

THE OFC COMMUNITY LIFE HANDBOOK



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The OFC Community Life Handbook
*Governance, Non-Hierarchical Structure, Consensus Decision-Making,
Conflict Resolution, and Community Rhythms*
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Here is the **Introduction** and **Chapter 1** of *The OFC Community Life Handbook* by Sister Abigail Hester, OFC:



Introduction

Why Community? Why Now?

In a world unraveling under the weight of empire, individualism, and spiritual disconnection, we need a different way of being. We need a way rooted not in hierarchy, domination, or profit—but

in relationship, in mutuality, and in the sacred rhythm of life shared together. This is the vision of the Order of Franciscan Clareans.

The OFC is not just a network or a movement. It is a spiritual family, a beloved community, and a prophetic witness to the possibility of living differently. In the lineage of Francis and Clare of Assisi, we walk gently on the earth, hold one another in radical love, and practice justice in our common life.

This handbook is a living document. It is not a rigid rulebook or top-down directive. It is a communal breath, a shared prayer, and a flexible rhythm for those who seek to live in sacred interdependence.

Here you will find the values that guide us, the practices that shape us, and the structures that support us—not as laws, but as invitations. Together, we discern how to live out our Franciscan Clarean calling with authenticity, courage, and joy.

We invite you to read this not just with your mind, but with your heart. Let these words be seed and soil, wind and water. Let them grow something beautiful in you, and in us.

Chapter 1: The Spirit of Franciscan Clarean Community

Rooted in Love. Growing in Justice. Flowing in Grace.

At the heart of the Order of Franciscan Clareans is a simple yet radical truth: **we belong to each other.**

We reject the isolation and fragmentation that capitalism and colonialism have sold us. We remember what the saints and mystics knew: that life is communion, and holiness is found not in separation but in connection.

Beloved Community, Not Corporate Model

Our community is not a business, a brand, or a bureaucracy. We are not here to climb ladders, hold power, or enforce compliance. We are a circle, not a pyramid. A family, not a franchise.

We model ourselves after Jesus, who knelt to wash feet—not to build empires. We draw strength from Clare, who refused to be married off for wealth and instead chose a life of simplicity, prayer, and solidarity. We learn from Francis, who walked away from the privileges of empire to embrace the lepers, the outcasts, and Sister Earth.

Shared Vision, Diverse Paths

In the OFC, no one way fits all. Some of us are called to quiet contemplation, others to loud public witness. Some are artists, others are activists, herbalists, caregivers, poets, or preachers. Each role is sacred. Each voice is vital.

We do not demand uniformity, but we strive for unity in love. We hold our differences tenderly, believing that diversity is not a problem to solve but a gift to celebrate.

A Prophetic Alternative

In a society that thrives on domination, extraction, and hierarchy, our shared life is itself a form of resistance. Living simply, loving boldly, and belonging deeply—these are revolutionary acts.

We are not naïve about the challenges of community life. We know it is hard, holy work. But we also believe it is worth it. Because in community, we remember who we are: not commodities, not consumers, but **children of God**, woven together in a tapestry of sacred interdependence.



Chapter 2: Core Values and Commitments

The Heartbeat of the Order

Our life together is not governed by rules etched in stone, but by shared values written on our hearts. These values are not abstract ideals—they are embodied practices, rooted in our relationships, our spirituality, and our resistance to systems of oppression. Each value is a path of transformation.

1. Radical Belonging

Everyone has a seat at the table. No one is excluded because of gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, economic status, or past history. We are all beloved, and we all belong.

This means dismantling not only external systems of exclusion but also the internalized messages that tell us we're not enough. It means seeing one another through God's eyes of mercy and delight.

2. Shared Leadership

There are no kings or CEOs here. Leadership is shared, rotating, and accountable. We recognize that power tends to corrupt—and so we distribute it, soften it, and constantly question it.

We practice **functional leadership**—temporary roles grounded in service, not status. We lift up the wisdom of the margins, the voices that have too often been silenced.

3. Contemplative Rhythm

Like Francis and Clare, we anchor our lives in prayer, silence, and sacred attentiveness. We seek not to escape the world, but to engage it from a place of inner stillness and Spirit-led clarity.

Contemplation is our root system. From it, justice flows. From it, joy blossoms.

4. Prophetic Witness

We stand against empire, white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and all forms of domination. Our way of life is not neutral. It sides with the poor, the queer, the disabled, the earth.

Our activism is not an add-on. It is an extension of our spirituality.

5. Mutual Care

We care for one another's bodies, minds, and spirits—not because we are obligated, but because we are family. Mutual aid, not charity. Accountability, not shame. Boundaries, not abandonment.

In the OFC, we carry each other with tenderness. No one is disposable.



