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The brothers and sisters are to praise the Lord, the king of heaven and earth, with all his creatures and to give him thanks.
(Tor Rule,10)

Editorial

Because God loves us, the brothers and sisters should love each other, for the Lord says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you"(TOR Rule 7: 23)

The current issue of *propositum* calls our attention to Franciscan Fraternity. Authors look from different angles on how we can live Franciscan fraternity today in a world where the global peace is disturbed in so many ways. Francis' vision of Fraternity was a challenge for him as it remains for us in our own time.

Here we have six articles dealing with different aspects of Franciscan Fraternity. Fr. Michael J. Higgins, TOR, explores St. Francis' understanding of two of the most important areas of Christian Theological discussion throughout the centuries: Who is God? and What is the proper human response to God? Sr. Rossana, OSF, pinpoints that Fraternity is a gift from God, where the absolute divine initiative stands out in an available heart, a heart that is ready and open. Sr. Daria Koottiyaniyil, FCC, offers an article dealing with Francis' all embracing vision of Fraternity. The Blessed Francis saw the goodness of God reflected not only in his soul, but in all creation. According to Sr. Mary Elizabeth Imler, OSF, Franciscan life is a communion based not only on structure or functioning but also on relationships. Joan Geiger, SFO, Shares her experience of Fraternity at the local, regional, national and international levels from a secular Franciscan perspective. Fr. Andreas Muller, OFM, in his article "Franciscan Fraternity: A Challenge" highlights the need of a revolutionary turning point in society and in the church as at the time of St. Francis, to establish Franciscan Fraternity today.

My sincere thanks to all the contributors.

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Relationship with God as the Basis for Fraternity

Fr. Michael J. Higgins, TOR

Introduction

This short reflection explores St. Francis' understanding of two of the most important areas of Christian theological discussion throughout the centuries:

Who is God?

What is the proper human response to God?

It is important to keep in mind that Francis was not a theologian - he left no systematic presentation of the pressing theological questions of his day nor did he consciously develop a theological paradigm or model of theological inquiry. He did not try to construct a theological system in order to explain divinity. All this falls short of the Divine reality who broke into Francis' life as a personal and concerned participant with dynamic power and clarity.

For Francis, God was the immanent Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier who loved him (and all people) and who wished to be actively involved in his life. He always wrote and talked out of a profoundly personal and mystical relationship with a God of love. This can be seen especially his Praises of God in which Francis used the familial second personal singular form of the verbs and the tu form of "you" in his Latin: "Tu es sanctus Dominus Deus solus, qui facis mirabilia" - "You are the holy Lord God Who does wonderful things" (PrsG 1). The distinction is lost in the English translation, but is significant in that Francis prayed as a child would speak to his or her mother or father - like Jesus would have prayed. It is clear that he was not interested in the God of the philosophers or theologians but in the God who touched his life - the God of Revelation and of the Word that was manifest to humanity throughout all of history, most especially in Jesus Christ. This was the God that Francis experienced - the God who loved him and was interested in his life, the God who invited him into personal relationship and who challenged him to truly love his brothers and sisters.

Who is God?

In recent years there has been a lot of discussion about the appropriateness of using the title "Father" for God. This is especially highlighted by the feminine critique and the movement towards a more inclusive vocabulary in theological discussion and spirituality. However, it is important to take historical figures as they are and within the total life context in which they were formed and grew. Saint Francis was a 13th century Italian man from a small hill town in the Umbrian valley. At that time, the culture placed a great deal of emphasis on the family. The family unit helped shape one's self perception, one's place in society, and assured mutual support and aid in light of the harsh conditions of life. When Francis broke from his father, Pietro, and put himself under the protection of the Church, he separated himself from the source of what his society considered to be essential for life, security and happiness. The many times that

Francis wrote about relationship and identity demonstrate that the desire for familial connectedness never left him. After leaving his earthly family, starkly highlighted in the scene before the bishop of Assisi, the Saint attached himself to God. The All Good, Most High, God became his father, Jesus became his brother, and all of creation was seen as part of his new extended family.

Francis uncovered and experienced a further dimension of the goodness of God that can best be expressed in terms of paternity. He experienced God as his father, the father of his followers, and not as some distant and uncaring being. It was an intimate and deeply personal experience that helped reorient the whole of his life. In his writings, the Saint refers to God as Father some eighty-nine times! The paternity of God was experienced, or at least claimed, by the Saint at the beginning of his conversion experience during the dramatic scene before the bishop of Assisi. At that time Francis stripped himself, returned all his earthly belongings to his father, and stated publicly, "now I can say without reservation, 'Our Father who art in heaven,' since I have placed all my treasure and all my hope in him" (LMj II:4). Later on his spiritual journey he would tell his followers what Jesus had told his disciples: "do not call anyone on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven" (ER XXII: 34).

The name "father" highlighted the special intimacy that Francis believed that God wished to have with all people. As he explained in the Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, those who do penance - those who are doing penance through a love of God, a love of neighbor, the reception of the Eucharist, a hatred of sin, and lives which show forth worthy fruits of penance - are blessed,

...because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them and God will make Its home and dwelling among them, and they are children of the heavenly Father Whose works they do, and they are spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1LtF 5-7)

Many times Francis expanded his personal call to God with the addition of the terms "Holy Father," "my Father," and "Most Holy Father."

Shortly after the verbal approval given to Francis and his early followers to live and to preach penance, he told his followers that when they pray they should simply say the Our Father and then praise Christ. Later, after the fraternity had adopted the Roman breviary as normative for the friars, the Saint prescribed the Creed and a set number of Our Fathers to be said at different times for those friars who could not read (cf. ER III:9-10). He also invited all the faithful to join together in praying this prayer:

Let us love God, therefore, and adore Him with a pure heart and a pure mind, because He Who seeks this above all things has said: True adorers adore the Father in Spirit and in truth... And day and night let us direct praises and prayers to Him, saying: Our Father who art in heaven... for we should pray always and not become weary. (2LtF 19-21)

Francis, deeply moved by the marvelous love of God, and filled with an overwhelming love, summed up his gratitude in this way:

Oh, how glorious and holy and great to have a Father in heaven! Oh, how holy, consoling, beautiful, and wonderful it is to have such a Spouse. Oh, how holy and how loving, gratifying, humbling, peace-giving, sweet, worthy of love, and above all things desirable it is to have such a Brother and Son: our Lord Jesus Christ. (2LtF 55-56)

Francis' experience of God as Father had a profound influence on the way he referred to God, in his own self understanding as a child of God, and his relationship with his brothers and sisters and all of creation. This is seen most clearly, of course, in the Canticum of the Creatures.

For Francis God's Divine love was best expressed in the awe inspiring gift of the Incarnation. He often underlines the love of God which is manifested in the mortification or self-emptying of Christ in this event. He states that praise should be given to God the One who has created all things "spiritual and corporal and, having made us in [the Divine] image placed us in paradise"(ER XXIII: 1). When men and women fell into sin, this loving God "brought about [Christ's] birth as true God and true man" (ER XIII: 3) for our redemption. The Son then "humbles Himself as when he came from the royal throne into the Virgin's womb" (Adm I:16) in the sacred bread and wine of the Eucharist. This continuing act of Christ's self-emptying had such a profound impact on Francis that he often could think of nothing else. The fact that Christ took the flesh of humanity and human frailty from the Virgin Mary and became man - and that He continues to do so every time the Eucharist is celebrated - surprised and delighted the Saint from Assisi.

