

*May the LORD
bless you,
May the LORD keep you.
May He show His face
to you and have mercy.
May He turn to you
and give you
PEACE.*

St. FRANCIS



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Beloved of God



**Franciscan Reflections
on Issues of Our Day**

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We hope you have found these reflections helpful. In St. Francis' time, the issues may have seemed less global, but war, hunger, poverty, discrimination, violence, wealth inequality, abuse in families and in the church existed as they do today. Francis and Clare of Assisi changed the world by living the Gospel. Together we also can change the world.

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INTRODUCTION

BELOVED OF GOD

We are all beloved of God – we are loved beyond measure! We were created to love in the same manner with which we have been loved, extravagantly, unconditionally. This is not just a comfort to us, but a challenge, for when we understand and truly believe in God’s love for us, we realize that that love extends to all of creation. Each human person is loved in the same way – we neither earn nor lose that love by our actions. God who is love freely loves all that God has created.

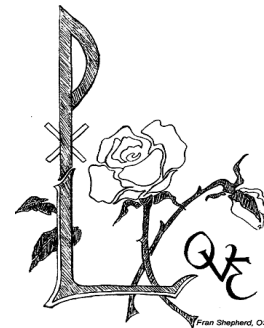
Franciscan Spirituality, based on the Gospel, contains three pillars, the goodness of God, the primacy of Christ and the dignity of the human person. Each pillar continually intertwines with the other two. God in God’s goodness created everything in love through Christ and destined all to reflect that love and to live in a love relationship with the Creator. Each person already possesses an immanent dignity because she/he has been created in the image of the Word of God.

In today’s world, many issues arise from a disregard for the dignity of the human person. We invite you to reflect upon these pages on some of these issues. We offer you some thoughts on how the values of Franciscan Spirituality can be applied to them. We hope that you will see as we do that there is hope for our world and that our Loving God continues to care for us and for all of creation.

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Several illustrations were provided by Allegany Art.



*Franciscan Sisters of Allegany
Franciscan Spirituality Committee
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THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE U.S.

In May 2015, Nebraska became the 19th state to end the use of the death penalty. (That same year the District of Columbia also voted to end the use of the death penalty.) Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the Use of the Death Penalty (CMN), with whom I served from 2011 to 2013, worked with Nebraskan organizations. The role of faith in this historic vote was evident as exemplified by Senator Garrett's call to his fellow lawmakers: "Let us join together as a legislature to promote a culture of life."

This echoes the words of Pope Francis during his visit to the U.S. Congress in September of 2015 when, after calling for the global abolition of the death penalty, he proclaimed, "Every life is sacred, every human person is endowed with an inalienable dignity, and society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes."

Some arguments against the death penalty expose the gross unfairness of its application:

- Geography:** 82 % of executions have occurred in the Southern states, 1% in the Northeast;
- Racism:** Blacks are 13% of the U.S. population but 42% of those on death row;
- Poverty:** Over 90% of those on death row could not afford their own attorney. There are no wealthy persons on death row.
- Deterrence:** The Southern states with the highest execution rates also have the highest murder rate.
- Financial:** The death penalty, with all of its legal appeals, costs much more than a life sentence. Florida, e.g., by the year 2000, paid \$24 million for each of its 44 executions.



FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

Franciscan Values in the Face of Wealth Inequality

There are three praxis-oriented values that come to mind in the face of the crushing reality of the wealth inequality that sees 85 people in the world having more money among them than the poorest 3.5 billion people on the planet: attention, desire and action.

Franciscans need to pay more attention to economics than they have in recent years. While we work and bring relief directly to the poor, we must also simultaneously pay attention to the political devices that the superrich are now using to permanently exclude the majority of the world's population from access to the common good and common wealth of the world. We must learn and attend to the dynamics of disparity politics. We must ask ourselves whether we are running our own congregational or provincial economies as "fraternal economies."

Franciscans need to recondition their desire for the transcendent. Over the past few years, in books and articles, I have demonstrated how modern consumerism eats away at our desire for God in multiple ways, replacing the infinity of God with the infinity of goods. Liturgy and economics go hand in hand. Deepening our awe and wonder will replenish our trust in the abundance of God and dismantle the Enlightenment logic of a distant and stingy God.