Chapter 3: Theological Vision of Non-Hierarchy

Jesus Didn't Start a Religion—He Started a Movement

When Francis stripped naked in the public square to renounce his father's wealth, he wasn't just rejecting capitalism. He was rejecting hierarchy. And when Clare broke away from her aristocratic lineage to found a community of sisters who owned nothing, she wasn't just choosing poverty—she was choosing relational equality.

The Order of Franciscan Clareans is grounded in a radical theological claim: **God does not relate to us through domination, but through love.**

The Myth of Divine Hierarchy

Too often, God has been imagined as a male king at the top of a celestial chain of command. This image props up patriarchy, clericalism, and empire. But the God revealed in Jesus is not a tyrant. Jesus does not demand tribute—he washes feet.

God is not above us in power. God is *with us* in solidarity. Incarnation, after all, is not about God lording over us—it is about God dwelling among us.

Franciscan Theology of Kinship

St. Francis called everything his sibling: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, even Sister Death. This wasn't poetic fluff—it was theology. It was a rejection of hierarchy and dominion. In this worldview, no one and nothing is "less than." Every creature is a fellow member of the divine household.

That's why our community life is non-hierarchical. Not because we hate structure, but because we love *relationality*. Structure should support flourishing, not suppress it.

Queer and Feminist Theology Confirm This

Queer theology reminds us that God breaks binaries and disrupts norms. Feminist theology reminds us that God is not male and does not bless patriarchy. Both remind us: if our community structures don't reflect God's justice, they're not from God.

In the OFC, we embrace **fluidity, shared power, and consensus-based discernment** as theological practices. They are not just how we govern—they are how we live out the gospel.



Chapter 4: A Circle, Not a Ladder

OFC's Non-Hierarchical Model

If the Church has too often looked like a corporate boardroom or a military chain of command, the OFC seeks to look like a kitchen table. No thrones, no ranks, no top-down control. Just a circle—open, inclusive, and grounded in mutual respect.

We do not believe God calls us to power over one another. We believe God calls us to power with and power within.

The Circle as Sacred Geometry

In many indigenous and mystical traditions, the circle is a symbol of equality, eternity, and wholeness. There is no "head" of a circle. All points are equidistant from the center.

For us, that center is **the Spirit of Christ**—the crucified and risen One who emptied himself, who welcomed the stranger, who resisted empire, and who calls us to do the same.

Horizontal Leadership

Rather than authority flowing from the top down, it flows outward through relationship. Every member is both learner and teacher, both minister and recipient. Titles, if used, are functional and fluid—not fixed identities.

In practice, this means:

- Decisions are made in **consensus circles**.
- Leadership rotates and is always accountable.
- No one person speaks for the whole.
- The community as a whole is entrusted with its direction.

Checks and Balances Built on Trust

While hierarchy uses control to maintain order, we use **relationship**. This doesn't mean chaos or lack of structure—it means *intentional design rooted in love*.

Conflict is addressed not by silencing or punishing, but by entering into honest dialogue and restorative processes (see Chapter 12). Responsibility is not concentrated—it is shared. That's the hard, beautiful work of life in a circle.



Chapter 5: Roles Without Ranks

Ministries of Service, Not Positions of Power

In the OFC, leadership is never about climbing a ladder. It is about washing feet. Just as Jesus took the lowest place, we model our leadership on humility, collaboration, and care.

We honor *gifts*, not *titles*. We recognize *callings*, not *control*. Everyone has a role to play, but no one's role makes them more "important" than another.

Rotating Roles

Leadership roles are **rotating**, **voluntary**, and **revocable by consensus**. They are held for a season, not a lifetime.

Examples of rotating roles include:

- **Circle Facilitator** – Helps guide meetings and ensure inclusive participation.
- **Communications Steward** – Keeps the community informed and connected.
- **Justice & Advocacy Anchor** – Keeps our prophetic edge alive and engaged.
- **Spiritual Rhythm Guide** – Helps design and host prayer and reflection practices.
- **Mutual Care Coordinator** – Checks in with members and encourages wellness support.

Each role is supported by the circle, and no one leads alone.

Servant Leadership

The term “servant leadership” isn’t just poetic for us—it’s a practical ethic. Leaders are **called to listen more than they speak**, to elevate marginalized voices, and to take initiative only with communal consent.

Leadership is not an identity—it’s an act of love. And when that love has done its work, the role is passed on.

Recognizing Gifts, Not Gatekeeping Them

The Church has long withheld spiritual authority from those deemed unworthy—especially queer people, trans people, women, disabled people, and the poor. We reject this gatekeeping entirely.

In the OFC, we do not ask if someone is “qualified.” We ask: *What gifts do you bring? What joy lights you up? How can we support you in living that calling out loud?*



Chapter 6: Consensus as Sacred Practice

Discerning Together in the Spirit of Love

We do not vote. We do not campaign. We do not force a majority to silence a minority. We practice **consensus**, not because it is easy—but because it is sacred.

