A Franciscan *Convivenza* of New York and New Jersey Secular Franciscans

On a sunny Saturday morning, April 21st, men and women, young and old, of many ethnic groups filled San Damiano Hall at St. Francis Church in Manhattan. These Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters of Our Lady of the Angels Regional Fraternity gathered for their *Convivenza*, the time every year when they all can pray, learn, share and socialize together.

Dynamic fraternity minister, Diane Menditto, OFS, kindled a fire in her opening reflection, “Who Do We Say We Are?” After she gathered Franciscan words from the members like community, family, servant, joyful, welcoming, she presented key phrases from the Order of Franciscan Seculars (OFS) Rule. Commenting on Article 6, “Witnesses and Instruments,” she stressed care in using words, even delaying her emails to check if they are inflammatory, and quoting Pope Francis on the “unguarded tongue” that can be divisive. Being “Penitential People seeking Conversion” (art. 7) can make us “delicious for God,” and being prayerful and contemplative” (8) relate us to the Trinity through various prayer forms, especially Eucharist. Secular Franciscans are “Promoters of Justice” (15) in gently finding common ground, and “peacemakers” (17 & 19) who try to see both sides. Diane featured an acronym of points built on the name of patron, St. FRANCIS. Fruits of the Spirit, particularly love and patience, let people see Jesus in the members.

Ed Wojciechowski, professed in 2001, member of the St. Anthony Fraternity in Butler, NJ, and the Formation Director of the Regional Council for the past 9 years, in his “Sharing Who We Are With Others” showcased the development of a new YouTube channel (<https://tinyurl.com/y8ofkn3>) to present OFSs to the public and get feedback. He encouraged members to develop content and send it, to subscribe, and of course, to “like” it on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/Our LadyoftheAngelsRegion/](http://www.facebook.com/Our%20LadyoftheAngelsRegion/)) .

Members at the 12 round tables had lively discussions after both presentations. At the inspiring Mass concelebrated by two friars, Fr. Frank McHugh OFM, mentioned the “hard sayings” of Jesus, as well as those of St. Francis in “Make Me an Instrument” like pardoning those who injure us. During lunch, the happy interactions continued .

Diane passed out her “Did you know?” sheet that provided many interesting facts like “There are approximately 300,000 Secular Franciscans in the world.” “There are 30 Regions in the USA with 12,000 members in almost 600 fraternities.” And specific to this group, “We are the smallest region the geographic area and among the largest in number of professed (732) and candidates (29) in the USA.”

The afternoon panel, “Living Who We Are,” furnished many illustrations of Franciscan values, chaired by Chris Leone, Regional Animator for the JPIC (Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation) and Minister of his local Porziuncola Fraternity in East Hanover, NJ.

Dawn Rusinko spoke of her project, “It’s Your World,” for which she interviews persons like an addiction counselor and a leader in a foster care system. This humble media project helps educate her fraternity members, many who are elderly and homebound, on what good things are happening in their world.

Hugo focused on a project his busy members found manageable, “Operation Chill Out,” in which they help homeless vets get clothes, water, and shelter. In the winter, their members buy backpacks and fill them with items from a list, and in the summer, give supplies of water and baseball caps. These are distributed to the hidden sufferers, often having PTSD, some coming even from Texas and Arizona only to get trafficked into sex slavery and remain homeless in our New Jersey areas.

Jim Andreano, professed in 2017 in the Most Holy Name fraternity in Little Falls, NJ, presented the project of which he is currently president, New Jersey Interfaith Cares. NJIFC is a nonprofit giving compassionate assistance to Syrian refugees who, after fleeing Syria eight years ago, have been largely on their own in Northern New Jersey. NJIFC’s core is helping families get skills for “sustainable independence” through passing certification requirements. The classes offering ESL are now able to be utilized since they found an Arabic instructor to translate. An example of NJIFC offering fellowship and friendship was the recent Syrian Mother’s Day project.

Participants from the floor added their endeavors like “praying while packing,” “making ‘blessing bags’ for other charity groups in Manhattan.” The humble zealous Korean Martyrs fraternity had a letter read enumerating an amazing array of projects including making 20 wells in Zambia, giving books, starting a nursery, supporting missionaries in other countries, collecting toiletries, socks, and articles for people in the city, and running a thrift shop to get money to buy groceries for the poor in Yonkers.

Mike Fogarty, having a background in prison work and now becoming a deacon, worked with his pastor to head up a housing project for which 100 volunteers in rotation from that parish stay overnights and cook meals for the 10 to 15 men. They sit with them while eating and get to know their names. Mike says, “It’s not what you do, it’s how you do it.” Their goal is always to support the human dignity of each person they serve and encounter. They also make sandwiches to give out in NY Penn Station.

Ron Pihokker, professed since 1977 and a member of Most Holy Name Fraternity in Little Falls, NJ, remarked “We should have more days like this” to invigorate members. The afternoon panel was of special interest to longtime members of the same New Jersey fraternity, Debbie and Joe Wickham (professed in 1980; Debbie the Regional Treasurer), who got ideas of something they might implement in their area. Aida Abundo, originally from the Philippines, professed in 1995, was deeply moved by the “witnessing of the people to their Franciscan spirit in action.” Nancy Labissiere, Haitian, professed 3 years, was moved by the day “refocusing us on how we treat others, how we represent Christ in our day-to-day actions.” For those long-professed all the way to those in formation, the *Convivenza* refreshed and inspired them with the values and actions of their brothers and sisters living their Franciscan commitment and stirring them to renewed love, service, and joy. (See website: <http://ourladyoftheangelsregion.org>)