Due to Francis' intense devotion to Jesus, Franciscan spirituality has often been described as profoundly christocentric, that is, it is based on the person and example of Jesus Christ more than on anything else. Francis encountered in Jesus the fullest expression of the length that God was and is willing to go to reach out to all women and men and enter into relationship with them. The key moments of this Divine in-breaking were highlighted for Francis in the Incarnation, the Passion, and the Eucharist - or, as some are wont to say, in the Crib, the Cross and the Chalice. "There is nothing that shows more graphically the humility, the poverty, which the Divine Word accepted in becoming incarnate, than in the helplessness of infancy, the defenselessness of the crucifixion and the silence of the Eucharist."¹

However, once again, these elements of the saving power of God were first experienced by Francis in a very personal way. He saw in Christ as a model of faithful love and adherence to the will of God, the paradigm par excellence of how poverty and obedience are expressions of a loving relationship with Divine love. God had touched his life in such a profound way that he yearned to live as Christ had lived and thus to become a worthy son of "so noble a Father." The recreation of the first Christmas scene at Greccio, the intense love for the Eucharist, and the mystical events of a lonely retreat on La Verna and the reception of the stigmata all bear eloquent witness to Francis' tremendous devotion to Christ. However, the ordinary events of the Saint's life give us an even more profound insight into his

spirituality.

Several stories from the early biographies make clear that what separates Francis from those inspired by a stunning sunset is that Francis found beauty and significance in the less aesthetically pleasing aspects of the physical world. A worm signified Christ because in Psalm 22, David, ancestor and prefiguration of Christ, proclaimed, "I am a worm and no man." In a leper, Francis discovered the image of Christ in the Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah. When Francis saw two sticks crossed on the ground, they led him to meditate on Christ and his cross.²

Francis' gift, that is so well expressed in this passage, is that he was able to see differently as a result of his experience of Christ and the love of God. When one is in mindful relationship with God, the Mystery of all that is, the whole creation is seen as being imbued with the very presence of divinity. Everything is seen as participating in the fraternity of creation as brother and sister.

What is the proper human response to God?

The example and challenge that Francis left his followers points out very clearly that an intimate relationship with God is a necessity for full human life. This highlights the insight that many mystics and saints have expressed so often: men and women find their proper identity only in a mutual and ongoing rapport or friendship with the Creator of all. This conviction of Francis would lead him to assert in Admonition XX that a person is who he or she is before God and nothing else. Relationship with the Divine subsequently impels men and women to enter into loving and caring relationships with others. Love and relationship with God and an openness to enter into relationship with others are two nonnegotiable elements for fraternal life and form the foundation for any kind of Franciscan fraternity.

The basic premise is that God has created women and men for relationship: relationship with each other and with the fullness of the Godhead, the Trinity. God is thus the Divine Creator and men and women are creatures. It is precisely in this creature-ness that Francis saw the grandeur and dignity of humanity. The experience of Francis gave birth to the insight that sanctity and holiness comes from a full embrace of the human condition in all its dimensions. Franciscan spirituality is not an escape from the world or from one's own humanity as much as it is an active involvement and participation in these areas.

Francis' answer to the question about the proper human response to God is summed up extremely well in the first verse of the Earlier Exhortation. It is simply a call to all people to "love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole mind, with their whole strength and to love their neighbors as themselves" (1LtF 1). This phrase repeats the teaching of Christ about the two greatest commandments (Mt. 12:20) and highlights that the essential foundation of Christian spirituality is based on a relationship and love - the essential elements of fraternity.

ENDNOTES

1. Eric Doyle, "St. Francis of Assisi and the Christocentric Character of Franciscan Life and Doctrine," in Kenan Osborne, ed., *Franciscan Christology* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, 1980) 10.
2. William R. Cook. *Francis of Assisi* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989) 54-55.

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"The Lord Gave me brothers..." (Test 14)

Sr. Rossana Villablanca, OSF

Contrary to what happens with other personages of Christianity, Francis of Assisi was not a great writer. His message was his whole life, a prophetic call to anchor the Church in the life of the Gospel.

The Testament is one of the writings (which certainly was not written by him, but rather by his contemporaries) in which we can discover better his spiritual depth and richness. In the Testament we find the revision of life of Francis, and, at the same time, we discover how he sought to be faithful to the values of the Gospel, according to a life project, rooted in the values of the Kingdom, which

he invites us to live. "And after that the Lord gave me friars, nobody showed me what I had to do, but the Lord himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel (Test 14). Without any doubt, in this paragraph we can find the witness of the origin of the Fraternity as a gift from God, where the absolute divine initiative stands out, in an available heart, a heart that is ready and open. Every brother, every sister is a gift from God and this is why we must take care, respect them for what they are: they are a gift from God.

Francis lived every second, every minute of his life, seeking the will of God, his only guide the Lord himself, as he repeatedly said on many occasions: "Nobody taught me what I had to do, except the Most High..." And thus there is no doubt about the fact that the Fraternity has its origin in God and God himself directs it. This is why every brother, every sister is sacred. This is how Francis felt and lived it, and as he himself repeated innumerable times: "I seek nothing more than to do the Will of Our Lord Jesus Christ: that is, to live according to the Holy Gospel". Francis did not desire a new Religious Order, as it has been indicated in the writings of the great biographers of the Saint, but rather nothing more than to follow Christ, as the Gospel revealed Him.

In reflecting on number 14 of the Testament, perhaps some do not find a great originality because the great saints of his time lived according to the Gospel, but certainly what was original in him is in the fact that he wants to live all this in the Church. We know well which was the social historical context, which were the social structures in which Francis lived: all that constituted a great challenge. When Francis says: "The Lord gave me brothers...", he indicates that he passes from the personal experience to the fraternal experience. He did not look for followers or disciples, rather brothers given to him by God.

This passage, is, without doubt, a self-witness of how Francis lived and of how his followers lived. In this is subjacent the origin of the Fraternity, which came to light with the presence of the brothers. The Lord alone could show him the path to be followed that is, to live according to the Holy Gospel.

Certainly, the brothers are a gift from God, as we have already said at the beginning of this article, because Francis did not look for them, but were given to him and this is the fact which marks the whole nature of his spirituality in the Fraternity, and also marked an enormous difference in regard to monastic religious life of his time. In fact, it was a question of living the Gospel according to the apostolic form.

The whole life experience of Francis is there, in the Fraternity, a gratuitous gift from God; and the life according to the Gospel presupposes realizing the life project according to the spirit of the Beatitudes, which he himself lived fully.

This life project according to the spirit of the Beatitudes (Mt 5), includes a whole Rule of life. Francis knew how to discover the essential elements in this discourse, and he feels challenged up to the point that he wants nothing else than to live according to the Gospel. In the Beatitudes he found the light, what is essential for every believer, and he set out towards the attainment of this life project, feeling poor before God. In this he recognizes the primacy of God, that God is the Creator. In that, he recognizes the minority spirit before God, his littleness, his humility, his reality.

Just as he experienced God's mercy, in the same way, we also should be merciful with the brothers and sisters. This lived experience impelled him to be the bearer of peace, a denouncer of any type of injustice, since it is this which destroys fraternal life. From the spirit of the Beatitudes springs the dynamics which gives life to the Fraternity and makes of it a perfect place for human and spiritual growth for all the brothers. Communion and the exchange of gifts of the Spirit and gratuitousness with God for the gift of the brother are the center of the Fraternity and the source of the interpersonal relationships. In looking at the Fraternity in this new way he constituted a new form of evangelical life and gave a new vision of the world. That is, his gaze and that of his followers became more human, they experienced that persons, things, are creatures of God, that they are a great gift worthy of friendship, of fraternity and from this vision springs the authentic common union (communion). **Francis showed that an authentic Fraternity is the place from which springs and from where the new life in Christ arises.**

The personal lived experience of Francis of Assisi is constituted in the lived experience of a group, thus giving origin to the Franciscan Fraternity, having the Gospel in the center of any form of life. We are called to live a spirituality centered in Christ (Christ-centred), Christ in the Gospel, Christ in the Eucharist and Christ in all our brothers and sisters, and this continues to be also, without doubt, a challenge for us.

The openness of Francis to the Spirit and his fidelity to the Gospel as a project of a life which can be realized, is, no doubt, one of the great challenges for us today. We live in a globalized and individualistic world; Father Giacomo Bini, OFM (ex General Minister) also pointed out this in his letter to the Order in the year 2000. "The Franciscan message of the universal Fraternity is an invitation to respect, to "reconciliation of what is diverse", to the search for communion, and it presents itself with all its force, as a word of hope and as an evangelical value in this concrete moment in which the destructive power of individualism is clearly evident", because we live in a world which advances very rapidly and in which fraternal life always becomes more difficult. It challenges us today and it will challenge us tomorrow, we who wish and who seek in fraternal life a place where to live, centered on the values of the Kingdom, in which one only seeks to be a sign of the new life in Christ, having as a basis the commandment of love: **"Love one another as I have loved you", living the fraternal spirit and in humility, this is the minority spirit, and then we will be an authentic Franciscan Fraternity.**

Today our Church has multiple and diverse needs, but one of the more urgent and important ones and of which we have to render an account as followers of Francis, is that of offering to the world an authentic response to its thirst for spirituality, to its thirst for transcendence. And then updating the word of Francis, we see once again our Fraternities, asking ourselves if they are spaces or places of encounter in which we give and receive love, where the commandment of love is in the center in our fraternal relationships, and if we can say that our fraternities are a sign of the new life in Christ. And we can ask ourselves another question: Are our Fraternities evangelical and apostolic? Do our Fraternities continue to be attentive to the Word of God? Do we allow ourselves to be challenged by Francis and by the spirit which moved his followers? Are our Fraternities still significant for persons and for the communities of Christians which are around us?

Today the Crucifix of San Damiano continues to challenge us. Together with Francis let us ask ourselves: “**Lord, what do you want me to do?**” and thus we can interpret the words of Christ: “Go and repair my Church”.

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Franciscan Fraternity Open to All

Sister Daria Koottiyaniyil, FCC

The world today is very much disturbed by lack of harmony and integrity in life. We have realized that our creative power is used more for destruction than for construction. In a world of technology and materialistic socialization, where human relationships are threatened by impersonal organizations and structures, it is more crucial than ever that the flame of love grow strongly. “By this will all men know that you are my followers: by the love you bear to one another”(Jn 13:35). In this context the fraternity which Francis embraced during the middle ages is much valid today. It goes beyond all national boundaries. He sought a new way of life in a new sensitivity to his fellow beings which led him to kiss the wounds of a leper, to identify himself with beggars, to make friends with people from other religion, to unite the quarrelling civil and religious authorities of Assisi and to accept all creatures as ‘brothers and sisters’ who are born of the same creative love.

Francis’ fraternity open to all stands as a challenge to the ambitious, individualistic, impersonalistic and authoritarian society of his time. It is precisely in the context of poverty that Francis finds the problem of fraternity. He realized that he could be a brother both to the majores and to the minores only if he stepped down from the safe confines of his home to the ‘market place’. When Francis speaks of the deep mystery of brotherhood and unity he always points to Christ our brother who gave his life for his sheep and prayed to the Father for us. His personal relationship with Jesus led him to keep solidarity with all created beings. Entirely absorbed in the love of God, the Blessed Francis saw the goodness of God reflected not only in his soul, but in every and any creature

Fraternity open to all human beings

In the writings of Francis the word brother (frater) is used more than any other. In fact it is used 242 times. The word “brothers” is constantly repeated in the two Rules and in the Testament, frequently with adjectives that are full of affection: my brothers, my blessed brothers, most beloved brothers. His care and tenderness were so intense that he loved like a “most loved mother” (2C 137). Pope Paul VI said: “The capacity to discover a brother in every man, whatever his origin, state, condition, or merits, is an exquisite and essential characteristic of the Gospel teaching”¹. A sense of equality pervades in his brotherhood. As far as possible, Francis rejected any hierarchy and clericalism and authoritarianism in his fraternity in order to preserve the sense of unity and equality among the brothers.

He even describes himself in his writings as “little brother Francis, your servant” (Test 41). In the letter to the Faithful he presents himself as “the servant of all,” who wishes “to serve all” (2LtF 2). Friars, Francis never calls servants but always brothers. Among brothers there can be no minors, for this would to the very identity of the fraternal group. But Francis describes himself as a servant in relation to God and to his brothers. In his humility he was able to see all are equal and consider himself as “a useless man and an unworthy creature of the Lord God” (LtOrd 3). Thomas of Celano presents an ideal portrait of the early fraternity:

There were chaste embraces, delightful affection, a holy kiss, sweet conversation, modest laughter, joyful looks, a clear eye, a supple spirit, a peaceable tongue, a mild answer, a single purpose.....So they were safe wherever they went. Disturbed by no fears, distracted by no cares, they awaited the next day without any worry....Often mocked, objects of insult, stripped naked, beaten, bound, jailed, and not defending themselves with anyone’s protection, they endured all of these abuses so bravely that from their mouths came only the sound of praise and thanksgiving. They never or hardly ever stopped praying and praising God (1C 38-41).

Francis considers every human being, even the lowest and the most marginal, as God’s own special remembrance, his ineffable gift, his beloved icon. In Francis view each creature is Gods’ personal handiwork. So each one has an obligation to respect each other. In his first rule, Francis says: “whoever comes to them, friend or foe. thief or robber should be received with kindness” (ER VII:14). Again he says: “The brothers should spiritually and attentively respect one another and honour one another without complaining” (ER VII:15).

He insists that his brothers should in a special way, follow the Lord Jesus in their life. They should do manual work, lead a life of poverty become one with the working class and the poorest sectors of society (cf. ER c.7; LR c.5). He teaches that it is a very powerful means to create strong and permanent relationships among people. Second Vatican Council says that it is through man’s labour that not only the fruits of our

activity, but also human dignity, brotherhood and freedom must increase on earth (cf. GS 3:39).

“Christian brothers” was the name Francis gave to the lepers. “My penance will be to eat with my Christian brothers and from the

same dish”(LP 22). Despite his natural loathing for them, “he went to the dwelling places of the lepers, and after he had given each leper some money, kissed their hand and their mouth. Thus he exchanged the bitter for the sweet” (2C 9). St. Francis’ contacts with the poor and the lepers humanized misery, gave back to the poor a sense of their human dignity. Francis created a fraternity of brothers open to the world of the poor.

Francis’ peaceful approach to people from other religions is admirable. It gives us a sign of relationship which is particularly relevant today and it shows how he wished to be a ‘brother’ to everyone. In the thirteenth year of his conversion (1219) Francis set out for Syria in order to preach to the Muslims. At that time great and severe battles were raging daily between the Christians and the Muslims. He tried to get the military and Cardinal Pelagius Gelvan, the leader of the crusading army, to declare an armistice and to accept an offer of peace from the Sultan. But the power politics of the Christian could not tolerate any set-back; total victory over the Muslims was the aim. The Muslim army attacked the Crusaders and killed 6000. It was only after this defeat the Cardinal allowed Francis to visit the Sultan but at his own risk. As Francis Beer observes: “At Damietta it is impossible to leave either camp without risking death and any Saracen who cuts off a Christian head receives a gold bezant”² Before Francis reached the Sultan, he was captured by the Sultan’s soldiers, was insulted and beaten. But he was not frightened. Though he was treated shamefully by many, he was nevertheless received very honourably by the Sultan. The way in which Francis approached the Sultan is tantamount to a break through: it is a prophetic sign of a new relationship (cf. 1C 57; LMj 9:7).

From the early sources we get the idea that Francis had a healthy attitude to all reality including women. Due to his radical conversion and customs of the time he kept a certain distance from women. But it did not prevent him from deepening his spiritual relationship with some women like Saint Clare and Jacoba de Settesoli (cf. ER c.23; LR c.11).

Fraternity open to all

In the first section of the Canticle St. Francis invites all creation to praise the creator, wherein he calls every creature brother or sister. The Canticle pinpoints creation’s unity as fraternal. 29th November 1979, Pope John Paul II declared St. Francis to be the Patron Saint of ecology. Because he offers to the world an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation. He desired to be a lesser brother and “subject and submissive to all creation, not only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well” (SaIV 16-17). In his Canticle Francis invites all creation to join him in a cosmic liturgy of praise and thanksgiving to God who created this marvelous array of beauty and splendor. Francis sees all creatures not only as objects of God’s creative power but also as his very brothers and sisters. The canticle shows his fraternity to all created things. His first Biographer Celano explains: “He used to call all creatures by the name of “brother” and “sister” and in a wonderful way, unknown to others, he could discern the secrets of the hearts of creatures like someone who has already passed into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (1C 81).

The environmental crisis of our own day constitutes an exceptional call to conversion. As, individuals, as institutes, as a people, we need a change of heart. A whole hearted and ever more profound turning to God. Today the Earth and its eco-systems are threatened with great disasters. When we look around, we drink, breathe smell and see pollution.

The environment is polluted and poisoned by social, economic, political, cultural and moral disasters. The selfishness of inhuman process of modernization makes us think that human beings have the absolute power to control nature, to bend it to our will, and even to destroy it and annihilate it, to satisfy the whims and fancies of human beings. In this time of ecological crisis, Francis’ vision of fraternity open to all creation is very much encouraged. Francis possessed an unusual feeling of solidarity with natural things, a sense of kinship that allowed him to use them while at the same time continuing to respect their integrity. For him cosmos is the creative blessing God entrusted to human beings. He saw himself as one love centre in a universal solidarity and he expressed this in the canticle. Francis believed that “all things are alive and have their own personality; they live in the same father’s house as humanity”³ In Leonardo Boff’s opinion “Francis’ mystic communion with nature did not consist in a mere passive, reverence for beauty and life, but in encountering persons in all creatures”⁴. This shows that Francis had a personal relationship to all created things, an intimate, friendly bond truly strong and unbreakable.

There are many examples we see in his life, showing his compassion and fraternal affection towards created things. “He gathered the worms in the road so that they would not be stepped on by the travelers, he provided the bees with honey and wine in the winter so that they would not perish from hunger and cold” (1C 80). “At the price of his own mantle, he rescues two little lambs that a shepherd is taking to be slaughtered.” (1C 77). “Another day he commands that a trembling, little rabbit that someone has given him be set free”, or “that some struggling little fish be returned to their element” (LMj 8:8).

Another example is the Wolf of Gubbio. As stated in the Little Flowers of St. Francis, in Gubbio there appeared a ferocious wolf and it had been terrorizing the people of Gubbio and they told Francis. But in Francis there is no fear of the wolf, just understanding and sympathy for it. He admonished the wolf yet tenderly called it “Brother wolf”, but he also admonished the people. The wolf was hungry and so it ate anything-including people. Francis struck a pact with both wolf and people-the people fed the wolf and the wolf stopped eating the people (cf. Lfl 21).

The same compassionate love he showed to inanimate things also. Because of his love and compassion, he walked with reverence over rocks (LP 5) .When the brothers go to the forest for wood, he asks them not to cut the trees down in such a way the trees may not have enough to sprout again. He is sad when the garden is ploughed for the planting of vegetables, and commands that one part be left untouched so that his sisters the flowers may go on growing freely (LP 51). He does not even want to put out the fire which is burning his habit: when a brother runs to free him from serious danger, he says: “brother do not harm brother fire” (LP 49). Francis approached nature and the environment with openness, love, kindness.

Francis never blamed anything for being itself. When the crickets interrupted his prayers he asked them to be quiet; they were and

when he had finished he told them to sing their own praises to God which they did. The birds, bees, fish, wolves all listened to Francis because they trusted him. Francis knew that we human beings, animals and nature, shared one thing in common-that we all are created and given life by God.

The challenge of being Franciscan is really the challenge of being in fraternity open to all. In the writings and the life of Francis we see the fact that Francis understood well what it meant to be living in Fraternity. He realized that he was called to be in relationship to everyone and everything. In his exhortation Francis writes: "We are brothers in Him" (Lfl 9), and "the Lord gave me brothers" (Test 14). Francis understood clearly that Fraternal relationship is not born of our virtue but of the gift from God. It is not that there is simply a brotherhood among all the friars, because of Jesus, as a human person, is a brother to each friar, they are brothers to one another. Francis was an open book, a living Gospel.

ENDNOTES

1. Pope Paul VI, L'Osservatore Romano (Italy: Albano 103,196 Aug.26-27,1963),1.
2. Francis De Beer, "St. Francis and Islam", Concilium 149(1981),14.
- 3 Sister Daria Koottiyaniel, Brother Fire, Sister Water: A Pilgrim Path to Solidarity (Kerala:Always Press, 2003), 68.
- 4 Leonardo Boff, Saint Francis: A model for human liberation (Britain: SCM Press, 1985), 34.

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Franciscan Fraternity: A Communion of Diversity

Sister Mary Elizabeth Imler, OSF

The 2005-2009 IFC-TOR Statement calls us "to integrate our spirituality, mission and fraternitas so as to more fully express the Trinitarian community of love." I share the fruit of my reflection, more specifically of my "Contemplation," as we stated in our goal III: "of the unity and harmony of the Trinity [that] sends us forth to more fully realize communion, inclusion and mutuality." I believe this challenges us to truly witness today the good news by more fully incarnating the core relationship in which we live out our TOR charism, i.e. Franciscan Fraternity. It may be important to frame this narrowly interpreted term, fraternity, but even more essential to claim the deeper significance of its meaning as our mission.

Franciscan life is a communion based not on structure or function but on relationship captured as fraternity. This is the good news we are called to preach with our very lives. We give prophetic witness of a loving community in a world of fragile peace where Jesus unites us around the earth table. Right relationship in the evangelical tradition is deeper than the religious language of community and broader than family ties. It offers a paradigm shift so needed in this new millennium where alienation and greed cause suffering to both the human species and nature. Jesus spoke a word of hope in his vision "that all may be one." What follows will explore this potentiality through a consideration of the development of Jesus' language found in John's gospel, the spirituality of Francis and lastly a Franciscan worldview response in an era of global consciousness to incarnate fully the "Body of Christ."

The Christian Era

If one follows the language Jesus uses in John's gospel, it shows the human characteristic that the relationship he has with his followers develops over time. First they are called by name (Jn 1:42ff), then "disciples" (Jn 13:35). In the last discourse referenced in our Rule and Life Chapter VII where we are called to "love one another" (Jn 15:12), Jesus stretches the relationship in human intimacy calling them "friends" (Jn 15:14) and even a step further.

The significance of being "called by name" is for someone to know the other. This implies a sense of the individual as a separate, unique being but personally being known and cared about. This naming from the beginning implies being in a relationship both honoring the sense of individual (particular) and personally interacting (caring).

Jesus then uses to the term "disciple." Clearly the relationship moves to include a sense of following, worthy of receiving instruction, capable of receiving the "good news." A disciple is one found to have the strength to carry out disciplines like handpicked employees entrusted with the company's secret recipe or such, even as they are told to spread the word, to make the "product" known. Add to this

the camaraderie of belonging to a group, believing in a common mission, committing to working toward some common good. At the time Jesus calls his followers “friends,” there is added to the relationship the dimension of caring for each other that goes beyond a loyalty of mere duty. This adds an acceptance of the work in a concern not only for the message but also the messenger. There is a genuine caring for the other, caring for each other. Belonging blossoms into a deeper relationship where there is a shift to caring as much about the whom as about the what.

But this isn't the end of the story! After His death and the resurrection, the language again shifts as the relationship changes once more. Jesus tells Mary Magdala to find his friends addressing them as siblings for a first time, “Go and tell my brothers that I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (Jn 20:17b). Jesus speaks in this post-resurrection moment of the ultimate relationship. It is not that which is held up in our culture: “friends” but rather what the salvific act frees us all to be in, with and through Jesus: “brothers/sisters”. This significant identification calls for the more of the gospel. We are called for our uniqueness, enlisted in a band held together by a common belief system of right living and fully free to love that which comes from such unity. But in addition we now also become fully responsible because we carry the family name. It is more than knowing the common good, carrying the common mission, sharing in the common life; it is a communion.

Consider my two nephews for example. Each is called by a name; their teachers ask them to follow, to accept messages of information and learning. They have friends of their own choosing with whom they share interests, play games, and simply enjoy each other's company and who know their feelings, weaknesses. But it is in being brother that adds the sibling dimension of relationship in whatever situation they are responsible for each other. Even at times when they might not even like each other, they are still brothers and cannot deny that relationship. They carry responsibility for each other's well being and safety; they are impelled to protect one another and the family name. What one does affects the whole family, its history and entrusted future. So it is when Jesus calls us brother/sister. It is closeness to him, but also a love that exceeds all other loves making us responsible for each other and the whole Body of Christ.

We have inherited this sibling relationship by the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus not by birthright but by adoption. We have received “a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Romans 8:15) Thus we can no longer just tolerate differences. The good news is that all have been adopted and at a very costly price. Every being of the human race is equally able to cry out “Our Father.” There is no privileged rank or race by rule of adoption in the Christian era. Only Jesus as the “firstborn” (Col 1:14) has the privilege of inheritance and rightful claim to the reign of God. All the rest of us merely adopted siblings having no rank order cannot be anything but grateful for whatever we receive and yet it is to fully be heir. It is “through his blood we gain our freedom” for it is “through Jesus that we should become adopted” (Eph 1: 5,7). The resurrection of Jesus propels us into the Christian era where all are adopted brothers/sisters – equally. “There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave or free, male and female, but all are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28) It is this Christ now who unconditionally says to every person, “I am your brother.” Therefore it is only through Jesus Christ we are in relationship as sisters and brothers to each other becoming a part of the fraternity in Jesus Christ, brother to all.

Second Millennium of the Christian Era

I am suggesting that Francis (and hence Franciscans) very deliberately uses “fraternity” not as a gender exclusion speaking merely “of the brothers” for example in “De Vita Fraternalis” (Ch VII), but rather as this ultimate relationship formed by Jesus' redemptive action. Just as Jesus' addresses Peter as “brother” and likewise would have called Magdala “sister”, Francis models this with his followers, naming them as such, Brother Leo and Sister Clare. The fraternity male and female alike are embraced, “many people, well-born and lowly, cleric and lay...renewed in both sexes”(1C37). Francis always refers to his followers as the brothers and to the collective relationship as the fraternity even early on, which included his sister, Clare. Interestingly, we do not find the term fraternity in the writings of Clare. She, too, refers to her comrades as sisters though never speaking of a sorority or a sisterhood for I believe this would eliminate the very heart and seal of the relationship, our fraternal brother Jesus.

I believe Francis discovers this powerful connection (1LtF 9,13). Because of the passion and resurrection of Christ we are made brother and sister to each other. So much so that Francis extends this even further claiming the fraternal relationship through our brother Jesus is to include all of God's creatures, e.g. Sister Water and Brother Fire. Francis' heart widens to embrace not only humanity but also all of creation in the fraternity. Francis found that Jesus won the fullness of life for even the sun and the worm with preferential privileges going to the least/weak. In his Canticle of the Creatures Francis calls us to live in right relationship with all creation. We are called to be intimately in right relationship with each other, all creatures and the environment. In, with and through Christ Jesus, Francis calls us to create a new type of solidarity as sister/brother. This widened fraternity itself offers a form of witness to the Trinity in both sign and service.¹

Francis recovers the circle of relationships won by Jesus casting down the mighty and raising up the lowly by embracing minores and majores in a respectful mutuality drawing all into the fraternity. But this was not of his own doing, for it was the “Lord who gave me brothers” (Test 14). Francis modeled the value of mutuality. Not all were reduced to a common denominator or disrespectful uniformity but respected for their particularity. Every person, every creature has a value to contribute no matter how great or how small. Francis preached to the birds but he also learned from them of his responsibility of caring. From the earthworm, he learned humility, the doves taught him vulnerability, the bees, community.

Because there is an intrinsic goodness of all creation, this must push us beyond simple recycling into reverential and responsible living. We wouldn't glibly dump garbage on a Sister or destroy a Brother's lungs as we are doing with the rainforests nor would we complain before the beauty of a simple grain of sand just in its very integrity of being! Genesis' creation story through a Franciscan worldview takes on a truer meaning of dominion framed by fraternity. Francis knew domination but preferred the caring domiciliary life of a good and faithful Lord. Francis tried to live his poetic vision of creation becoming responsible for that which God loved. Francis invites us to relate to a spirituality of mutuality where each brings a unique reflection of God so that each is a valued and valuable “chip off the old block!” For Francis the human species and all creation are not a simple hierarchy but interconnected by bonds of love where there is

sacramental integrity, a mutual exchange of giving and receiving, even to the extent of offering one's life for the other.

Third Millennium of the Christian Era

At the turn of yet another new millennium when we are beginning to understand what it means to relate environmentally in the fraternity, I believe once again relationship of the fraternity challenges us further. We Franciscans desire a Trinitarian community of love, gathering in fraternitas (Article 20)² different and I believe more than that of a monastic or apostolic bond of community. We are graced with the awareness of a bigger worldview involving the natural world and diverse humanity in the Body of Christ as suggested earlier. But we must see an added dimension calling us to transcend not only space boundaries but also time. We are called to reconcile all creation (Article 12) in a mutually beneficial relationship first in our time but also responsible and reflective out towards a "seventh generation"³. The depth of Francis heralded as Patron⁴ of Ecology⁵ unfolds for his followers in a time conscious communion of adopted sisters and brothers where our eyes see a responsibility for now and our shared future of our children's children. The fraternity gathers around the earth's table just as around the Eucharistic table in a manifest spirit of invitation and inclusivity, honoring mutuality where no longer are there sides to defend dividing the spoils of war but only brothers and sisters to know, understand, and love in the differences. There are parts of the fraternity on every side of any conflict. Differences are not eliminated but respectfully managed politically, economically and ecologically searching together with Jesus for peace (cf Lk 19:41-44).

Take, for example, the concern for our Religious Institutes. Today this extends to our common TOR life creating Federations and support of the International Franciscan Conference. And more, can we see value in the greater Franciscan family (Article 3), the human family, a global family? We are becoming more inclusive and respectful of the gift of diversity, but are we more aware of the global responsibility to ensure a wholly, healthy, holy future. Hence we write of the need to "promote communion among all Franciscans, different Christian denominations, people of all faiths and all creation." (2005-2009 IFC-TOR Recommendation G) Our love may begin with those closest, those with whom we share in common our living, our values, our worldview, but we are called to embrace the "other" with whom we may not share things in common and may even compete for possessions or ignorantly call the enemy **6**. Surely this is the good news bringing forth the reign of God now!

Our life cannot merely be a life centered on following Jesus, but also must be a life making Christ alive in the world. As followers of Francis and Clare, we are all called to love, celebrate and give thanks claiming mutuality wherein "with confidence [we can] make known [our] needs to one another so that each can find and offer to the other that which is necessary." (Article 23) Referring to Francis' admonition to "preach the gospel at all times and only when necessary use words" (ER XVII: 3), we must move beyond speaking of our love for one another into "manifesting [our] love in deeds." (Article 12) It is no longer enough to be peace lovers, but we must be deliberate peacemakers⁷ for the sake of the family name (cf Lk 21: 17). We are called to fully participate in the purpose of bringing about peace and reconciliation (cf Col 1:20). Benedict XVI notes in his encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, that Christianity cannot limit its attention only on the individual and his/her salvation; Christianity's transforming reality includes the wider society. And I add, the whole cosmos.

Conclusion

There is a modern parable of two adopted siblings who through a series of circumstances end up winning a drawing where the top prize is a fifteen-minute shopping spree. The day to claim the prize arrives. After much coaching from dressing in the right shoes for better maneuverability to studying the location of the most expensive items, the two take a shopping cart and begin. Amidst the shouting from the observers, the siblings simply meander through the store collecting only a few items. The total rings up to a small pittance much to the chagrin of the jeering crowd. When asked afterwards why the two seemed to fail to push the total, they responded, "You don't understand; our father owns the store!"

Dare to imagine this attitude for the inhabitants of our sister, Mother Earth as followers of the patron saint of ecology. How can we not learn to live in relationship with all as sacraments? Consider the grace of a global table where we are called like Jesus to make room for all (inclusion) and as Francis saw not to just be takers but also to bring to the table (mutuality). Add the newer dimension now that calls us to be respectful of this time and more (reconciled communion). We must be conscious of the whole history daring to tend the future of the table as much as the needs of those gathered. We must learn not to be exclusive and not mere consumers⁸, but also to be conscious of the implications for the common storehouse for the future we share. Surely we sense our inclusivity welcomes all who live by the name Christian both the Magdala and the Judas of our lived experience. We are widening the space of our tents to welcome all the descendents of Abraham: Jews, Muslims and Christians learning from them as Francis was converted from his encounter with the sultan. May the Gospel continue to stretch our hearts to embrace all creation so that we can consciously perceive the mysteries and longed for fulfillment of the cosmos in relation to eternity.

Let us pursue with our whole being (Prologue, Article 29) this life of Franciscan fraternity through the love of our elder brother, Jesus. May our hearts grow wider, deeper, lighter so as to inwardly embrace our true identity and outwardly extend among our friends and families and beyond, in our workplaces and communities, in our nation and internationally in this present moment building upon the foundation of the past and a commitment toward a shared future. May we be like Jesus, not afraid nor ashamed to call them "brother/[sister]" (Heb 2:11). May we be converted by the prophetic words in John's gospel and the poetry of Francis to incarnate the goodness of our Franciscan spirituality for this time so that Jesus' life, death and resurrection won't be for naught. And let us be bold in our TOR lives giving hope to future generations with a vision based on equality, respectful mutuality and reconciled communion. The reign of God, true fraternity, sisters and brothers contributing and creating a harmony of love is in our reach; let Jesus come and change us into the good news, true sisters/brothers of Christ Jesus.

ENDNOTES

1. Vita Consecrata 41-71.

2. References to particular Articles are noted by number and taken from TOR Rule and Life, 1997.
3. From the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy, "In every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."
4. Pope John Paul II proclaimed St Francis the Patron of Ecology in 1979 citing him for being "an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation." Francis, in addressing creatures as sister/brother, saw them as equals, not as subjects to be dominated. He saw himself as a part of the ecosystem.
5. Ecology is the study of the rules governing the relationships in the household of creation. Ilia Delio discusses this in greater depth than possible here in her article "Living in the Ecological Christ" in *Vita Evangelica: Essays in Honor of Margaret Carney, O.S.F. Franciscan Studies* 64, 2006.
6. TOR Rule and Life Chapter VII expresses the realism of the human heart to open wide a welcome to all. In only two brief articles that honor life both when things run according to the vision of our Creator (Article 23) and, when in our human condition, we fail to love and live as we ought (Article 24).
7. Father Bryan Massingale's "Healing a Divided World," offers some concrete insights for our contemporary situation beyond the scope of this reflection. It is available through CNS Documentary Service in August 16, 2007 Origins, Volume 37, Number 11 p 162-168.
8. Francis admonishes us in 2C87 not to have more than we need lest we can be guilty of stealing from the poor.

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Fraternity – A Secular Franciscan Perspective

Joan Geiger, SFO

The Secular Franciscan Order is distinguished from other lay associations in the Church in that its primary purpose is the striving to live the Gospel life...As a lay order, the Secular Franciscan Order stresses fraternity life, a quest for personal holiness and personal and fraternity apostolates as way of living for social justice and peace among all people.¹

As followers of St. Francis, Secular Franciscans are called to fraternity – that is to be a community of brothers and sisters to Jesus with Francis. It is fraternity that:

- provides us an intimate spiritual family within the larger spiritual family of the Church where we can grow in holiness;
- gives us opportunities to love others with all their goodness as well as their flaws and irritating ways as well as they us;
- keeps us from being self-centered;
- gives us strength where we are weak;
- creates a place where apostolic work is fostered.²

In his youth, Francis reveled in his relationships with his friends. He enjoyed companionship and was known for his carefree ways. He was more likely to do things with others than by himself. Francis' life changed dramatically after Jesus called him to "Build My Church." In solitude, he literally responded by stripping himself of earthly possessions and embracing "Lady Poverty." It wasn't long after leaving family and friends that others felt attracted to Francis. They had witnessed his humble and detached way of life and the example and intensity of his prayer and wanted to follow Jesus as he did. Soon this "human magnet" had a following of companions – Bernard of Quintavalle, Peter Catanii, Leo, Giles, Elias and Rufino – to name just a few. Thus, the beginnings of Franciscan community and fraternity.

The Secular Franciscan Order is divided into fraternities of various levels – local, regional, national, and international. Each one has its own moral personality in the Church. These various fraternities are coordinated and united according to the norms of this rule and of the constitution (Rule 20).

Individually, each Fraternity is a cell of the Church and the Order. St. Michael's Fraternity, Queens County, New York, is a local Fraternity. This is one of thirty-nine fraternities that make up the Tau Cross Region Although St. Michael's Fraternity has been in existence for over a hundred years (established in 1892), it became part of the Tau Cross Region just ten years ago (1997) when the fraternities of the counties of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Nassau and Suffolk (Long Island and three Boroughs of New York City) were merged. The Tau Cross Region is the youngest of the Regions in the United States (National). There are thirty-one Regional Fraternities in the United States.

St. Michael's Fraternity meets on the 4th Sunday of each month at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Ozone Park, NY. It has 30 professed members, however, many of these members are elderly and homebound. About 10-12 members regularly attend the monthly meetings. It also has 4 candidates in formation and 1 inquirer. The Minister, who is elected by the professed members for a three-year term, conducts the meeting. The meeting begins and ends with a prayer from the SFO Ritual, and a hymn. At each Fraternity meeting there is a reading from scripture, ongoing formation (relevant to Church/Liturgical season, Franciscan calendar, etc.), a sharing/reflection based on the readings, a talk by the Spiritual Assistant (a Franciscan Capuchin), prayers of petition/ intentions, and updates on future Secular Franciscan events. The meeting concludes with a social when refreshments and conversation are enjoyed. The Formation Director guides the candidates in their study of Franciscan spirituality. St. Michael's Fraternity makes a monthly donation to the Franciscan Family Apostolate. This stipend supports a needy family in India. The Fraternity receives regular correspondence from this family informing them of the good works their contribution has done. The Fraternity also sends a monetary gift to a local parish in need. Food drives to replenish Church pantries and the collection of baby clothing and items to support an unwed mothers' shelter, are its main apostolates. In addition, the members are actively involved in ministries in the parishes where they live. A bi-monthly fraternity newsletter is mailed to all members.

The Tau Cross Regional Council (Minister, Vice Minister, Secretary, Treasurer, Formation Director, Councilor and Spiritual Assistant) also meets monthly for several hours on a Saturday morning. The Regional Minister conducts the meeting. The meeting begins and ends with prayers from the SFO Ritual. A Council member reads a prepared Scriptural passage and insights are shared by the members present. A brief period of time is spent on on-going formation, reviewing and reflecting on the Constitution/Rule/Statutes and their relevance and application to the region and local fraternities. The minutes of the previous month's meeting are reviewed for approval and each member of the Council gives a report. Often these are in the form of an action item(s) that required follow-up from the previous month's meeting. New business is discussed. Between meetings and quite regularly, the Regional Executive Council members communicate through email on issues that need immediate attention or can be put on the agenda for discussion at the next month's meeting. Among other responsibilities, the Regional Executive Council plans a gathering for the members of all fraternities in the fall, a Chapter in the spring and an annual retreat. The Tau Cross Region supports regional, national and international fraternities through fair-share and the giving of those who have more to those who have less. The Region has also made donations to disaster relief funds namely, to the victims of the Katrina Hurricane and Peru earthquake. An example of the fraternities working together is the H2O Project. Each Lent, members are asked to abstain from soda and contribute that money to help create clean water for youth and families in need. The Tau Cross Region has also joined with other fraternities by a perpetual Novena Prayer for Darfur – for the end of violence, oppression and suffering and to bring about healing, forgiveness, compassion and relief. Each year at the fall gathering, two awards - Family and a Peace – are presented to members who have been nominated and selected based on their service to the Church and community. In addition, The Tau Cross Region publishes a newsletter quarterly. The Regional Council Ministers meet with the National Council annually to report on the status of their Regions.

This past July, an event hosted by the National Fraternity (NAFRA), was held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was the 17th Quinquennial Congress (held every five years) and provided a wonderful opportunity to meet and share with other Secular Franciscans across the United States. Wearing the Tau Cross not only gave identity and made one instantly recognizable; it also established an immediate fraternal kinship with others on the journey. Over 500 Secular Franciscans – men, women and the youth – gathered to pray, listen, reflect, share, socialize and celebrate cultural diversity. It enabled Secular Franciscans to learn from each other and observe the rich heritage of the various cultures that were presented (theme of the Congress). A member of NAFRA is an International Councilor.

In this article, I have attempted to share Fraternity at the local, regional, national and international levels from a Secular Franciscan perspective. The Franciscan charism of fraternity energizes and sustains our commitment. In summary I will conclude with Article 30 of the SFO Constitution as it capsulizes life in fraternity.

The brothers and sisters are co-responsible for the life of the fraternity to which they belong and for the Secular Franciscan Order as the organic union of all fraternities throughout the world. The sense of co-responsibility of each member requires personal presence, witness, prayer, and active collaboration in accordance with each one's situation and possible obligations for the animation of the fraternity.

ENDNOTES

1. To Live As Francis Lived, Foley, Leonard OFM, Weigel, Jovian OFM, Normile, Patti SFO, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000, p. 8.
- 2 Ibid. p. 177.

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Franciscan Fraternity - A Challenge

Fr. Andreas Müller, OFM

Today we find ourselves at a turning point of times whose dimensions are not yet fully recognized and interpreted. We know the enormous gap between the rich and the poor with all its consequences: on one side hunger, misery and premature death, and on the other one a luxury beyond description. We deplore the unjust distribution of goods and of power on our Mother Earth, the way in which fundamental human rights such as participation, self-determination and dignity are ignored, and then we are surprised when terrorism and wars turn out to be useless instruments for the solution of the problem. We experience apocalyptic signs of destruction of the environment, but we do not want to change our life-style. Political visions which would point to a positive change are lacking. Change has to do with conversion, and to quote saying of Michael Gorbatschow, conversion is only possible if we have spirituality. What we therefore need are prophetic guides, leaders with a vision, personalities who can show us a way out of this situation.

A Revolutionary turning point in Society and in the Church

Francis of Assisi was such a prophetic guide. At a time when the feudal society, divided in nobles and common people, and its structure of high and low was regarded as being by "divine order", he brought a radically new into play. If God descended and united himself to the smallest, so also in the family of humanity no difference should exist among persons because we are all sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus of Nazareth, in whom God himself became our brother. With this idea of all of us being brothers and sisters to another, Francis brought an outright revolutionary vision, quite different from the accepted ideas of Church and society of his time. There must be no lords and serfs, no distinction of status.

It is the threefold vision of human rights and duties: "liberty, equality, fraternity." Living as brothers and sisters, this is what Francis had in his mind. No doubt, he is one of the Spiritual Fathers of this vision of humanity from a Christian source. Consequently Francis refused for himself and for his community everything hierarchical. What was common in other religious communities of his time, - eg the Benedictines who had an abbot, - should not be in the Franciscan movement. Francis himself wanted to be the servant of all and certainly not only on paper, - not patriarchal but fraternal. "No brother should occupy a position of power or of dominion, especially among the brothers themselves" (Rnb 5, 9). "No one should be called "prior", but all should call themselves "minor brothers" and one should wash the feet of the other" (Rnb 6,3).

This is truly the vision of a communication that is free from domination, it is one of genuine fraternity and authentic equality. He also makes it clear what he means by that: "All should willingly and mutually serve and obey one another through the love of the Spirit". Concretely, this means to listen to the needs of the other one, to the life of the community, to the call of God here and now. Here, too, Francis follows in the footsteps of Jesus with determination: no longer the power games among adults, no longer the fighting for the best places and positions, no more fear of losing importance and of being a failure. In fact, God is present, and every man and woman is created in His image and likeness and because of this he/she possesses a God-given unique dignity which cannot be replaced by anything else. "All the brothers should make an effort to imitate the humility and the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rnb 9,1).

Naturally in the life of a community rules and agreements are necessary, but these should be as communicative and simple as possible. Therefore, no dominating airs, no property-conscious attitudes, be it spiritual or material property, no patronizing, this is the vision of Francis of Assisi, the vision of a fraternal and united humanity, in the common awareness of having been created. Francis himself had to experience how difficult it was to realize this idea: already during his life time the struggles for power began in his own Order; and also in that community there emerged forms of leadership and ways of relating with one another that were hardly different from the usual power structures of that time. And so his vision remains a sign of hope and a challenging task especially also for our time. With his concept of following Jesus, with his vision of universal friendship between the Creator and the creature and between creature and creature, he meant to show that it is possible to create a different world, free from violence and filled with peace.

Is the Franciscan vision of fraternal life on this earth perhaps so fascinating because we do not consider it sufficiently realistic and at the same time we desire it urgently? Francis, God's Fool of Assisi, had perceived with lucidity that a life based on possession destroys solidarity and love for the neighbour, and places in danger the ideal of being all creatures. This is the reason why he did not want to possess anything, this is why he wanted to see everything fraternally shared and distributed, this is why he criticized power and nourished suspicion regarding those who held it in the Church and in the State. In our time of great social mobility and of coldness or indifference, the Franciscan vision of God and of humanity is more actual than ever before.

Franciscan Witness Today

The secularized world today is essentially distinguished from the world in which Francis lived, but the basic attitudes which he experienced, have, precisely in our own time, an extraordinary significance. This is why it is so important for the brothers and the sisters of the Franciscan Movement to live and to experience such realities, as for example freedom and joy, trust in every single person, the sense of fraternity toward every person and every creature, the awareness of the love of God which includes the whole world, the capacity to recognize the face of Christ in the poor, the idea of being responsible for the universal mission. Some of these aspects I want to explain here in more detail.

a) The Challenge of being Brothers and Sisters

Today for the Franciscans – men and women – the conviction of encountering the other one truly as if she or he was a sister or a brother forms part of the following of Jesus. We should familiarize ourselves with the reality and the conditions of life which shape our faith and the idea of self of those with whom we live and whom we serve. We should understand their fears and their bitterness, the humiliations which they suffer and their marginalization just like Francis who, at that time, joined the marginalized of the society of Assisi. Up to this point, we will contribute to heal the divisions between sexes. It is important to recall that, as Francis and Clare did, we also, in the Franciscan Family in the world, can witness that it is possible for men and women to share life in a creative way and be stronger together than communities of men and of women who follow each one their own way.

b) Fraternal Communion with the Poor

“Father of the Poor and poor himself, Francis, becoming poor with the poor could not bear, without pain, to see someone poorer than himself, not out of pride, but because of an intimate compassion” (1 C 76).

Francis did not dedicate himself only to solidarity with the poor, but he wanted to live for and with the poor, he wanted to be equal to them and their brother. Consequently, the profound desire of following the footsteps of Jesus led him to the poor and to the lepers. He wanted to live with them in fraternal communion. Therefore, he demanded that each one of his brothers should spend the time of the Novitiate among the lepers for whom that meant an authentic liberation through which they recovered their dignity and self esteem. From the beginning, therefore, the Franciscan Movement did not want to be a charitable association for the poor which would only satisfy the needs of the moment. Its aim is the liberation of the poor, it believes in the poor and binds itself to the poor in solidarity.

c) Franciscan solidarity with the Poor

Therefore, in the course of history Franciscans have never shrunk from projects and initiatives that really helped the poor. Thus, for example, the “Wheat Mountains” were formed, that is the “Banks of cereals”, in order to face the times of scarcity. Fraternities were formed which sustained the poor and visited the sick. Yes, the Franciscans were the first ones who organized the “People’s Banks”, which greatly spread all over Italy, Spain, France and in Germany, and thanks to those the poorest class of the population could get loans of money. And naturally the numerous Feminine communities of the Third Order were especially sensitive to the needs of the time, having done an authentic pioneer work in the sector of the schools, of caring for the sick, of solidarity with women and with the underprivileged. Today, we must continue to develop these forms, living them in a prophetic way as an alternative to the forms of economy, in which the only criteria are gain and profit and persons become replaceable as it pleases the economy.

d) Francis and Clare and the Ethics of Compassion

Francis and Clare in their rule inserted not only ethics of justice, but also an ethic of compassion. The capacity of both to consider life from the “point of view of a mother”, led them to stress not only the correct reciprocity and equal rights (justice), but also the reciprocal responsibility and the mutual assistance (compassion) (cf NbR 4; BR 10). This is why they gave great value to the relationships between the brothers and between the sisters. The Institutions and structures were important for them, but even more important were the mutual appreciation and attention (Cf NbR 5; BR 10). The Fraternity, as Francis understood it, does not depend on the good behaviour or on the failure of a brother or a sister (Cf. BR 11). For him, in community life, the so well loved Fraternity was more important than the mere correct behaviour according to the Rule (Cf. Erm 3, Lm 4). Besides, the Fraternity does not serve, in the first place, for the “well being” of the members of a community, but it is above all a vital sign of the liberating force of the Gospel in a world in which it is difficult to establish good relationships.

If today we reflect on the meaning of an “Ethics of compassion”, we must extend it beyond our community, including the beggars, the lepers, the needy and the marginalized groups of our time and also the women. Solidarity with the women the “living among them” (cf. NbR 9, 2; 16, 3), today presents a central question and we have to reflect what it means for the Franciscan Family that women, not because of free choice, but on the basis of repressive structures, in the Church and in society, have to be in the role of the “Minors”? As brothers and sisters we have the opportunity to encourage them and to indicate to them valid alternatives through the ethics of justice and of compassion.

e) The Canticle of Creatures

If today we speak about Fraternity, we should also speak of the ill-treated creation, of our brothers and of our sisters of Creation, which Francis sang and honoured so much, lovingly, in his Canticle of Creatures. This hymn to the beauty and to the liberating force of a creation wanted by God, is the confession of “a paradise-like man”; it frees man to be his true self, teaches him to recognize and to love nature and the environment as co-creatures, and therefore all persons, the animals, the stars and also the Earth. It is only with such an attitude that we will be able to change our life-style in such a way as not to exploit indiscriminately God’s Creation, but rather preserve and take care of it with love.

Today, the world needs this spirituality of creation if it wants to avoid catastrophic climate threats which endanger it. All experts hold that we can still avoid the worst, but only if we really reflect and live again in a way which is in conformity with the laws of nature. For this reason new technologies are not sufficient. We need a new attitude. Francis has given us the example and we, brothers and sisters of the Franciscan Family, have the task to show it and to transmit it to the world today.

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