the presence of Christ in the sick and elderly, as He Himself said: *“I was sick and you visited me”* (Mt 25:36).

Among the various services that are part of fraternal life, service to sick and elderly brothers and sisters stands out, representing a concrete response to Saint Francis' call: *“And each one must love and cherish his brother, as a mother loves and cherishes her child* (cf. 1 Thess 2:7)” (Regula non-Bullata IX, 10). This care for sick and elderly brothers and sisters has always been at the heart of Franciscan spirituality; therefore, fraternity is not limited to meetings and moments of prayer, but is embodied in loving attention to the frailty of others.

Thus, experiences with the sick and elderly are not secondary, but are a central part of the Franciscan vocation, leading us to understand that these brothers and sisters are not merely recipients of care, but full and active members of fraternal life, witnesses of fidelity and hope. The spirit of service remains relevant for us Secular Franciscans who live the Rule approved by the Church, amid the challenges of the world—in our families, at work, in our communities, and in our local fraternities.

This document uses the See-Judge-Act-Celebrate methodology to offer a comprehensive and reflective approach, adaptable to the realities of fraternities worldwide. The experience of the OFS in Brazil is used here as a reference, but always recognizing the need for specific discernment, attentive to each cultural and social context.

1. See (Listen) – Opening your eyes and ears to an exercise of closeness

Looking at our reality as the Secular Franciscan Order, we see that in each local fraternity there are brothers and sisters who, due to advancing age or illness, find their in-person participation in meetings more limited.

However, their presence continues to be a gift and a testimony of fidelity. Listening to their stories is an essential part of life in fraternity, as they are the living memory of God's people.

Reality demands attentive listening from us: listening to the elderly, listening to their physical and emotional pain, but also listening to their wisdom, their counsel, and their mature faith. As the psalmist says: *“They bear fruit even in old age; they are full of sap and green”* (Ps 92:15).

Franciscan spirituality calls us to view this reality through the eyes of Francis of Assisi, who repeated to his brothers: *“If any of the brothers falls ill, wherever he may be, let the other brothers not abandon him”* (Regula non-Bullata, X,1). Clare told her sisters: *“For all must provide for and serve their sick sisters, as they would like to be served themselves if they were ill”* (Form of Life of Saint Clare, VIII,14).

Seeing is more than observing; it is contemplating with compassion the frailty of others; it means not ignoring the frequent absence of a brother or sister from meetings.

Listening means embracing their pains and joys with empathy, without rushing, allowing the brother or sister to express themselves in their own way, in their own time, and to share their experience of life and faith.

This exercise of listening, however, requires time and attention. It is necessary to silence one's own heart to create a space of welcome. Often, a brother or sister does not need immediate solutions, but simply to feel seen and heard in their needs. Listening is, therefore, an act of stripping away: of our time, our certainties, and our tendency to interrupt. It is in the serenity of this encounter that fraternity is created, a fraternal relationship that sanctifies both the listener and the one being listened to.

Pope Francis denounces the reality of our society: *“Thanks to advances in medicine, life has been prolonged: but society has not ‘expanded’ itself to life! The number of elderly people has multiplied, but our societies have not organized themselves sufficiently to make room for them, with due respect and concrete consideration for their frailty and dignity. While we are young, we are led to ignore old age, as if it were an illness from which we must remain at a distance; then, as we grow older, especially if we are poor, sick, and alone, we experience the shortcomings of a society programmed for efficiency that, consequently, ignores the elderly. But the elderly are a treasure; they cannot be ignored!”* (General Audience, March 4, 2015).

According to the United Nations (World Population Prospects 2022), population aging is a global phenomenon with regional particularities. In Brazil, for example, this phenomenon is accelerating and marked by inequalities, with many elderly people facing poverty, loneliness, and an overburdened public health system. Where public policies fail, action by civil society is needed to meet the needs of people in vulnerable situations.

The aging process brings with it personal and community challenges. Aging with quality of life is a right and depends on a support network that includes comprehensive health care—physical, mental, and spiritual. For the Secular Franciscan, cultivating good fraternal relationships and developing spirituality are not only factors of well-being, but the concrete expression of a life understood as a gift and open to transcendence, even in frailty. Therefore, the care that family, fraternity, and the entire support network must offer should be comprehensive.

