

"SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE AND ITS ROLE WITHIN THE OFS"



THE FRA

PRESENTATION

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
OFS - YouFra

Peace and all good,

It is a great joy for us to be able to share this material with you. We propose highlighting several ideas regarding spiritual assistance so that we may form ourselves within our local Fraternities.

The Secretariat for Formation shares this formation material:

“SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE AND ITS ROLE WITHIN THE OFS”

We thank Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFM Conv., and all our General Assistants for their generosity and fraternal sharing of this material, as well as for their service.

We would be grateful if each national Fraternity and their Spiritual Assistants could encourage this formation initiative among the local Fraternities and their Spiritual Assistants. Furthermore, we recommend that the knowledge and study of the Statute for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the OFS and the Manual for Spiritual Assistants be included in the formation program of our brothers and sisters. Your brothers and sisters,

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A BRIEF LOOK AT SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE

The recent celebrations of the Franciscan Centenaries (2023–2026) have offered us the opportunity to celebrate together, as one large family, the important events in the life of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis and, at the same time, to work together as brothers and sisters, promoting the common good as a visible sign of unity. Although we are one family called to live the Gospel in today's world, our specific characteristics are quite different. We have understood once again that we need one another in order to walk the path of good and fully live our charism, with the specific characteristics of each individual Franciscan branch. Without an awareness of the importance of our role and our unique character within this great Franciscan Family, we risk weakening its unity, frustrating its mission, and exposing it to the danger of losing its significance.

This uniqueness and distinctive character of the Franciscan Family was desired by our Seraphic Father Saint Francis from the beginning, received and blessed by Mother Church, and always supported by the vicars of Christ through their numerous interventions over the centuries.

With these few pages, we propose to highlight some ideas concerning spiritual assistance and its role within the OFS. We will try to review very briefly some legislative documents that illuminate the relationship intended to ensure a sustainable and meaningful life for the Franciscan Family. Service and mutual respect can bear much fruit for both the OFS Fraternities and for their Spiritual Assistants.

I. FRANCISCAN FAMILY

1.1 Relationships among the Friars Minor

And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I should do; but the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the holy Gospel. And I had it written down in few and simple words, and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me. Test 16-18.

And wherever the brothers may be and find themselves, let them show themselves familiar with one another. And let each one confidently make known his needs to the other, for if a mother nourishes and loves her child according to the flesh, how much more affectionately should one love and nourish his spiritual brother. And if one of them falls ill, the other brothers must serve him as they would wish to be served. (Rb VI, 8-11)

1.2 Relationships between the Friars Minor and the Penitents

Men and women from among the people said to the friars: “*Tell us, then, what we must do to save our souls*” (Anper 41). Francis and his companions presented themselves as humble servants who collaborated with the secular penitents, providing them with necessary assistance: “*Even married men and women, unable to free themselves from the bonds of marriage, at the suggestion of the friars, practiced a stricter penance in their homes*” (3Comp 60; Anper 41; 1Cel 37).



II. LEGISLATIVE TEXTS

2.1 The Memoriale propositi (1221)

This document does not speak of the relationship between the penitents and the Friars Minor. The Memoriale entrusted the task of overseeing the proper functioning of the Order of Penance to lay visitors approved by the bishops. It seems that, after the second generalate of Brother Elias (1232–1239), the Friars Minor lost interest in the Fraternities of penitents.

2.2 Supra montem (1289) by Nicholas IV

The Pope states that Brother Francis is the founder of the Order of Penitents. The Pope establishes that the visitor must be chosen from among the Friars Minor and appointed by the local Custos or guardian. The visitor must conduct the visitation once a year.

During the visitation, the local minister must publicly report the faults of the brothers and sisters to the visitor, so that they may be admonished.

2.3 The Rule of Leo XIII (1883)

It adds nothing new. It simply states that the visitors are chosen from among the friars of the First Order and the TOR.

2.4 The Current Rule (1978)

There are two articles of particular importance regarding fraternal assistance: the first and the last (26). They address several important questions for the life of the OFS.

2.4.1 We Are a Spiritual Family

Rule art. 1)

Secular Franciscans are not an appendage, but an integral part of the Franciscan Family; the OFS is not a political or social movement: it is a family raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church.

The OFS is part of a spiritual family, the Franciscan Family, which brings together all members of the people of God: lay people, religious, and priests. The purpose of the Franciscan Family is to follow Christ in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi.



2.4.2 Within the family there is a reciprocal vital communion (Rule art. 1):

Communion

It is not a relationship based on calculation, authority, money, and so on, but on fraternal communion.

The new Rule does not speak of a hierarchy, but of communion among equals.

Vital

Life flows precisely from this communion. Without this communion, there is no nourishment.

Reciprocal

The bond is the union of each with the others, or, in other words, reciprocity. From this arises the new concept of spiritual and fraternal assistance as the role of the friars of the First Order and the TOR. The Spiritual Assistants of the OFS are not merely the “ecclesiastical assistants” of any lay association. For Secular Franciscans, they represent something more: they represent a privileged channel through which the life-giving sap must pass in order to guarantee the “reciprocal vital communion” between the secular component and the religious components of the Franciscan Family.

2.4.3 Spiritual assistance as a sign of communion and co-responsibility (Rule art. 26).

Once again, communion and co-responsibility are the key words for expressing the relationship between the friars of the First Order and the TOR and the Secular Franciscans.