The Franciscan intellectual tradition has a rich reservoir of material on how Franciscans have reshaped economic models in the past and are doing so today. Reading up on this material will provide an active counterweight to today's polarizing politics of excess and exclusion.

David B. Couturier, OFM. Cap.,
author of *Franciscans and their Finances:
Economics in a Disenchanted World*

(St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2015)

FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

In harmony with Pope Francis' International Year of Mercy, we Franciscans the world over are also commemorating, in 2016, the 800th anniversary of the granting of the "Pardon of Assisi" or, as it is sometimes known, "The Portiuncula Indulgence."

In July 1216, while Francis was praying at the Portiuncula for the forgiveness of the sins of all humankind, Jesus with his mother Mary appeared to him and asked what he wanted for the salvation of these souls. Francis begged for an indulgence to all who entered that chapel and had confessed their sins. As directed in his vision, Francis sought and was granted this pardon by the pope, Honorius III.

Since that time, popes, including Paul VI, have re-confirmed the Pardon of Assisi as a plenary indulgence on August 2 (the feast of the Portiuncula) or another day designated by the bishop, under the usual conditions (sacramental Confession, Holy Communion, and prayer for the intentions of the Pope), by devoutly visiting a parish church, and there reciting at least the Our Father and the Creed. The pardon may be gained as often as one visits the church: once for oneself and then for souls in Purgatory.

In reviving this devotion, we can emulate Francis' universal regard for every human being as sacred and equally worthy of the mercy of God.

Kathie Uhler, OSF

References: CMN: www.catholicismobilizing.org;
Death Penalty Information Center: www.deathpenaltyinfo.org;
The Catholic Encyclopedia: www.newadvent.org/cathen/12286a.htm.

WEALTH INEQUALITY

Reflection:

How would you respond to a religious conservative who holds to the death penalty because in Exodus it says: “an eye for an eye”?

How would you reply if someone said that after obtaining the Assisi Pardon or Portiuncula Indulgence, which is a plenary indulgence, one would be assured of going to heaven?

Suggested action:

In reviving this devotion, we can emulate Francis’ universal regard for every human being as sacred and equally worthy of the mercy of God.



Let’s start with two different but inter-related words: income and wealth. Income is the money you earn but wealth is all that you own (property, house, investments.) People realize that income inequality is getting larger in America. While the economy grew 83% in the last 25 years and corporate profits doubled, the median income is less than it was 15 years ago. Wealth inequality is worse. The wealthiest 10% of US households own 76% of all the wealth in the United States. Imagine the facts this way as Christopher Ingraham does.

Think of 100 Americans. The richest person of that 100 would own 1/3 of America’s total wealth: 1/3 of all property, 1/3 of the stock market, 1/3 of anything that can be owned. The next four people would own 28% of all wealth. The next 5 people would own 14%, the next 10 people would own 12%. That means that 20% of the people own a whopping 90% of our wealth. That means that 40% of Americans are trying to split among themselves 12% of the wealth and the bottom 40% of Americans have negative worth. They might have a car and even own a home but they are financially under water. No wonder the majority of Americans are very nervous and increasingly distrustful of government and institutions. They see their bills rising, incomes falling, and their ability to make a difference in policy replaced by the 1% who are shielding their money and paying proportionately less in taxes because they have the power (the wealth) to influence politicians to their advantage.

What is at stake is the ability to influence American life and its future. The superrich have been able to siphon all income gain over the past quarter century, locking up 90% of the country’s wealth, and determining tax policies to their exclusive advantage, thus disenfranchising the majority of Americans who build this country day after day. As Arthur Miller once wrote, “Attention must be paid!”

To love your enemies is not an easy challenge. Scholars claim that the crusaders wanted to kill Francis as a heretic after meeting with the Sultan, and the friars did not appreciate his politics. But the issue was so important to Francis that he added to his "Later Rule" that all friars are to love their enemies "as the Lord commands." (Chapter X and Admonitions)

We know that Francis faced scorn and ridicule as he went about proclaiming "Pace e Bene!" We may experience something similar as we attempt to implement such a radical message in our own families, communities and parishes.

Kathy Maire, OSF

Reflection:

What are the "triggers" that lead me to want retaliation?

What ethnic, racial, religious, or gender group leads me to be suspicious?

Action:

Endeavor to learn more about one such group and pray for an enlightened understanding of their beliefs and traditions.



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

One in four women in the United States will be a victim of severe violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. This means that domestic violence is an epidemic, one that disproportionately affects women. Domestic violence is the use of power by physical, mental, emotional, financial and/or sexual means to control the other's behavior. Domestic violence affects all aspects of a woman's life and also the lives of her children. In 98 percent of all abuse cases there is financial abuse keeping the woman unable to break free of the relationship.

A woman leaving her abuser is 70 times more likely to be murdered in the few weeks after she leaves the relationship than at any other time. Domestic violence is the primary cause of homelessness. Domestic violence can also interfere with a woman's ability to work, or the loss of welfare benefits and can cause more poor economic outcomes for women and children overall.

Helping women in domestic violence directly alleviates the root causes of unemployment and homelessness. Additionally, support groups for women who experience domestic violence have been found to be particularly effective. Women report feeling valued and empowered with new coping skills in order to make needed changes in their lives.



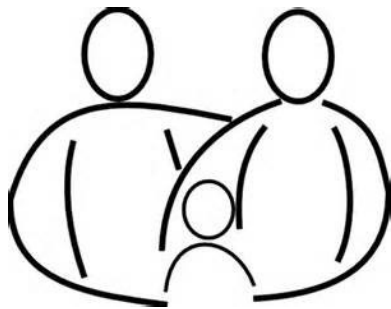
FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

Kinship with All People

Among the most striking attributes of women who suffer domestic violence are the pervasive feelings of shame and unworthiness. Some people who have difficulty understanding the epidemic of domestic violence believe that the women should just leave. Yet, women in domestic violence situations often have very low self-esteem and a deep sense that they don't deserve better treatment. Along with the lack of financial and social resources, these persistent feelings of shame and unworthiness endure.

St. Francis reached out to all, especially those who were treated as unworthy - the poor and those who were powerless. (Earlier Rule IX). In a moment of conversion, St. Francis was filled with love and kissed the hand of a leper, whom he had previously abhorred and branded unworthy. In doing so he was transformed. "God inspired me... what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me". (Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, p. 212)

Liz Schumacher, OSF



FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

Francis himself had to face the reality of war in his own time and place in history. Perhaps as a youth he entertained grandiose dreams of knights fighting for the glory of God, but his short career ended with imprisonment, sickness and a long recovery period. His eventual conversion was profound and dramatic, and to this day we honor Francis as a model of non-violence and peace.

A quote from John Dear's "You Will Be My Witnesses" speaks of his conversion:

Francis embodies the Gospel journey from violence to nonviolence, wealth to poverty, power to powerlessness, selfishness to selfless service, indifference to love, cruelty to forgiveness, revenge to reconciliation, war to peace, killing enemies to loving enemies. It is the journey of conversion that each of us is called to make.



WAR

From the beginning of recorded history to the present, we can find evidence of war. An article in the New York Times from January 21, 2016 told of a find of skeletons in Kenya which appear to be the remains of a massacre from 10,000 years ago. Scientists who reported the discovery claimed that this group of relatively complete skeletons with unmistakable signs of violent death suggests that warfare may have existed even before humans began agriculture. The scientists further speculate that expanding populations at the time may have caused different groups to seek new territory. Whether or not such finds can be classified as warfare, it appears that from our earliest history, human beings resorted to violence to resolve conflict.

The shock and disbelief of people around the world on September 11, 2001, as they watched planes slam into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, ultimately led to the US declaring a "War on Terror". This effort resulted in the killing of Osama Bin Laden, but hardly led to an end of war. Fifteen years later, we in the US are still dealing with hatred against Muslims and their religion of Islam. There is increasing anger and resentment against the US and enormous recruitment efforts on the part of terrorist organizations. We know of the 6,000 US soldiers killed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and of the possibly 100 times that number of civilians from those countries. (www.globalissues.org/Issue/245/war-on-terror)

War can indeed bring about apparent gains for the victors. Whether it is the acquisition of territory for specific needs, the sense of righteousness when evil appears to be vanquished or the satisfaction of a debt, the winners celebrate and declare their dead as heroes. Meanwhile, the vanquished mourn their dead and build up stronger walls of resentment and hatred.