It is in the Rule that Francis expresses his views on the care of the brothers. Considering that the original fraternity was essentially itinerant, it is interesting to note that the brothers could seek help from someone outside the group in the event of illness.

We also know how radical Francis was regarding the use of money. However, in the Regula non Bullata VIII, 3, when faced with the needs of the sick, he makes an exception: *"Therefore, no brother, wherever he is and wherever he goes, should in any way receive, or cause to be received money or coins [...] except because of the manifest need of the sick brothers."* However, perhaps due to abuses, in Regula non Bullata IV, 2, Francis institutes spiritual friends: *"However, only the ministers and custodians should diligently care, through spiritual friends, for the needs of the sick."*

In this context, the Secular Franciscan Order of Brazil encourages Fraternities to organize and care for their sick and elderly brothers and sisters, offering them the spiritual and material care necessary for a dignified life.

2. Judge (Discerning) - Reality in the Light of Faith

After seeing and hearing the reality, we are called to illuminate it. The elderly or sick are not simply those in need of care, but are the presence of Christ.

"Many of our elderly have spent their lives for the good of their families and communities, based on their place and vocation. [...] They deserve to be recognized [...] particularly for the cross of their illnesses, diminished abilities, or loneliness" (Aparecida Document, 449). Every life, at every stage, has equal value. Society cannot judge those who are no longer productive as useless; the value of life is not measured by usefulness, but by the love with which it is lived and cared for.

Contemporary culture often encourages us to hide or deny our frailties, seen as failures. Franciscan spirituality, on the contrary, invites us to discern in them a sacred and opportune time of grace. Even when an elderly brother or sister can no longer do many things, his mission evolves: to be a witness of patience, acceptance, confident prayer, and love. Through their lives, the elderly enlighten the fraternity to discover the value of simply being before God and our brothers and sisters. Caring for them is, therefore, having the privilege of learning the most important lessons for our own spiritual journey.

Pope Francis stated: *"The loneliness and neglect of the elderly are neither accidental nor inevitable, but the result of choices—political, economic, social, and personal—that fail to recognize the infinite dignity of each person."* (Fourth World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, July 28, 2024.)

Pope Leo XIV chose the theme *"The Compassion of the Samaritan"* for the 34th World Day of the Sick, to be celebrated on February 11th, which profoundly illuminates Service to the Sick and Elderly. The message reminds us that humanity *"still today, too often, has to deal with the darkness of evil, with suffering, with poverty, with the absurdity of*

death." God, however, "looked upon us with compassion. He himself wanted to walk our path, he came down among us, and, in Jesus, he came to heal our wounds." Thus, "healed and loved by Christ, we too become signs of his love and compassion in the world." Anyone who thinks that their own journey must take priority is not willing to stop for others." The parable of the Good Samaritan urges us to 'stop our journey' and 'have compassion,' especially when we understand that the wounded man on the road represents each one of us! (Vatican News, 9/26/2025).

If every human being possesses an inalienable dignity, if each person is my brother or sister, and if the world truly belongs to everyone, then it makes no sense for us to accept a culture that treats anyone as disposable. This message resonates deeply with Franciscan spirituality, which sees everyone as brothers and sisters, including the most vulnerable.

Discerning means understanding that Service for the Sick and Elderly is not merely a charitable act. It is an evangelizing mission, a prophecy against the throwaway culture. It is a manifestation of true love and a path to holiness, for, as Francis of Assisi says: "*Blessed is the servant who loves his brother as much when he is sick and cannot repay him as when he is well and can repay him.*" (Admonitions XXIV)

Illuminating reality means realizing that, in caring for the sick and elderly, we are led to personal conversion and fraternity. Our mission is to be sensitive to the presence of Christ in our suffering brothers and sisters. Discerning means recognizing that frailty does not diminish a person's value. On the contrary, the elderly and sick brothers and sisters bear witness to perseverance and trust in God.

This discernment echoes the experience of Saint Francis who experienced his conversion precisely through his encounter with the leper: "What seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body" (Testament, 3). This experience shows us that care is not just service but a place of encounter with God. His experience represents a conversion of perspective that grounds our spirituality: it is learning to see the divine in human frailty and to recognize in mutual care the most authentic experience of evangelical love.

Service to the Sick and Elderly is not a peripheral activity, but an essential dimension of fraternal life: caring for our frail brothers and sisters is living the Gospel of Christ.

3. Act: A Transformative Path of Fraternal Love

"For as the body without the breath of life is dead, so faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Therefore, Service to the Sick and Elderly must be a concrete, organized action, faithful to the Franciscan spirit.

Each Local Fraternity is called to get to know its sick and elderly brothers and sisters, organize visits, make regular contacts, include their names in prayers, and hold some celebrations so they can participate, even if less frequently.

“To Act” means making God's mercy visible, because fraternal love is manifested in simple and consistent gestures. Service to the Sick and Elderly points out paths for fraternal life: regular visits, phone calls, messages, and celebrations adapted to the conditions of the sick.

Some Fraternities prepare celebrations primarily for Christmas, Easter, and Saint Francis of Assisi, to which the brothers and sisters (who can still participate) and their families are invited. They create conditions for their families to bring them, or for a Fraternity member to pick them up for the celebrations. These are moments of joy, reunion, and great consolation and hope for the brothers and sisters. For those who are truly unable to attend the gatherings, the Fraternity seeks to celebrate birthdays, sending them messages of affection and even small gifts that might be of use to the sick or elderly brother or sister. The involvement of caregivers and family members should be valued. Family members feel comforted knowing that their loved one has people who love and value them. In this way, they will know who to turn to in case of material or spiritual needs.

Care-filled gestures that reveal the Fraternity's love:

- Identify brothers and sisters who are no longer able to actively participate in the Fraternity's life and encourage their participation through phone calls and messages. Teach them how to use apps, allowing them to participate virtually in meetings.
- Create a team to support them, helping with practical needs such as medication, food, and adult diapers.
- Offer spiritual support, sharing the Word, praying the Office, encouraging Eucharistic communion, and access to the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick.
- Celebrate birthdays, anniversaries of profession, and significant dates in fraternal life and invite them to share their memories at meetings.
- Integrate them into fraternal activities creatively and respectfully, creating means of prayer that unite the elderly who can no longer leave their homes but remain united, interceding for the fraternity and the Church.

Practical Structure of Service for the Sick and Elderly:

To ensure that these actions are not sporadic, but rather a part of the Fraternity's life, it is suggested that a Coordinator for the Sick and Elderly be elected or appointed. This coordinator will have the following practical functions:

1. Record-keeping: Develop and maintain an updated registry of brothers and sisters who require care, recording their specific health conditions, most urgent material needs, contact preferences, and significant dates to be celebrated.
2. Team of brothers and sisters who will conduct visits: Organize a schedule for visits and phone calls. Ensure that care is consistent and avoid overloading a single person.
3. Communication: Serve as a clear channel of communication between the Fraternity and the family of the sick or elderly brother or sister, offering support and establishing a relationship of trust and collaboration.

4. Ongoing Formation: Promote, within the Fraternity, formation sessions on topics such as active listening, health care in the elderly, etc.

This simple structure ensures that Service to the Sick and Elderly is a permanent service, organized with charity and efficiency, reflecting the concern of Francis and Clare for their sick brothers and sisters.

World Day of the Sick (February 11) and OFS Solidarity Day (November 17, the feast of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary) are privileged moments to reinforce our commitment to SEI (Service to the Elderly and Infirm) at the local, regional, national, and international levels. Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, patron saint of the OFS, dedicated her life to caring for the poor and sick. Her life inspires us to live charity with joy and dedication.

4. Celebrate – Life as a Gift

Celebrating is recognizing that life, even in its frailty, is a gift from God. Celebrating can mean organizing fraternal gatherings in the homes of the sick, praying the Office of the Passion together, singing the Canticle of the Creatures, or sharing a simple meal. It is making the joy of the Gospel visible, even in difficult situations.

The fraternity can also celebrate birthdays, anniversaries of profession, and some significant dates in Franciscan spirituality, making them active participants, even in their homes. Care is not limited to meeting material needs but is complete in the celebration that renews hope and strengthens faith.