Consensus is not just a method. It is a way of being. It reflects our theology: that every person carries a spark of the divine, that wisdom emerges in relationship, and that unity cannot be rushed or coerced. In the OFC, **consensus is spiritual discernment in community**.

Why Consensus?

Voting is efficient—but efficiency is not our goal. Relationship is.

Consensus takes time, patience, and vulnerability. It asks us to slow down, to listen deeply, and to consider not just what is “good for me,” but what serves the flourishing of all.

Consensus respects the wisdom of the margins. It recognizes that the Spirit often speaks through the least expected voice. And it resists the logic of domination and division.

How Consensus Works

Consensus doesn't mean everyone agrees on everything. It means we discern a path forward that everyone can live with—one that respects every voice, holds space for difference, and centers the well-being of the whole.

Our process usually unfolds in these steps:

1. Prayerful Preparation

We begin in silence or prayer, grounding ourselves in love and humility.

2. Sharing and Listening

People share their perspectives. Others listen—not to respond, but to understand.

3. Clarifying and Reflecting

Questions are asked. Needs and concerns are named. The goal is clarity, not persuasion.

4. Testing for Unity

A proposed path forward is offered. The facilitator checks for:

- *Agreement* (thumbs up),
- *Willingness to go along* (thumb sideways), or
- *Block* (thumbs down, with strong reason).

5. Revising or Pausing

If a block is offered, we pause. We ask: What is the Spirit trying to tell us? How can we revise this in love?

6. Celebrating the Decision

When unity is found, we mark the moment—sometimes with prayer, song, or blessing. It is holy.

When a Block Is Sacred

Blocking is not a veto or a weapon. It is a sacred trust. A block says: “I believe this would violate our shared values or harm the community.”

A block must come with discernment and deep care—not ego, fear, or stubbornness. In the OFC, blocking is rare—but it is respected. A block means we revisit, rework, or wait. We trust the Spirit is still speaking.

When Consensus Can't Be Reached

Sometimes, consensus is not possible in the moment. In these cases, we:

- Return to prayer.

- Name where we're stuck with honesty and love.
- Consider tabling the decision for another time.
- Use a fallback process (like supermajority) **only if explicitly agreed upon beforehand.**

But more often than not, when we stay rooted in relationship and guided by love, consensus emerges.

Chapter 7: Daily, Weekly, Monthly Practices

Living the Rhythm of Sacred Community

Community is not built by big events or dramatic gestures. It is woven slowly, gently, in the rhythms of ordinary time. In the OFC, we honor the sacred in the everyday, and we root our life together in simple, consistent practices that connect us to God, each other, and the world.

We do not all live in one physical location, but we live in **spiritual proximity**—bound together by shared rhythm, mutual care, and contemplative action.

Daily Practices

These are personal yet communal. Even when we are physically apart, we know others in the OFC are doing the same.

- **Morning Centering:** A moment of silence, breath, and intention-setting. Some members pray the Daily Office, others light a candle or walk barefoot on the earth.
- **Gratitude Pause:** A mid-day practice of noticing beauty, naming blessings, or offering thanks.
- **Evening Examen:** A reflection on the day—Where did I see love? Where did I need grace? What am I called to release?

Optional Shared Prayer Texts:

- OFC Daily Psalms
- Franciscan Clarean Affirmations
- Herbal Blessings of the Day (integrated from OFC health traditions)

Weekly Rhythms

Each week offers a chance to reconnect and reground.

- **Community Check-In (virtual or in-person):**
Informal time for members to share how they're doing, ask for support, or simply be seen.
- **Sabbath Practice:**
A chosen day or part of a day set aside for rest, delight, and spiritual renewal. Some unplug from devices, others go into nature, some read and pray.
- **Shared Learning:**
Each week, one member may share a reflection, article, or resource for contemplation and discussion.
- **Acts of Justice:**
Each week, we commit to at least one action for liberation—writing letters, joining protests, supporting mutual aid, or speaking truth.

Monthly Rhythms

Every month is a pilgrimage—a chance to mark time together in a way that deepens our communal identity.

- **Full Moon Circles:**
On or near the full moon, we gather (virtually or in person) for prayer, ritual, storytelling, and shared discernment.
- **Justice & Earth Rituals:**
We incorporate seasonal rituals that honor creation, protest oppression, and bless our communities with hope and action.
- **Community Discernment Circle:**
A monthly consensus meeting where decisions, dreams, and direction are shared. Led by rotating facilitators.
- **Skill and Gift Sharing:**
Members offer workshops, herbal teachings, art, music, or mutual aid tutorials—gifts freely shared for communal empowerment.

Optional Seasonal and Liturgical Practices

While we are not bound to a traditional liturgical calendar, we honor the seasons through a Franciscan Clarean lens.