Reflection:

Can we be loving and understanding to those powerless and suffering from domestic violence? How can we be affirming and empowering?

Through Prayer:

Sit quietly and reflect on God's children who are suffering from domestic violence.

Envision the love of God pouring into those who suffer from domestic violence. Sit for several minutes meditating on this outpouring into these children of God.

Envision the love of God present in those who minister to domestic violence victims. Incorporate these meditations into your weekly prayer schedule.

Through Action:

Contact the local domestic abuse crisis center and ask how you can help; find out what organizations run victim support groups and ask how you can help; financially support organizations that support domestic violence victims and prevention efforts; attend functions sponsored by domestic violence prevention groups. October is domestic violence awareness month.



DRUG CULTURE

The use of drugs to produce temporal euphoric states has a long history among many different cultures. The motivations for ingesting potentially dangerous drugs are complex although initial efforts have been made to identify and analyze why people are susceptible to using drugs considered harmful. Undoubtedly the motivations are psychological, sociological, and anthropological with resultant habituation sometimes becoming physiological.

JASA 20 (December 1968): 104-114.

The drug culture is primarily defined by recreational drug use. This culture is a misguided attempt to feel included, a part of, to belong. Drugs are valued as a way to break down social boundaries. They are also used to provide a rush of emotion, a “high”, with instant gratification. They are used to avoid emotional pain. Drugs and alcohol become “a bad way to go after a good thing.” The drug culture is our failure to recognize humanity as God’s creation for this culture promotes de-humanization and only sees people as objects to use in increasing one’s own wealth and status.



FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

Our father Francis said that the peace we preach must be carried in our hearts. Peace then becomes the seed for forgiveness. Strength does not come from killing, but from forgiveness.

Edir de Freitas Pereira, OSF

Action:

In a moment of prayer, identify someone you need to forgive or whom you need to ask for forgiveness.



VIOLENCE

In 2014 I went to the city where my father died. He was murdered when I was a child. The worst was that I was there and witnessed the horrible scene. A man who claimed to be a “friend” shot him and two of my brothers.

The next morning my brother-in-law accompanied me to the site where I had watched my father's violent death. As I arrived and stepped on that ground where my father fell, I felt such a deep anguish and sorrow that I could actually hear the gunshots and the screams for help. My reaction? - - - Fear, revulsion and indignation.

I began to pray to God for answers to so many questions that I held within my heart. For three days I returned to this indescribably sad place to pray for my feelings to change. Whenever I visited this scene I would experience such anguish that I could not sleep on those nights.

Last year I returned to the city and site of my father's death, but I no longer felt the anguish in my heart. At this time I also wanted to visit the place where the man who killed my father met his death. He died just minutes after shooting my family. My brother shot him and he died only feet away from my father.

When I reached the spot where this man died, I touched the ground where he fell and said to him: “I came not to forgive you, but to ask for your forgiveness. If we had proclaimed God's love to you, you would not have killed my relatives.”

FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

God created man and woman saying: “It is very good.” God gave us all that we need to live life to the fullest. But our society has turned from God. It has attempted to fill the emptiness by the use of drugs and alcohol, creating a greater divide between us and our relationship with God. This use of drugs is an attempt to break down barriers which should never exist. If we can pause to observe the beauty and goodness that surround us, we will be filled with gratitude and an understanding of our place in God's creation.

We are created to be in a holy relationship and our deepest longing is a desire to be with God. Many do not recognize this desire and seek other means to fill the emptiness in their hearts. The fear of this emptiness drives some to the use of drugs and alcohol and other addictive behavior. The solution is to embrace the emptiness and begin the journey to God. God will not abandon a single person. God, out of the greatest, most unfathomable love, sent Jesus to experience what it means to be a human person with all our emotions - positive and negative. Just as Jesus accepted the pain and suffering of the cross, he understands the fear and loneliness, as well as the feelings of emptiness and abandonment that we all experience. Jesus constantly assures us that we will never be alone if we turn to God.

St. Francis of Assisi saw all of creation as brother/sister because we are one family created by God out of God's goodness. As the moon is in relationship to the sun, earth and stars, so we are called to enter into balanced relationships with our environment, our world and each other. St. Francis' greatest desire was to walk in the footprints of Jesus. To do so, he turned away from wealth and instant gratification to embrace poverty and pain, as well as intense joy. This is inherent when we are willing to risk reaching out to others in support and love as we put our faith and trust in God.

Colleen Brady, OSF
(With input from Ana M. Viamonte Rose- Baptist Hospital
and Rose Anderson & Alina Wetzstein- Camillus House)

Reflection:

Do I see myself as brother/ sister with those closest to me?

Do I see myself as brother/sister with the stranger?

Do I see myself as brother/sister with the world and all of creation?

What addictive behaviors do I use to cope with the difficulties that may be a part of these relationships?

Action:

Take 5 minutes each day to sit quietly and see with new eyes (contemplate) all that surrounds you.

Increase your awareness of the drug culture issue and select one way in which you can make a difference.



Reflection:

What are some ways within my own home that I could cut back on my use and abuse of Sister Water?

How can I educate myself, my family, friends and co-workers to the plight of our once pure water?

Action:

Consider starting a Water Watch Group in your own area, monitoring a local stream, creek, pond or lake for contamination.

Plant a small flower or vegetable bed or garden. Care for and nurture it. Enter into relationship with your garden, enjoy the gifts she gives to you: beauty, peace, nourishment for body and spirit.



FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

St. Francis, a man for all times, had great respect for all creation. He entered into conscious relationship with creation, calling the Sun, our Brother, and Water, our Sister. The Earth he called our Mother, who sustains and governs us, providing fruits, herbs and flowers for our nourishment and delight. Francis passes this heritage on to us. All of Creation is a precious part of our family. Francis invites us to take responsibility to care for, protect, defend and cherish our Mother Earth. Being in relationship really makes a difference in how we commit to protecting all of creation. "Creation is a gift that God has given us to care for and use for the benefit of all, always with great respect and gratitude." (Pope Francis, General Audience, 21 May 2014). "The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves." (Francis, *Laudato Si* 6 quoting *Benedict XVI, Address to the Clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone* (6 August 2008): AAS 100 (2008), 634. "Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in lifestyles, models of production and consumption and the established structures of power which today govern." Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 5 quoting *John Paul II Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 58: AAS 83 (1991), 863.

Let us respond wholeheartedly to the cry of our Mother Earth by our care for Sister Water.

Eleanor Berret, OSF

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human Trafficking, a modern day form of slavery, is growing by astounding numbers with an estimated 27 million being enslaved globally and tens of thousands of people being bought and sold annually in the United States alone. Children, women and men of all ages, races and ethnicities are placed in horrifying situations involving sexual exploitation and grueling labor. No one is immune to this evil.

With the opening of our P.A.T.H. Enrichment Center, [in Buffalo, NY], we have seen first-hand the brokenness and suffering that victims of exploitation experience. Some of the women who have come through our doors have never experienced love or been able to receive it from someone else. All they know is how to survive in an environment of exploitation and distrust. We have had our clients tell us that our agency is the first place they have experienced the feeling of unconditional regard without judgment. We seek to enrich their lives and be the hands and feet of Jesus. Our prayer is that these women continue to experience the presence of Jesus and find their wholeness and healing through Him.

Julie Palmer, Executive Director P.A.T.H. of WNY
(People Against Trafficking Humans, Inc.)



FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

Embracing the Suffering of Others

St. Francis knew well what it was like to be helpless and treated as a slave. As a boy he dreamt of being a knight. As a young man in battle he was taken prisoner and held captive for over a year. Returning home, Francis struggled; he could not behave as he once did in his prior life as the well-to-do son of a fine cloth merchant. He began to distance himself from his friends, and took to staying in out-of-the-way places by himself. (He would have been diagnosed today as having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

During these times of solitude he slowly turned to God in prayer. Through this, a transformation was underway. The sight of the poor and powerless prompted him to sell his horse and give away his possessions. The townspeople called him a "madman". His conduct infuriated his over-powering and controlling father who imprisoned Francis. When his good mother let him out, he hid in the poor church of St. Damian. Still his father pursued him, attempting to coerce Francis into submission by bringing legal action against him. When that failed, his father appealed to the bishop himself. In the public square Francis gave his father the remaining clothes on his back thus renouncing his father's hold on him. Now naked, the bishop himself covered Francis with his own cloak.

Francis' journey from prisoner/slave to the freedom of new life in God gave him particular sensitivity to those without power. Francis and his followers chose to live among the weakest and embrace them in their suffering. Francis brought the weakest the hope of the Gospel and what help he and his followers could provide. In doing so, he brought to light the tragedy and injustice of society's treatment of the helpless. Often Francis and his group were the first and only ones to show the weakest the unconditional love of God.

Liz Schumacher, OSF

THE PLIGHT OF SISTER WATER

"The entire material universe speaks of God's love, God's boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God." Francis, *Laudato Si*, 84.



Water is a necessity for life, yet we continue to contaminate our oceans, lakes, rivers and streams by the use of insecticides as well as other dangerous powders and sprays on our farms, orchards and lawns. Major catastrophic oil spills and leaking toxic waste dumps threaten our under-ground water.

Another threat to human health and our underground water is fracking. It is an ongoing challenge to safely dispose of the sludge created by fracking. Between twenty and forty percent of the toxic chemicals used in the fracking process remain stranded underground where they can and often do, contaminate drinking water, soil and other parts of the environment that support plant, animal and human life.

We need to become proactive in our care for Mother Earth and our Sister Water, "or in the future we may be fighting wars over water. In his January 1, 2010 World Day of Peace message, Pope Benedict XVI, known as the 'Green Pope', proclaimed: "If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation".



Reflection:

Is there an issue of justice/injustice within the contemporary church that stirs you?

How would you bring the spirit of St. Francis to address it?

Action:

Identify a social justice issue in the church that concerns you and find another or others who share your concern. With this like-minded group, generate some possible responses.



Reflection:

What are some ways we can practice this unconditional love particularly mindful of the horrific circumstances of human trafficking?

Through Prayer

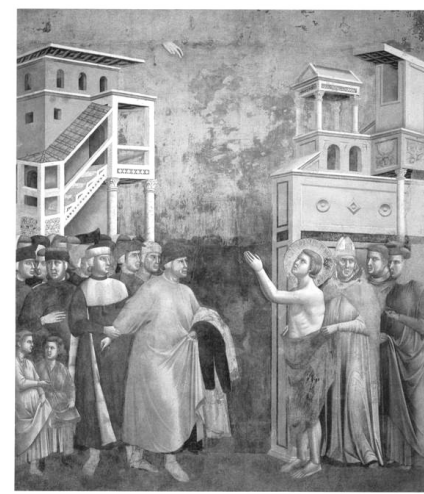
Keep those who have experienced forced labor/trafficking in your daily prayers.

Pray for a conversion of heart for all people associated with the trafficking of humans.

Join Pope Francis in prayerful support of the UN 'Agenda 2030' ending all forms of child labor by 2025 and forced labor by 2030.

Through Action

Check out what national and local anti-trafficking groups are doing. Support these groups through: your prayers, giving of some of your time and /or providing monetary support.



HUNGER IN OUR NEIGHBORHOODS

For the past eight years, Mary, who is raising two grandchildren alone, has been coming to the food pantry. Every month she struggles to make ends meet. Her story highlights the everyday stress many face as they worry about whether there will be enough money to pay the bills and some food to get by this time.

Right now I am receiving \$100/month for Food Stamps and \$725/month from Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and it's just not enough to make ends meet. My bills are killing me so I have to go to different organizations for help:

This month just started, so I don't have any food—it has been a week or more. It is like this every month. We just try to eat different foods, basically just put together. We mostly eat sandwiches, toast, noodles or whatever. Sometimes we end up eating noodles for a week. And sometimes I don't eat so I can feed them. And I will skip lunch and I won't eat – I will just drink water from the faucet to try to keep full as long as they can have a bite to eat.

It is hard to imagine why in a land of plenty people experience hunger on a regular basis. Food availability is more than having monetary access. It is about transportation to get to the food, adequate housing and utilities to safely prepare and store the food and dealing with a fragile budget that can collapse with one small emergency.



FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

Francis – Solidarity and Empathy

Francis, like Jesus, did not try to reform social structures. He could not imagine confrontation or protesting unjust structures, especially within the church. Yet as Leonardo Boff proposes, Francis approached dilemmas with a liberating strategy. He did not accuse, censure or condemn. He did not make things worse by shaming others. Neither did Clare. Instead, because of their spiritual freedom, they took a different course.

Francis responded personally to some social issues like violence and poverty, but his approach to injustice in the church was more subtle. When the local bishop and the mayor were at odds (the bishop had excommunicated the mayor and the mayor had forbidden trade with the bishop), Francis created an environment based on the Canticle of Creatures which brought about their reconciliation. (Legend of Perugia, 44) When Clare sought a form of life based on radical poverty and the simple rule of the Friars Minor, her request was denied in favor of a more detailed and austere rule. With patient persistence she trusted the Spirit (and the recommendation of a new cardinal) to bring to fruition her desire for simplicity.

Francis and Clare exemplified solidarity, compassion, and patience as integral to the quest for justice. Franciscan social justice is creative, not political. It seeks to embody a face of justice rather than a rule of justice. Can contemporary Franciscans strive for anything less than to be a face of justice?

Jane Kopas



The Church and Social Justice



From its earliest years the church has responded to needs in society, beginning with aid sent to victims of a famine in Judea (Acts 11:29). While charitable responses to needs of this kind remain important, other more complex needs demand different responses. Thus contemporary Christians have addressed larger issues by seeking causes of injustice, engaging in protests, and proposing systemic solutions.

Leaders in the church have also been actively concerned with social justice. Pope Leo XIII wrote in support of the rights of workers to organize, and Pope Francis has called for ecological and economic reform.

But what of injustice within the church?

Acting against injustice within the church is a more complex matter than acting against injustice in society. For one thing, members of this community need to act in keeping with its gospel values. In addition, the church's hierarchical structure makes it hard to achieve dialogue about matters of internal injustice.

Leaders may be tempted to defend or rationalize actions in order to protect their image. But justice overrides the need to be seen in the best light. There are no easy answers to the question of dealing with injustice in the church with integrity and skill. But Franciscan tradition offers some examples.

FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

“The Wounded,” Francis Would Never Forget

During his first visit to Rome, Francis had an experience that shaped his life forever. “The dazzling splendor of her palaces, churches and shrines, the incredible wealth enjoyed by so many of her citizens and by the prelates, all the evidences of worship paid to gold and to possessions acquired by gold; and side by side, the crowds of diseased, crippled, despairing beggars, the hungry faces of the tattered women and naked children, all the countless un-regarded human dregs creeping out into God's generous sunshine ...to beg for bread and all too often be denied it – and then creeping back into the noisome darkness of tumbledown hovels.”

The wounding contrasts offered by the scene would never leave Francis' memory.

To spend himself utterly became as necessary as air, but the way to that service, even more so its ultimate pattern, remained blurred.

The words above were written in the very early life of Francis. We are given a glimpse of the contrasting surroundings that overwhelmed him and drew him to seek a life of poverty and deepened his love for the poor. He learned to embrace compassion, empathy and solidarity, great gifts from a beloved God.

Marita Flynn, OSF

Reflection:

How would your life be different if you lived in a very poor neighborhood?

Actions:

Organize a “Hunger Banquet” in your parish or community with groups of adults or children to simulate the imbalanced distribution of food in our world.

Have a speaker and serve a meal that corresponds to one in an extremely undeveloped country.

Become an advocate in your community by actively expressing solidarity with the poor around the world. www.crs.org/hunger/banquet/instructions.3

Resources Used:

1. “Putting a Face on Hunger,” Jane Trocheck Walker, Nora B. Arriola, Roberta Baer, Ph.D
2. St. Francis of Assisi/ A Great Life in Brief, pages 52-53, E.M. Almedingen, Random House, New York, 10022.
3. Operation Rice Bowl, Catholic Relief Services, Hunger Banquet Instructions.



FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

“Perfect love drives out fear.”

It was love that allowed St. Francis to get off his horse and approach a leper. His fear was certainly warranted in his time. The disease of leprosy was thought to be a scourge - all people knew they had to avoid contact with lepers or they themselves would contract the disease. Not only was the disease feared for its contagious element, but its physical effects were hard to stomach. There did not seem to be any treatment known so the victims were isolated from the rest of the population.

Francis’ awareness that all people were created in the image of God and that all are sisters and brothers moved him to reject his first impulse to flee from the leper. He stopped, gave him some money and then went beyond the imaginable – he kissed the leper! He overcame his fear and allowed himself to really see the leper.

For us, fear can rule our actions and blind us to the humanity of those whom we fear. We are all sisters and brothers, children of our Creator God. We are called to reach out to those who are different, to put love into action even when it is difficult.

Pat Klemm, OSF

Reflection:

Of whom are you afraid? Whom have you isolated?

Action:

Make a point of seeing the person rather than the language they speak or the color of their skin.

PREJUDICE

Prejudice appears to be built into our DNA - it has been around for centuries. Surprisingly, prejudice does not show up in young children until they are taught by example to fear those who are different from themselves. Children don't seem to notice differences of race, economic status, or sexual orientation. We have a child development center where I work and it is such a joy to see toddlers of different races, backgrounds and social status playing together oblivious to what adults see as social inequalities.

The issues of prejudice and immigration are intrinsically linked. We want to protect ourselves from those who are different. Some want to seal off our borders (or our neighborhoods) to keep out of our lives those who might be a threat to our self-defined status quo. We are unwilling to welcome the stranger among us.

Fear of the unknown is the driving force behind our prejudices. Fear can lead to violence which in turn can lead to more fear. It is a vicious circle.

We do not recognize the richness of diversity and the benefit of knowing and living among people who are different from the "ideal" that we have created.



POVERTY/HOMELESSNESS

Lately, there has been concern by government officials about the rising number of homeless on our city streets. The loss of jobs, rise in rents and the lack of housing for the poor will continue to contribute to the increase in numbers. Numbers of homeless people should not be our measuring stick. To make the effort to connect and attempt to make a difference in their lives is what we are challenged to do.

Making it real:

Let's call her Cindy. Cindy came to the Dwelling Place in 2008 after much coaxing and encouragement by people who heard of her at their local parish. Cindy would sleep on the church steps and would be invited to come in and wash up on occasion.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Cindy was a woman in her late 40's who lived with her mother and stepfather. The story of why she left was vague. She stayed in the neighborhood where she was comfortable—familiar with the people of the area, but afraid to get help or leave her comfort zone. Cindy had worked, but nothing steady or for long periods of time. A sister who worked in the parish, tried to convince Cindy to come to the Dwelling Place.

Many phone calls were made, but Cindy was too frightened to leave Brooklyn. It's said in "God's time." Cindy finally came. When I first met Cindy, I saw a very frightened woman who needed a lot of time and love, tenderness and compassion. With time and love, we were able to connect Cindy with our Health Team and eventually, get her on Disability. Our ladies were very helpful in companioning her on her journey. One day one of her dorm mates took her on the PATH (rail system) and went to Jersey City. It was Cindy's first time ever out of New York. She returned with a smile that would melt your heart.

We were able to get Cindy into permanent housing at a place where the love she experienced with us would continue. Cindy celebrated Christmas with us this year, and to date, her smile continues to touch my heart.

FRANCISCAN RESPONSE

As Franciscans following in the footsteps of Jesus, hospitality and acceptance of others are necessary elements of ministry to those who are poor. Sometimes it is not an easy thing to see the presence of God in a person who has been living on the streets. Since God has called everyone into God's family, we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

In the days of St. Francis, he and the friars were often keeping strict fasts. One night, one of the younger friars woke the others with his cries: "I am dying of hunger." Rather than single out the friar who was unable to keep the fast, Francis gathered them all and had them set the table for a simple meal. Francis was the first to eat so that the hungry friar would not be embarrassed by his weakness. The way of ministering to those in need must include respect for the people who are being served.

Another story tells of Francis going out to beg for food for their supper. Having brought back a sack of simple food, Francis left for a while. Some robbers came and stole the sack of food. The other friars chased them and brought the food back for their supper. When they told Francis of their escapade, he made them take the food back to the robbers as a gift from him. The hunger of the robbers was more important to Francis than his and his friars own needs.

Nancy Chiarello, OSF

Reflection:

How can we show respect for those who are needy and poor even when they are unattractive or difficult?

Action:

Find a soup kitchen or homeless shelter that needs volunteers and offer to spend some time helping out. Make sure that you treat those who are there as your brothers and sisters who are worthy of your respect.