To make the celebratory dimension more concrete, a simple plan for a Celebration is proposed, to be held in the home of a brother or sister who cannot travel:

- **Setting:** Create a small altar with a candle, a Bible, and a Franciscan symbol (such as a crucifix of San Damiano).
- **Welcome:** Begin with the Canticle of the Creatures or another well-known Franciscan song.
- **Reading of the Word:** Proclaim a biblical passage (this could be from the day's liturgy).
- **Sharing of Memories:** Invite the elderly brother or sister to share a special memory from their life in the OFS, or what Franciscan spirituality has meant to them during their journey. The fraternity present listens affectionately.
- **Prayer of Thanksgiving:** The celebrant summarizes the sharing in a spontaneous prayer, thanking God for the brother or sister's life and witness.
- **Final Blessing:** Conclude with the blessing of St. Francis.
- **Fellowship:** Share a simple snack, brought by the brothers and sisters, transforming the moment into a true fraternal encounter.

Celebrations like this attest that fraternity is not confined to a physical space, but extends and is present wherever one of its members lives and bears witness to the faith.

Celebrating the lives of elderly brothers and sisters is recognizing their Franciscan vocation as a gift for the entire fraternity; it is giving thanks for the history, fidelity, and witness of these brothers and sisters. The celebration strengthens fraternal bonds and renews the joy of the specific vocation we embrace.

The OFS of Brazil, through the National Coordination of Service for the Sick and Elderly, provides formation outlines, reflections, prayer experiences, and celebrations that can be used in Local Fraternities or during family prayer times.

The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order invites us to a continuous conversion and a joyful witness of fraternity. This means incorporating care for our brothers and sisters as a priority, where gratitude overcomes the difficulties of daily life.

Conclusion

Service to the Sick and Elderly is not just one activity among others, but an expression of the Franciscan essence of being a brother or sister. Caring for the vulnerable is caring for Christ present in the midst of fraternity.

Inspired by Saint Francis, Saint Clare, and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, we are called to make fraternal life a place of welcome, tenderness, and care. May we live our secular vocation enlightened by the Word of God, the Rule of the OFS, and the Franciscan and Clarian Sources, transforming our fraternal relationships into signs of joy and hope.

Service to the Sick and Elderly is adaptable to the realities of individual fraternities and represents a significant contribution of the OFS to the experience of love. More important than perfect solutions is initiating processes, creating spaces for listening, and sowing concrete gestures of fraternal care.

As we care for our brothers and sisters, we encounter the true values of life. The sick teach acceptance, revealing that what is essential is not suffering itself, but self-giving love, following the example of Christ. The elderly, in turn, proclaim with their lives the hope of an eternity with a merciful God. They also remind us that frailty is not synonymous with uselessness, for "not every elderly person is sick, and not every sick person is elderly."

We conclude, therefore, by inviting each Fraternity to take the first steps: identify those in need of care, create a care plan, and, above all, pray for them and with them; for a Fraternity that does not care for its elderly and sick loses the memory and richness of its living tradition.

In a world marked by a throwaway culture, Service to the Sick and Elderly is the ongoing mission of the OFS. It transforms not only the lives of the elderly and the sick, but also the entire fraternity, which grows in the care of life.

May Our Lady inspire us to hasten toward one another. May each Fraternity be a bearer of mercy, where no one feels alone and all experience the joy of being brothers and sisters.

In a world that often marginalizes the elderly, the persevering and loving practice of SEI is an act of resistance. It is a rejection of the 'throwaway culture' and an affirmation that every life, in any condition, is a priceless good. By caring for our most vulnerable brothers and sisters, we are not simply performing charitable work. We are, in fact, sowing the seeds of the Kingdom of God.

In this way, following in the footsteps of the Poverello of Assisi, our fraternal life, grounded in reciprocal care, will be the seed of a new society founded on evangelical values.

For Reflection and Action in Fraternities:

We propose that Fraternities dedicate a portion of their meetings to reflect, in fraternal dialogue, on the following questions:

1. When we look at the reality of our sick and elderly brothers and sisters, can we say we know them? Are we able to listen to them and integrate their voices and wisdom into our fraternal life?

2. Is our Service to the Sick and Elderly occasional, or is it a continuous and sustainable service? How can we better structure ourselves so that no brother or sister feels forgotten?

3. Has the encounter with the frailty of our brothers and sisters challenged us to change our perspective, overcoming the logic of productivity and activism? In what specific ways has caring for the most vulnerable taught us gratitude and the values of the Gospel?

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