- **Advent as Resistance**
- **Lent as Liberation**
- **Easter as New Creation**
- **Pentecost as Queer Fire**
- **Feast Days of Francis and Clare**
- **Transgender Day of Remembrance as Sacred Vigil**
- **Earth Day, May Day, and Indigenous Holy Days**

We are free to observe, adapt, or co-create rituals as the Spirit leads.

The rhythm is flexible but intentional. You are not expected to do everything—but you are invited to **participate faithfully in your own way**, knowing that your presence, your prayer, and your participation matter deeply.

Chapter 8: Gathering Together

Sacred Space Is Where We Show Up

Though the Order of Franciscan Clareans is a dispersed community, we are deeply connected. We gather not out of obligation, but out of love. We show up for each other, for the movement of the Spirit, and for the sacred work of becoming community together.

We believe **presence is a sacrament**—whether in-person or online. The Spirit moves wherever we make room.

Types of Gatherings

1. Virtual Gatherings (Zoom, Phone, Messaging)

Most of our day-to-day connection happens online. These are not placeholders for “real” community—they *are* real community.

Common virtual formats:

- **Weekly check-ins**
- **Monthly consensus circles**
- **Full moon rituals**

- **Text-based mutual care groups**
- **Online retreats and workshops**

We bless the digital as holy ground. Christ appears in the chat box and the breakout room.

2. In-Person Gatherings

When possible, we gather physically to hug, share meals, sing, walk, and rest together.

In-person possibilities:

- **Seasonal retreats** (open to all companions and postulants)
- **Local gatherings** in regions with clusters of members
- **Pilgrimages** to sacred sites, protest marches, or creation-based locations

We honor the body and the land through our presence. Even one in-person encounter can anchor a season of virtual connection.



Chapter Meetings

Each month, we hold a **Chapter Meeting**—a practice borrowed from monastic tradition, updated for our time.

In our Chapter Meetings, we:

- Reflect on the past month's rhythms
- Discern the path ahead
- Listen for the Spirit's guidance
- Make decisions through consensus
- Hold space for celebration and lament

Anyone can propose agenda items. Facilitation rotates. Participation is open, and mutual respect is expected.



Celebrating Holy Days and Shared Rituals

We mark time through **ritual**, not routine.

- **Feast of St. Francis (Oct 4):**

Celebrated with public witness, creation blessings, and acts of solidarity with the poor.

- **Feast of St. Clare (Aug 11):**
Honored with silence, candlelight, feminist theology, and celebrations of divine intimacy.
- **Transgender Day of Visibility (Mar 31) and Transgender Day of Remembrance (Nov 20):**
Held with reverence, protest, and healing liturgies.
- **Earth-based holidays** like Solstices and Equinoxes:
Celebrated with outdoor rituals, herbal blessings, and ecological activism.

Every gathering—no matter how small—is a chance to embody our deepest commitments.

Radical Hospitality

Whenever we gather, we extend **radical hospitality**—especially to newcomers, to those struggling, and to the voices often silenced elsewhere.

We remember: Jesus welcomed outcasts, and Francis embraced lepers. So we strive to **welcome without exception**. We set aside the need to impress. We bring our full selves—messy, holy, healing.

Wherever two or more of us are gathered—in a living room, on a Zoom call, under a tree—we are the OFC. And we believe: *that is enough*.

Chapter 9: Rituals of Belonging

We Don't Join an Organization—We Enter a Sacred Story

In the Order of Franciscan Clareans, belonging is not about paperwork, pledges, or performance. It's about relationship. It's about saying “yes” to a sacred path—a path of simplicity, justice, and radical love—and being received with open arms into a community that walks it with you.

Our rituals of belonging are not about earning acceptance. They are about **recognizing what is already true**: that we are kin, companions, and co-creators of a new world.

🌀 Stages of Belonging

We honor different stages of relationship with the community. These stages are flexible, non-linear, and always held with love.

1. Seeker

You are curious, drawn to the vision, and exploring if this path is for you. You may read, attend gatherings, or join conversations without any formal commitment.

There is no pressure to move forward. You are already welcome.

2. Postulant

You feel called to deeper participation and begin a time of spiritual formation. As a postulant, you:

- Are paired with a companion or guide
- Engage in study, prayer, and discernment
- Begin practicing the rhythms of OFC life
- Reflect regularly with your guide and/or circle

This stage typically lasts 6–12 months, but is flexible.

3. Companion

You make a formal commitment to walk the OFC path. This is a public “yes” to living the Franciscan Clarean way.

As a companion, you:

- Participate in shared practices and consensus life
- May hold rotating roles or serve as a guide for others
- Continue your own spiritual and communal formation

Profession of companionship is marked by ritual, prayer, and celebration.

4. Anchor or Elder (optional)

Some companions may, over time, take on roles of spiritual anchoring, deep listening, and care for the community’s well-being.

These are **not leadership ranks**, but roles of service and discernment, received only with communal affirmation.

Rituals of Welcome and Commitment

Welcome of a Postulant

A simple gathering (virtual or in-person) where the community prays, blesses, and affirms the seeker's desire to explore the OFC way. A candle may be lit, words of encouragement spoken, and a small token (like a handmade item, blessing oil, or herbal sachet) given.

Profession as a Companion

A sacred ritual that may include:

- Sharing one's spiritual journey
- Affirmation of core values
- Anointing or blessing
- Communal prayer and song
- A vow or declaration in one's own words

This is a celebration of grace—not a reward for performance.

Seasonal Renewal of Commitment

Each year, companions may choose to renew their commitments together in a ritual of reflection and recommitment. This reminds us that belonging is an ongoing “yes.”

Symbols of Belonging

These are always optional and should reflect the spirit, not the letter, of the OFC path.

- **Cords or bands** representing community and nonviolence
- **Herbs or natural elements** (lavender, rosemary, soil, water)
- **Handmade items** from fellow members
- **Digital badges or written blessings** for those in remote locations

Whatever the form, these symbols are signs of grace—not tests of worth.

Mutual Commitment

Belonging in the OFC is mutual. The community commits to walking with you, just as you commit to walking with us. We vow:

- To hold space for your growth

- To honor your boundaries
- To speak truth in love
- To receive your gifts
- To walk beside you when life gets hard

You are not alone. You never were.

Chapter 10: A Theology of Conflict

When Love Gets Messy—and Stays

Conflict is not a failure. In healthy community, conflict is a sign of honesty, of engagement, of care. If no one ever disagrees, someone's voice is likely being silenced. At the OFC, we believe **conflict is holy ground**—a place where transformation becomes possible.

We do not fear conflict. We fear avoidance, bitterness, and domination masquerading as peace. That's why we embrace a theology of **truthful love**, where conflict is welcomed, witnessed, and transformed.

Conflict as a Call to Growth

In most religious spaces, conflict is either repressed (in the name of unity) or weaponized (in the name of purity). Both are harmful.

We believe:

- Conflict is inevitable in any authentic relationship.
- Conflict, when held well, leads to deeper trust and intimacy.
- The goal is not to win, but to understand.
- The point is not to control, but to connect.

As queer, trans, disabled, decolonial, and feminist practitioners, we know that naming harm, power, and pain is a spiritual practice—not a disruption of holiness, but its deepest expression.

Jesus in the Temple and Jesus at the Table

Jesus flipped tables—but he also washed feet.

There are moments for prophetic anger and righteous confrontation (Matthew 21). And there are moments for humble service and quiet conversation (John 13). Both are part of our tradition. Both are expressions of divine love.

We follow a Christ who neither enabled abusers nor abandoned the hurting. He stayed with the tension. He moved toward healing without ignoring harm.

Franciscan Roots of Peacemaking

Francis of Assisi called peacemakers the true children of God. But he did not mean appeasers.

- Francis stood up to corrupt bishops.
- Clare resisted patriarchal control of her rule.
- They practiced **nonviolence**, not **non-conflict**.

Peacemaking in the Franciscan Clarean tradition means:

- Speaking truth in love
- Refusing revenge
- Seeking reconciliation without domination
- Creating safe, sacred space for disagreement

Hurt Happens. Healing Can Too.

Even in the most loving communities, harm will occur. Words will wound. Intentions will misalign. Needs will be unmet. And that's not a sign that we are broken—it's a sign that we are human.

Our commitment is not to be conflict-free. Our commitment is to **walk through conflict with grace, courage, and accountability**.

We ask:

- What is this conflict trying to teach us?
- Where is love being asked to stretch?
- How can we honor both truth and tenderness?
- Who needs support to feel heard, held, and healed?

Conflict as Sacred Story

In the OFC, we believe that every conflict tells a story. It reveals wounds, values, power, and desire. We hold that story in community—not to assign blame, but to seek understanding and justice.

This is why we root our practices of communication and conflict transformation in the chapters that follow—so that we may live our theology, not just preach it.

Conflict doesn't have to break us. It can become the fire in which we are refined.



Chapter 11: Compassionate Communication

Speaking the Truth in Love Without Weaponizing Either

Words can heal—and words can harm. In the Order of Franciscan Clareans, we strive to make our communication a spiritual practice: one rooted in deep listening, honest expression, and reverence for the sacredness of each person.

This is not about being “nice” or passive. Compassionate communication is bold, clear, and transformative. It names truth without shame, and holds pain without blame. It is the language of justice **and** mercy.



The Ground Rules of Holy Conversation

We enter every conversation with the assumption that:

- Everyone is doing the best they can with what they know.
- Everyone's story deserves to be heard.
- No one holds the whole truth alone.
- Disagreement is not disrespect.

We speak not to control, but to connect. Not to defend, but to understand.



The Four Foundations of Compassionate Communication

(adapted from Nonviolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg)

1. Observation, Not Judgment

Say what you *see or hear*, not what you assume or diagnose.

Instead of “You’re always dismissive,” say:
“When I shared earlier, you looked at your phone and didn’t respond.”

2. Feeling, Not Blame

Name your emotions without making someone else responsible for them.

“I feel hurt and unseen” instead of “You made me feel worthless.”

3. Need, Not Demand

Speak from your deeper need, not from a place of control.

“I need to feel safe and heard in this space.”

4. Request, Not Ultimatum

Ask for what you want, with openness to negotiation.

“Would you be willing to check in with me before giving feedback?”

This takes practice. It is a muscle, not a switch.

Deep Listening as Sacred Presence

Listening is more than waiting your turn to speak. It is a **ministry of presence**.

We listen:

- Without interrupting
- Without planning a rebuttal
- With our whole heart

We ask clarifying questions. We reflect back what we’ve heard. We leave room for silence.

To be heard is to be healed. And often, listening is more powerful than any words we could say.

When Communication Harms

Not all speech is welcome in our space. Free speech does not mean harmful speech. We draw firm boundaries around:

- Hate speech
- Gaslighting
- Tone policing
- Spiritual bypassing
- Racism, transphobia, ableism, classism, and other oppressive language

When these occur, they must be named—not to shame, but to **protect the community** and begin repair.

Tools for Difficult Conversations

We equip our members with:

- **Brave Space Agreements** (see appendix)
- **Facilitated dialogues** with mutual care anchors
- “**Heart Circles**” for processing feelings communally
- **Cooling-off periods** when things become too heated to continue with care

We believe that conflict without compassion fractures community. But truth without clarity erodes trust.

Our communication must do both: **hold love and speak light.**

Chapter 12: Conflict Transformation and Accountability

From Breakdown to Breakthrough

Conflict is not the end of community. **How we respond to conflict determines whether our community breaks down or breaks open.** In the Order of Franciscan Clareans, we do not aim to erase tension—we seek to transform it.

Accountability is not punishment. It is love with roots. It is the commitment to growth, healing, and justice—together.

🌀 Transformation Over Transaction

We do not “cancel” people. We do not “move on” without repair. We do not force forgiveness.

Instead, we **enter into a process of transformation**:

- Honoring the harm done
- Naming what needs to change
- Holding space for growth and restitution
- Protecting the well-being of those impacted

This is slow, sacred work. It is the work of love that refuses to abandon.

🌻 The Circle of Repair

When harm occurs—whether interpersonal or communal—we initiate a **Circle of Repair**, facilitated by trained mutual care anchors.

The process includes:

1. Preparation and Consent

- Each party agrees to participate willingly.
- Safety and boundaries are named.
- A mutual care anchor is assigned to each person.

2. Storytelling and Impact

- Each party shares their experience, uninterrupted.
- Listeners reflect back what they heard.
- The goal is not agreement—it is clarity and recognition.

3. Needs and Requests

- What does each person need to feel whole?
- What restitution, change, or acknowledgment is required?

4. Accountability and Commitment

- The person who caused harm owns their impact without defensiveness.
- Clear steps are outlined for amends and future care.
- The community may assist in resourcing these steps.

5. Blessing and Closure (when possible)

- The circle may end with prayer, ritual, or a shared blessing.
- If closure is not possible, boundaries are respected and documented.

Accountability as Liberation

We believe that true accountability:

- Is **voluntary**, not coerced
- Is **communal**, not individualistic
- Leads to **freedom**, not shame
- Prioritizes the **needs of the harmed**, not the comfort of the powerful

The person being held accountable is not disposable. Nor are they the center. Accountability is an invitation—not a sentence.

Community Agreements and Safety

To uphold our values, we maintain **Community Agreements**, which include:

- Speaking with compassion and clarity
- Respecting boundaries and bodily autonomy
- Naming oppression when it occurs
- Protecting vulnerable members
- Practicing consent in all things

Violations of these agreements may lead to:

- Private conversation and invitation to change
- Temporary pause from participation
- Formal Circle of Repair
- Removal from the community **only** if transformation is refused and safety is threatened

These are not punishments. They are **protections of sacred space**.

Mutual Care Anchors

Certain companions in the OFC are trained and entrusted to serve as **Mutual Care Anchors**. Their role is:

- To support members in distress or conflict

- To facilitate repair circles
- To hold confidentiality and compassion
- To advocate for restorative justice, not retributive harm

No one is expected to navigate conflict alone.

Justice and Mercy Kiss

As Psalm 85:10 says:

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; justice and peace will kiss.”

That is the goal of our conflict transformation: not perfection, not resolution, but **a deeper wholeness born of courage, truth, and love.**

Chapter 13: Mutual Aid and Shared Resources

From Scarcity to Solidarity

In a world built on exploitation and hoarding, the Order of Franciscan Clareans proclaims a different truth: **there is enough when we share.** We reject the myth of scarcity and embrace the sacred practice of *mutual aid*—the direct, voluntary, and compassionate exchange of care and resources among equals.

This is not charity. Charity often reinforces hierarchy: the “giver” and the “receiver,” the saved and the dependent. Mutual aid says: **we all need each other**, and we all have something to give.

Rooted in Gospel Economics

When Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes, he didn’t create food out of thin air—he invited people to **open their baskets**, share what they had, and discover that it was already enough.

Francis of Assisi embraced poverty not as misery but as **freedom from greed, freedom for generosity, and solidarity with the poor.** Clare refused inheritance and control, choosing instead a community of shared sustenance and shared power.

The OFC follows this path of:

- Simplicity over accumulation

- Need over greed
- Collective care over individual survival

Mutual Aid in Practice

We embody mutual aid through both informal care and structured sharing:

Informal Mutual Aid:

- Sending meals, herbs, or gift cards to a member in crisis
- Covering another companion's internet bill or rent for a month
- Offering childcare, transportation, or listening presence

Structured Mutual Aid:

- **The OFC Mutual Aid Fund**
A shared fund (digital or physical) for distributing emergency support and resources.
Funded by optional monthly donations.
- **Skill Shares**
Members offer classes, tools, and time—herbal medicine, theology, art, grant writing, healing, tech support, etc.
- **Resource Networks**
A shared list of therapists, lawyers, healers, and justice-minded professionals vetted by the community.
- **Free Circulating Resources**
A communal stash of books, zines, ritual supplies, and liturgical tools passed from hand to hand.

No one is too poor to give, and no one is too rich to receive.

Principles of Franciscan Mutual Aid

1. No shame. No strings.

Receiving support is not failure—it's faithful community life.

2. **Give what brings you joy, not what burdens you.**
We do not sacrifice ourselves into burnout. We give from abundance.
3. **Ask boldly. Receive gratefully.**
Asking for help is not selfish—it is sacred vulnerability.
4. **Everything is relational.**
We don't measure "worthiness." We respond to need with love.

Redistribution as Reparations

Our mutual aid is also **justice-oriented**. It includes:

- Prioritizing Black, Indigenous, disabled, trans, and poor members
- Redistributing wealth and privilege
- Naming how systems of inequality shape who gets access—and who doesn't

This is not "being nice." It's *undoing empire*. It's gospel economics in action.

Communal Wealth, Not Private Hoarding

We dream of building shared economies of:

- Land and housing co-ops
- Communal gardens and herbal apothecaries
- Retreat centers funded by the many for use by the all
- Eldercare and end-of-life support embedded in community

These dreams are not distant. They are beginning in our small, faithful acts of care today.

Chapter 14: Growing and Changing Together

Community Is a Living Thing

The Order of Franciscan Clareans is not a fixed institution. It is a growing, breathing, ever-evolving body. As companions change, as justice calls us forward, and as the Spirit continues to speak, **we commit to transformation**.

We do not cling to what has been. We stay rooted, but we allow new shoots to emerge. What began as a seedling may bloom into a wild, beautiful forest of resistance and belonging.

Communal Discernment, Ongoing Reformation

We believe that **reformation is not a historical event—it is a daily practice**. As a community, we engage in collective reflection and communal discernment to adapt, grow, and evolve.

Every companion has the right and responsibility to:

- Propose new rhythms, roles, or structures
- Challenge traditions that no longer serve love
- Participate in the revision and renewal of our common life

This Handbook Is a Living Document

This handbook is not a fossil—it is a field manual.

Every year, the OFC holds a **Community Re-Imagining Circle**, where we:

- Reflect on what is working and what needs healing
- Invite testimonies of lived experience
- Propose and test revisions
- Incorporate feedback with transparency and care

Anyone—whether a postulant or longtime companion—can initiate a conversation about change.

New chapters may be added. Outdated sections may be pruned. Rituals may shift. Language may evolve. The Spirit has not finished speaking.

Leadership as Compost

In the OFC, we recognize that **healthy leadership eventually dies and feeds new growth**.

We hold leadership roles lightly and rotate them regularly so that:

- Fresh voices can emerge
- Burnout can be avoided
- Innovation can flourish

If a model, ministry, or meeting rhythm no longer serves love—it is composted. Nothing is wasted. Everything can be transformed.

Welcoming New Voices, New Visions

Each new companion brings a new perspective, a new story, a new piece of the gospel we are becoming.

We commit to:

- Centering marginalized wisdom
- Practicing intergenerational learning
- Opening space for creative experimentation
- Letting the community evolve beyond its founders

Our goal is not preservation. Our goal is **liberation**.

Anchored in Spirit, Open to Change

We are not afraid to change, because we are **anchored in deeper values**:

- Love
- Justice
- Simplicity
- Mutual care
- Freedom

These values are our compass. Everything else is flexible.

As we grow, we stay humble. We stay listening. We stay *becoming*.

Chapter 15: Our Witness to the World

Living the Gospel Out Loud

The Order of Franciscan Clareans is not a private club. It is a **public witness**. We are not here to hide away from the world's pain—we are here to show another way is possible.

To be Franciscan Clarean is to live your faith not only in prayer and ritual, but in protest, in healing, in creation care, in mutual aid, and in everyday acts of holy defiance.

We are contemplatives in action, mystics in the streets, prophets with dirty feet.

Public Justice as Spiritual Practice

Our community's commitments flow into the public square. We show up for:

- Queer and trans liberation
- Racial and economic justice
- Disability rights and radical accessibility
- Climate justice and Earth-centered living
- Migrant and refugee protection
- Anti-imperial and anti-fascist resistance

We speak when silence would protect the powerful. We act when inaction would cost lives. We love when hatred is politically convenient.

Embodied Solidarity

We do not speak *for* others. We **stand with** them. We do not pity. We **partner**. We do not offer charity. We build **shared power**.

Examples of our embodied witness:

- Participating in direct actions and protests
- Organizing mutual aid and housing support
- Writing letters, petitions, and op-eds
- Hosting vigils, rituals, and public prayers for justice
- Offering sanctuary and accompaniment

Digital Witness

As a dispersed and often virtual community, we also recognize the sacredness of online presence.

We engage in:

- Digital organizing and spiritual activism
- Public theological writing and resource sharing
- Creative media (memes, podcasts, videos, graphics)
- Storytelling and online accompaniment

Our witness is local and global, embodied and digital.

Faith That Risks Something

We do not believe in a “safe” gospel. The gospel of empire is safe—for the rich, the white, the cis, the straight, the powerful.

But the gospel of Jesus? It gets people crucified. And resurrected.

We are not naïve. We know the cost of this witness:

- Misunderstanding from family
- Targeting by the state
- Fatigue from constant struggle
- Loneliness in systems that won’t change overnight

And yet we say yes. Because **this is what love looks like in public.**

A Franciscan Clarean Benediction to the World

We are the ones who wash feet and march in protest.

We are the ones who pray with herbs and speak with fire.

We are the ones who choose simplicity in a world of excess.

We are the ones who plant gardens and dismantle prisons.

We are the ones who dare to call all creatures kin.

We are the ones who love without apology.

We are the ones who believe:

Another world is not only possible—she is already here.

Closing Blessing for Community Life

A Prayer for the Journey We Share

 *To all who walk this path of sacred interdependence—*

May your hands be open, not clenched—ready to receive, to hold, and to bless.

May your heart be spacious—enough to carry joy and grief, justice and mercy.

May your voice be bold—speaking truth with tenderness, and tenderness with courage.

May your feet be rooted—planted in soil and Spirit, ready to move when love calls.

 May you know: You are not alone.
You do not have to be perfect.
You are a vital thread in the tapestry of this community.
Your becoming is welcome here.

 May this handbook not be a cage, but a compass.
May its words guide—not bind.
May its rhythms nourish—not exhaust.
May it serve the work of love—and only love.

 And when the world grows dark,
may you remember the light that lives in the circle—
a light that no empire can extinguish,
a fire kindled by saints and sinners, prophets and poets,
a flame now passed to you.

Blessed are the community builders, the peacekeepers, the justice dreamers, for theirs is the realm of God—already breaking in, already rising up, already burning bright.

Go forth with joy.
Live boldly.
Love deeply.
And may the circle always hold.

— *Amen and Ashé*

About the Author

Sister Abigail Hester, OFC, is a queer, transgender Christian nun, theologian, healer, and founder of the **Order of Franciscan Clareans**—a new monastic expression of radical inclusion, simplicity, and justice. Rooted in the spiritual legacies of Saint Francis and Saint Clare of Assisi, Sister Abigail is a passionate advocate for LGBTQIA+ liberation, communal healing, and the creation of contemplative communities beyond the walls of empire.

She writes, teaches, and ministers at the intersections of **queer theology, liberation spirituality, holistic health, and decolonial practice**. Her many works—including sermons, commentaries, devotionals, and theological manifestos—call the Church to become what it was always meant to be: a sanctuary of belonging, a movement for the oppressed, and a living body of sacred resistance.

Sister Abigail lives, writes, and plants justice seeds from her digital monastery at

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