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POVERTY
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POVERTY (Revised April 16, 2017)

Today we focus on the value of living *in the spirit of poverty*. We Third Order Franciscans are faced with disquietude living Franciscan evangelical poverty as we make use of the goods of this world to do works of mercy. The unease arises from a doubt. Are we living in such a way as to make it obvious that we are Franciscans for whom poverty is core to our spirituality? Interpretations of how to live poverty have been a conflictual aspect of Franciscan history from the beginning when there was a shift of the friars “from itinerancy to a more settled way of life, involving landownership, building projects, libraries, and study centers.”ⁱ Francis and Clare are exemplars for living evangelical poverty, but Third Order Franciscans do not find prescriptions for living poverty in our primitive rule, *The Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*. The *form of life* that is the prologue to our 1982 Rule is not about hating our bodies, or wearing a habit, or working with lepers, but rather about conversion.ⁱⁱ “It is about people choosing to respond in faith to the God revealed in Jesus.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our ongoing conversion transforms us to become poor like the poor Christ. Ordinarily poverty is chosen by Third Order Franciscans not for an ideal or ascetical purpose, but with a charitable purpose or social help in mind.^{iv} How are we contemporary Third Order Franciscans addressing the social needs around us to witness to a new world vision? In this presentation I propose to reflect on our spirit of poverty in three “fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself.”^v

Relationship with God

Our rich Franciscan legacy of relationship with God begins with St. Francis’ *Prayer Before the Crucifix*. The stance of Francis expressing his darkness and emptiness before God, “enlighten the darkness of my heart,” portrays his spirit of poverty. Without God’s initiative, we are dark, empty, and void of meaning. The spirit of poverty compels us to often pray “give us this day our daily bread.” Our trust that God hears our pleas changes us to be childlike; trust generates joyfulness because we know that we will be taken care of. Didn’t Jesus tell us not to worry about our life, what we will eat or wear? He said, “look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap... yet God feeds them. Are not you more important than they?”^{vi} Saint Francis modeled for us that the way “to experience the fullness of God was through a process of emptiness.”^{vii} Recognizing our littleness, we grow in love and gratitude for God, “who is the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good.”^{viii} Evangelical poverty prepares us to be receptive to the awesome showering of divine riches from God. ~~In this disposition, Pope Francis prayer in *Laudato Si* says,~~
~~“All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.”^{ix}~~

Relationship with our neighbor

Relationship with God intertwines with our relationships with our neighbor, and with creation. Let us imagine that we are setting out on a hike up a mountain, and we are assessing the supplies we would need for a few days to reach the panoramic peak. Looking over our camping gear, we eliminate heavy items that would impede our climb, and we lighten the load to a comfortable weight that will meet our needs. While judging the externals we carry, it is important to ponder our internal disposition. Heavy emotional weight would slow down the trek as much as external weight. Compare the preparatory work of a mountain climb with our daily striving to be good neighbors. Ask ourselves, what weighs me down?

Jesus Christ showed us the spirit of poverty we ought to have in our relationships with each other, and our neighbors; he knelt and washed his disciples feet.^x Servant leadership requires humbly respecting others, doing actions of service, but more so, recognizing that each person has a face of God, a truth to be revealed to us. As sons and daughters of God, we have a responsibility to be mindful of the human dignity of each person; to respect and protect *human dignity*, avoiding behavior and attitudes that leave others feeling they are objects. Our spirit of poverty will avoid having power over another, and attitudinally create in us a disposition of kneeling before the other with respect. We recognize that we are interdependent brothers and sisters on a mountain climb to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Often, aspirants to our Order are enthusiastic about leaving all behind, and they willingly clothe themselves plainly according to the congregation's customs, and live simply with us. Over the years the initial enthusiasm to live poorly can be dampened by an accumulation of things that weigh us down. A transfer to a new assignment provides a moment of reality: what is necessary to take to the next place? What can be given away? It is the same process as setting out on a mountain climb. What really do I need for the trip I am beginning? These decision-making moments require a trust in the community; a deep trust that what I need I can request from those with whom I live.

Just as personal choices are made for de-cluttering, so congregational leaders need to do an inventory to assess what congregational holdings are needed for the current ministries and care for the retired, and what needs to be divested. For the past eighteen months, I have been engaged in the task to downsize our libraries at our motherhouse. The grief of deciding to pass forward favorite books from the past was painful, and gave me guilt about how limited I am in living the spirit of poverty. I am learning to let go of unnecessary holdings that lightens us for our mountain climb. Hanging on to the past will weigh us down and impede our journey.

As I reflect upon the changes in religious life since my profession of vows in 1961, there are many changes that impact our lightness of heart. In the United States, the average age of women religious is increasing. There were 100 young women in formation in my congregation when I was in the novitiate 57 years ago. The Sisters' labor in health care institutions, colleges and schools provided stipends that more than covered the congregational expenses. Today, we have one Sister under temporary vows, and no one in the novitiate; our average age is 81. The congregation is dependent upon interest from investments and the generosity of our benefactors to cover the living expenses of the Sisters. There are weighty problems facing many congregations in North America to dispossess large buildings that are no longer necessary for a shrinking number of members, as well as selling pieces of real estate. While such American congregations embrace a new type of external poverty, there are other young congregations who have few assets. They are limited in their resources to respond to the social needs of the poor in their locales. How might we help each other?

The question before us is "How do we discern the charism of our congregations to do the works of mercy in the changing circumstances of our moment in history?" Dealing with our personal and communal challenges of living poorly cannot blind us to those around us. Pope Francis prayer, "*O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes,*"^{xi} *hearkens to the very reason why we Third Order persons exist: "to give witness by word and work to God's voice; ...to heal the wounded, to bind up those who are bruised, and to reclaim the erring."*^{xii}

There are two different ways we can examine our stance of caring for our neighbor: we can consider our direct "hands on" approach of service in our ministries, and/or we can review the strategies for systemic change to relieve the destitution and

suffering of the poor. An example of direct service to those non-Christians, particularly those of the Islamic faith who are demonized because of current wars in the Middle East, would be participating in dialogue, reassuring them of our concern. Developing humanizing relationships lessens their suffering from prejudicial judgments. An ongoing question for us in the face of global migration: “How are we Third Order members responding to displaced persons, to all refugees fleeing violence and natural disasters?”

Working for Systemic change is another response to poverty. Systemic change can be brought about by education, presenting a vision for improvement of social issues while identifying causes of the current suffering. We can promote systemic change by advocacy work—advocating for justice in all our governments’ welfare practices. Our spirit of poverty requires us to trust that our small advocacy efforts will develop like planted seeds into great fruit. An example of a wee bit of progress in systemic change is increased awareness and improved legal services for those victimized by human sexual trafficking.^{xiii} The efforts of women religious have contributed significantly in addressing this issue. We are far from eradicating this form of slavery, but our small efforts are pushing out this tide of evil.

Relationship with Mother Earth

Pope Francis has profoundly affected our consciousness living a spirit of poverty in relationship with the earth. He provided a moral vision in the encyclical, *Laudato Sí*, especially through his prayer:

“Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.”^{xiv}

Franciscan spirituality of reverence for creation has been at the essence of the Franciscan movement even before Francis’ companions sang the *Canticle of the Creatures*. Our belief that ongoing, evolving, continuous creation is a dwelling place of God^{xv} moves our lips to sing praise and thanksgiving. However, the global circumstances of harm to Mother Earth requires us to re-examine how we are living in appropriate relationship with God’s creation. Our sensitization to the environment can affect us with great sadness as we feel the physical ailments of Mother Earth suffering from desertification of the soil and the extinction of species.^{xvi} How do we address this sadness? Ongoing conversion requires us to assess ways that we refrain from overuse of earth’s resources, and ways that we can promote conservation efforts to sustain the beauty of creation for generations to come. What are the best practices of our relationship with Mother Earth that our congregations are promoting? What does our spirit of poverty require of us?

Conclusion

At the beginning of this twenty-first century, what message are we Third Order Franciscans giving the world about renouncing our possessions to be true disciples of Jesus Christ?^{xvii} “The goal of Franciscan life is not primarily about ministry; it is fundamentally about witness, - the witness of relationship.”^{xviii} Considering the word of Pope Francis that relationships are “intertwined”, we are challenged to develop relationships that curtail the violence and greed within our global family. The efforts we are making to live poverty must be about creating a better world. Are our neighbors inspired toward a new world vision by our witness?

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- ⁱ Paul Lachance OFM and Pierre Brunette OFM, *The Earliest Franciscans* (NY: Paulist Press, 2015), xi.
- ⁱⁱ Robert M. Stewart OFM, *“De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam”* (Roma: Istituto Storico Dei Cappuccini, 1991), 336.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 336
- ^{iv} Lino Temperini TOR, “Poor with Christ to Serve the Poor,” *Propositum* 3.2 (1998), 7.
- ^v Pope Francis, #66.
- ^{vi} Mt 6:26
- ^{vii} David Couturier OFM Cap., “Naked in the Public Square: Millennials and the Hopes for a New Franciscan Economy,” AFC Presentation 2016. (See <http://www.franfed.org>)
- ^{viii} RegnB XXIII, 9
- ^{ix} Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí*, 246
- ^x See John 13: 3-5
- ^{xi} Pope Francis, 246.
- ^{xii} TOR Rule, 29,30
- ^{xiii} For further information, see http://www.stopvaw.org/Trafficking_Explore_the_Issue
- ^{xiv} Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí*, 246
- ^{xv} Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (NY: Bloomsburg, 2014), 122-153.
- ^{xvi} Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*, #215.
- ^{xvii} See Luke 14:33
- ^{xviii} David Couturier OFM Cap., “Naked in the Public Square: Millennials and the Hopes for a New Franciscan Economy,” AFC Presentation 2016. (See <http://www.franfed.org>)