2.4.4 What purpose does the spiritual assistance offered by the friars to the Secular Franciscans serve?

- §To foster fidelity to the charism.
- §To foster observance of *the Rule*.
- §To provide greater support in fraternity life.



The Spiritual Assistant is a concrete sign of communion and co-responsibility of the First Order and the TOR toward the OFS. In the Fraternity, the Assistant serves as a brother in Saint Francis and as a teacher and guide in the person of Christ and in the name of the Church.

-As a brother: he shares the same ideals and participates, in a different form, in the same charism and the same mission of Francis. In this way, he lives and facilitates the vital and reciprocal communion among all the followers of Saint Francis.

-As a teacher and guide: he reveals Christ who saves and transmits the grace of Christ to the candidates so that they may exercise their common priesthood, proper to all the baptized. In this way, he fosters communion with the Church, guaranteeing the integrity of the faith and ecclesiastical discipline.



III. THE NEW GENERAL CONSTITUTIONS OF THE OFS (2001)

3.1 The Role of the Spiritual Assistant

The Spiritual Assistant is not the Director of the Fraternity, as was the case in the past, nor its secretary or treasurer. He is a member of the Fraternity Council, with the right to vote on every matter except financial decisions (90.2) and elections (Stat. Ass. 12.3). The work of the Spiritual Assistant is less extensive in terms of direction and organization. It can and should be deeper, serving as spiritual accompaniment and support for the brothers and sisters in initial and ongoing formation.

3.2 Who is the Spiritual Assistant?

According to the new General Constitutions, the Spiritual Assistant is “the person designated by the competent Major Superior to carry out this service for a specific OFS Fraternity” (89.2).

His priestly status is not specified: his task is not “sacramental” assistance, but spiritual assistance. He may be any friar, priest or not, provided that he is suitable and prepared.

Where there is a shortage of friars, Major Superiors may entrust this responsibility to: religious men and women belonging to other Franciscan Institutes, diocesan clerics belonging to the OFS, or even other diocesan clerics or non-Franciscan religious.



3.3 Collegiality among Spiritual Assistants

The unity of the OFS also promotes collegiality among the Spiritual Assistants: “At the international, national, and regional levels, the Assistants, if there is more than one, form a Conference and render their service collegially to the OFS and YouFra.” (cf. Const. 90.3)

The idea is that the ministry of assistance should be carried out collegially at all levels above the local level, because a local Fraternity is assisted by only one religious Order. The creation of the “Conference of Spiritual Assistants” is required by the very unity of the OFS. In this way communication and participation will make the ministry of assistance richer and more creative.

3.4 Task of the Spiritual Assistants

Nowhere is there any mention or indication that the Spiritual Assistant is in any way the “Superior” of the OFS. The proper role of the Spiritual Assistant is to provide “spiritual assistance.”

The Assistant is appointed by one of the four religious Orders as a sign of communion and co-responsibility.

The Assistant’s principal tasks are two:

-To give witness to Franciscan spirituality and to the fraternal affection of the religious.

-To collaborate in the initial and ongoing formation of the brothers and sisters of the OFS.

The altius moderamen over the OFS, exercised by the General Ministers of the four Orders, does not imply power or control but rather serves as a guarantee:

- of the OFS’s fidelity to the Franciscan charism,
- of its communion with the Church,
- of its union with the Franciscan Family.



IV. LEGISLATIVE TEXTS

The new International Statute, citing the OFS Rule and the OFS General Constitutions, once again highlights the relationship between the two Orders, explaining both its reasons and its objective (SI CIOFS 75-78):

The spiritual and pastoral care of the OFS has been entrusted by the Church, by virtue of belonging to the same spiritual family, to the Franciscan First Order and to the Third Order Regular (TOR), to which the Secular Fraternity has been connected for centuries. This relationship is regulated and defined according to the OFS Rule, the OFS Constitutions, and the Statute for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance. (SI CIOFS 75)

1) Spiritual Assistants, in particular, have the primary task of giving authentic witness to Franciscan spirituality and to fraternal communion between the OFS and the First Order-TOR.

2) The role of the Spiritual Assistant is of great importance in vocational promotion and in both initial and ongoing formation.

3) Before admission to the OFS, the Spiritual Assistant of the local Fraternity discerns the aspirant's Catholic faith, communion with the Church, good moral conduct, and signs of vocation, and gives his opinion to the Council of the local Fraternity. (SI CIOFS 76)



It can therefore be concluded that Spiritual Assistants do not have any “authority” understood as the right to direct the members of the OFS. On the contrary, they “assist” Secular Franciscans by sharing their own Franciscan life with them.

The Conference of General Ministers of the Franciscan First Order and the TOR renewed its commitment on March 19, 2024 (Prot. No. 05/2024: Spiritual Assistance to the OFS and YouFra)[1] not to fail in the specific love of an elder brother and to continue spiritually assisting the brothers and sisters of the OFS and YouFra.[2]



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[1] Cfr. Conf MMGG & FF 2024-05 OfS -GiFra_ita.pdf

[1] There are two important documents that describe the roles and responsibilities of the Spiritual Assistant: The Statute of the Spiritual Assistant and the Manual of the Spiritual Assistant, especially Chapter IV: SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL ASSISTANCE TO THE OFS, pp. 86–122. In this chapter, the role of the Spiritual Assistant is described in great detail (his role on the council, in initial and ongoing formation, etc.). Both documents are available on the website Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis – Consilium Internationale OFS (CIOFS), Secular Franciscan Order CAS (spiritual assistants) – Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis.