

Chapter 5: Becoming an Associate

The process of becoming an Associate is a journey of mutual knowledge-gathering, self-discovery and prayer. Once an individual has committed to begin the orientation journey, the Director of Associates will help identify a Companion—a Sister or Associate—who will walk with the individual during orientation and formation. The Candidate and Companion will meet to review the mission and charism of the Congregation, explore Franciscan values and service, identify ways of being Franciscan, while living fully in the lay world, to determine if the Candidate sees himself/herself being connected with the Joliet Franciscans in order to continue one's spiritual journey.

STEPS TO BECOME AN ASSOCIATE

Phase 1: Initial Orientation

During this phase an individual interested in the Associate Relationship contacts the Director of Associates, completes an application form and responds to a series of reflection questions. She is interviewed by the Director of Associates so that each can understand what the individual is seeking and why the Associate Relationship with the Sisters of St. Francis may be the way to grow spiritually.

Phase 2: Reflective Transition

In this second phase, the individual Candidate begins discernment with a Companion—a Sister or Associate who will journey with her. For several months, the Candidate and Companion explore what being a Franciscan Associate means. This manual is used as an important tool in the journey. The Candidate is invited to attend many of the Associate and Congregational events.

Mid-point in this discernment, the Candidate decides whether she wishes to continue and, if so, writes a letter of intent to the Congregation President and requests letters of recommendation from three individuals.



Phase 3: Ongoing Formation

At the third phase, when the Candidate is accepted by the Congregation, she continues to meet with her Companion and receives Congregational mailings. As she prepares for the formal commitment, usually in the Spring, she composes a statement that describes how she wishes to journey with the Joliet Franciscans. Each year she composes a renewal statement and presents it at the yearly celebration of commitment. This statement is called a Mutual Agreement.



"Road in Assisi"
Artwork by Associate Karen Kietzman

When the Candidate is formally committed to being an Associate, she engages with the Sisters and Associates in prayer, ministries and events, as life style permits.

THE MUTUAL AGREEMENT

The commitment made between Associates and the Congregation is called a Mutual Agreement and acknowledges two movements of the Spirit:

1. the desire of Associates to deepen their Christian faith and witness by publicly associating themselves with the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate, thereby embracing the spiritual tradition of Francis and Clare, growing in relationship with other Associates and vowed members of the community, and furthering the evangelical values and ministries of the Congregation;
2. the willingness of the Congregation to recognize the Associates' desire, to affirm their commitment as an Associate, and to celebrate the Associate relationship as a blessing for the Congregation, the Church and the world.

Based on a common faith and mutual affection, the commitment signifies a spiritual bond that is made with confidence and trust on the part of the Associates and the Congregation for a designated period of time. Mutual Agreements are reviewed and renewed every year. At any time, Associates may choose not to renew their mutual agreement. Similarly, the Congregation may choose not to renew the commitment of an Associate.

Reflecting on Becoming an Associate

Contemplating this ideal of interdependence and mutuality as it relates to the Associate Relationship, you and your Companion are invited to prayerfully share and discuss the following.

Consider the personal hopes, fears, needs that you bring to the Joliet Franciscan Associate relationship, as well as your personal gifts and experiences which will enrich this relationship.

In your present circles of community (family, friends, workplace, church) how do you reverence each person's dignity and recognize that diversity among us marks the action of the Spirit? What challenges does this present?

*Living together in shared faith,
in common hope,
and in mutual love,
we aspire to witness to believers and unbelievers alike
that community is possible in Christ.
Constitutions 12*



Artwork by Sr. Kay Francis, Berger, OSF

THE ROLE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COMPANION

Each candidate chooses to be in close communication with a Sister or Associate during the period of discernment. In this way, mutual support, sharing, and prayer are encouraged. Communication can take the form of letters, phone calls, or personal visits. Occasionally, it may include shared ministry with the Sister or Associate or some form of Congregation service or activity.

Companions exemplify the following characteristics

Compassion – the ability to actively listen to what another is attempting to put into words: the ability to be with another in pain, as well as in joy.

Respect for Others – the ability to be with the candidate's stories even when the individual's way of thinking, believing or being are different from one's own. Can interact without judging. Keeps confidentiality sacred.

Simplicity of Spirit – has a straight-forward, no airs approach. Can be trusted for who she is.

Faith-Full – displays one's faith transparently. Is in touch with one's own story and has the ability to share parts of one's own journey when and where appropriate

Mutual Support – displays a willingness to share in mutuality, reciprocity, equality, and rapport. Does not act as therapist or teacher; is not superior to others.

Service-oriented – models an openness to serving others and responds to opportunities to serve the poor and needy

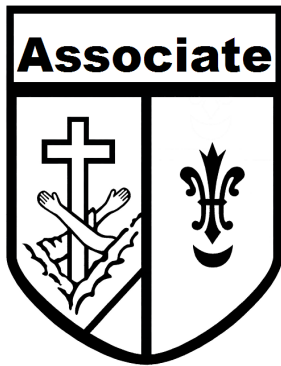
Knowledge of the Community – knows the Congregation well enough to speak to its history, its values and its charism

Reflecting on Companionship

1. How has this journey provided you and your Companion opportunities for "mutual knowledge-gathering, self-discovery and prayer?" with the Congregation?
2. Which Companion characteristics matter most to you and how have you observed them in others?

THE ASSOCIATE PIN

Upon acceptance as an Associate, during the Commitment Ceremony, the Associate receives an official pin which identifies the individual as an Associate of the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate. The pin is given to serve as a reminder to a call, as an Associate, to share in the spirituality, mission and vision of the Congregation by serving God in the spirit of Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi and our foundress Mother Alfred Moes. The pin is explained:



The word “Associate” across the top of the pin is intended to identify the person as an Associate of the Congregation.

The left side of the pin depicts the traditional coat of arms of the Franciscan Order: crossed hands of Christ and St. Francis surmounted by the cross.

The right side of the pin depicts the *fleur de lis* (lily) symbolizing the Virgin Mother Mary and the crescent, distinguishing her as the “Immaculate.”

Reflecting on the Associate Pin

1. What significance do you put on wearing a pin or another symbol that represents an organization to which you belong?
2. Where do you expect you will wear this pin?

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Associates **are not** bound by the same obligation of the Sisters of the Congregation, nor are they beneficiaries of those Congregational resources reserved to the Sisters.

Unless otherwise mentioned, Associates pay their own expenses for days of recollection, conferences or other activities that have a fee. The Associates have no financial responsibility for the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate or their ministries or activities.

MUTUALITY IN THE ASSOCIATE RELATIONSHIP

The Congregation’s Book of Directives states: “The essential element of the associate relationship is the desire to recognize and nurture a mutual relationship which will witness to a Gospel vision of Christian living in the spirit of Clare and Francis of Assisi. ”

The Sisters to Associates

In living out this mutuality, through joined prayer, ministries of service and celebration of special events, the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate share with the Associates in the charism and spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare. These opportunities allow Associates to participate in the mission and spiritual legacy of the Congregation. When affirming an individual as an Associate of the Congregation, the Sisters exclaim their commitment on the Mutual Agreement:

We, the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate, agree to share with you, our Associate, our common mission of making Gospel living more present and credible in today's world by:

- Sharing our Franciscan charism, the heritage of our past, which encourages us to live as women of courage, strength and dedication*
- Sharing our Franciscan vision, as evidenced in the lives of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare*
- Sharing the challenge of our universal call to holiness through Baptism*
- Sharing our mutual concerns for one another, our world and our Church*

The Associates to the Sisters

Associates agree to participate in Congregation activities as circumstances allow. They complete their portion of the Mutual Agreement form, to “rejoice to share this common mission of making Gospel living more present and credible in our world,” and add their unique ways of living the Gospel, concluding with, “I will deepen and celebrate my faith while working for peace and justice.”

MAJOR ASSOCIATE EVENTS

Associates host two major yearly events: the Spring **Associate Weekend** and the Fall **Day of Reflection**. All Associates, Candidates and Sisters are invited to participate.



Associate Weekend is a Spring event that culminates with the new Associates being formally accepted by the Congregation at a special liturgy. On Saturday, the Associates, Sisters and invited guests come together for a day of spiritual renewal. It is a day to meet old and new friends and gather together in discussion and conversation. On Sunday, during the Celebration of the Eucharist, the new Associates formalize their mutual agreements and all Associates renew their agreements. A luncheon for family and friends follows the Mass.

In the Fall at the **Day of Reflection**, Associates, Candidates, Sisters and invited guests, again come together for prayer, discussion and community. This day ends with a liturgy or prayer service, liturgically celebrating who we are together.

Other than Congregation-business gatherings, Sisters' hosted events invite Associates (and Candidates) to attend. Spiritual events include retreat days, days of recollection, mornings and evenings of prayer. Social events include fall feasts, celebratory lunches and dinners, Jubilee day and other events throughout the year.

PRAYER ASSOCIATES

Associates no longer able to be active in regional groups, events or any Associate activities become Prayer Associates. As Prayer Associates, they remain spiritually connected with the Sisters and Associates. They are adopted by a Regional Group and continue to receive mailings and periodic greetings.

ENDING THE RELATIONSHIP

Periodically, there are life situations that may affect an Associate's need to withdraw from the Associate Relationship. The Associate discusses the situation with the Director of Associates and, if mutually determined, no longer completes her Mutual Agreement, terminating the relationship.

An Associate may be asked to leave the Associate Relationship if her behavior or moral judgment is in conflict with the mission and charism of the Congregation. The Director of Associates will contact the Associate to discuss the situation. If the situation cannot be resolved, a letter ending the relationship is sent to the Associate.



DEATH OF AN ASSOCIATE

Upon the death of an Associate, the Congregation secretary is notified so that the Sisters and the Associates can be informed. Every effort is made to have a representative of the Congregation attend the wake and funeral services, where a “Certificate of Membership” is presented to the family. An “In Memoriam” communication, complete with photograph of the Associate and a brief life biography is sent to the Sisters and Associates.

REGIONAL GATHERINGS

A regional gathering is a small faith community of Associates choosing to be together either face-to-face or by phone. Living out the words from our Commitment Statement, “we commit ourselves through relationship to living more fully the mystery of community where we, as Associates are drawn together through prayer and bound together through mutual support.” The purpose for gathering is to grow spiritually and support each other through prayer and discussion.

Face-to-face groups consist of 7-10 people and phone groups of 5-6 people. The face-to-face groups are designed so that Associates will travel as short a distance as possible to get to a designated site. The phone groups use a simple conferencing system and join with Associates from across the country.

Groups have suggested guidelines to support how often to gather, how long the meetings may be and what to discuss. There are readings, discussion topics and questions posted on the Associate website to guide discussions.

The regional gatherings are for Associates, although there may be locations and opportunities when Companion Sisters will attend. Candidates preparing to be Associates may attend the gatherings and the group may decide to use the materials the Candidate is using and pray and discuss the material together.



“Wherever two or more are gathered in my Name, there I am in their midst.” —Matt. 28:20

SERVICE AND MINISTRY OPPORTUNITIES

Living the Commitment Statement that we pledge, “As advocates with and for the poor and oppressed, wherever they may be, we commit ourselves to work for peace, justice and the integrity of creation,” Associates exemplify men and women of service and extend themselves in their parishes, their families, their communities and beyond.

Sometimes they join other Associates, for example at the yearly Blue Stem Earth Festival, or they travel to Mosses, Alabama, to minister to the poor. When there are several in the same parish, they sponsor service ministries together.

They volunteer in Congregational activities from ushering at events, to serving on task forces, to ministering to the sick and elderly at Our Lady of Angels.

Individual Associates minister in third world countries, volunteer time with the homeless, and serve as advocates for others in need.



Reflecting on Service and Ministry

1. What engagements attract you?
2. How are you/do you see yourself, getting involved?