

“I Have Called You My Friends”

Fr. Michael Perry, OFM

[Friars sing “Laudato si, o mi Signore”]

It is written in the Gospel of St. John:

“You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father” (John 15: 14-15).

It is a great joy for me as the Minister and Servant of the Order of Friars Minor to participate with you, my dear brothers and sisters, in this week of special grace and blessing. I give thanks also to God for the gift of our brothers of the Community of Taizé who offer us the occasion to pray, sing, reflect, and relax together as members of the one family of God. Your hospitality gives witness to the invitation of Jesus who welcomes all at the same table fellowship, a table fellowship, which begins in humility, mercy and simplicity and ends in reconciliation, peace and communion.

The song that my brothers sang, *Laudato Si*, reflects an authentic recognition by St. Francis of Assisi of his true identity as a beloved child of God, called to embrace each and every human being as his own brother or sister, and to promote peace and harmony among all.

“Most high, all powerful, all good Lord! All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing. To You, alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your name.”

St. Francis did not begin his spiritual journey singing the praises of God for all of creation. His vocational pursuit began as a response to a deep crisis that he experienced within his own life, within his family, within the Church, within the society and within world in which he lived. His was a world in which humanity was gradually being de-humanized, systematically stripped of its dignity through the competing forces of greed, power-grabbing, economic displacement and the perpetual assault of the poor by the rich. It also was a world of war and violence, especially religious violence, brought crescendo in the Fifth Christian Crusade, a protracted effort by the Holy Roman Church to retake the Holy Sights and the Holy Land. In the midst of a personal and social crisis, three central themes emerged that would shape the vocational journey of St. Francis. These three themes allowed Francis to discern the voice of God speaking through his double embrace: the embrace of the Crucified and Resurrected Lord Jesus on the Cross at the dilapidated Benedictine church of San Damiano; and the embrace of a leper of Assisi, one of

those persons rejected by society, consigned to a life of misery and begging, suffering from the wounds of leprosy, which disfigured and deformed the physical appearance, making its victim look like a monster.

The Humility of God

St. Francis came to discover a very different image of God than the one proposed by the major theological and spiritual practices of the Church of his time. In the course of his personal crisis, Francis found himself no longer drawn to an image of God who, like the emperor or the Pope, was all-powerful, in control of everything, demanding only submission to the established order in order to achieve salvation. I am speaking about the theme of the **humility of God**. For St. Francis, God was now seen to be the one who came in the form of a tiny, weak infant, born in conditions of poverty, stripped of all pretense of the divine. This image is described most clearly in the Letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 2 where we hear that Jesus did not deem himself equal to God but rather came in the form of a slave, a servant, taking human form in order that humanity might once again experience the love and mercy of God from within itself. The Master of the Dominicans, Friar Bruno, spoke about his yesterday where he encouraged all of us religious to never forget or run away from our humanity precisely because God did not run from us but, rather, sent His only begotten Son into our midst. It is in and through our humanity that we have been called and chosen for consecrated life.

For St. Francis, the life of the Christian disciple is rooted in humility. We do not have to be powerful or in control of our lives in order to be more fully human and spiritual. We do not need to exercise power over the lives of others, which is certainly a very big temptation in our times. Rather, we are called to abandon the pursuit of power, authority, and control, opening our lives to take the great risk to believe that God believes in us (cf. Giacomo Bini, OFM), loves us, forgives us unconditionally and is forever in our lives. Humility is that quality that sets us free from the fear of taking a risk and of making a decision to choose a particular form of life to which we believe God is calling us. This calling, this taking of a risk, requires that we progressively learn how to 'let go' of all that we never possessed from the beginning, even though we thought we were in possession of ourselves. Humility is the recognition of our true identity as beloved children of God, members of the one human family, called to become 'friends of Jesus', as the text from the Gospel of St. John reminds us. It is this calling into friendship with God that unleashes within us the desire to break out in joyful song, "Laudato si, o mi Signore!" "Praise be to you, Most High God..." It is through a recognition of our true selves before God, the way of humility, that we learn the way to harmonious living, as exemplified in God's creatures (vs 1-9, 10).

Mutual Interdependence

A second theme that emerged in the conversion experience of St. Francis might be described as that of **coming to live in mutual interdependence** with others, those who are members of our specific religious institutes, those in the Church and the world, and, ultimately learning how to live in mutual interdependence with all of creation. As Fr. Richard indicated yesterday, one of the contributions from the experience of life in Africa is the realization that my individual life, my well being and being well, is totally dependent on the well being of the other person, of my brothers and sisters anywhere living in the world. We are born into a **permanent condition of brotherhood and sisterhood, members of the one family of God**. St. Francis of Assisi progressively came to this realization as he deepened his life in God through the 'wasting of time' in solitude, and by praying together with the brothers. He came to perceive and understand that God's invitation into friendship is an invitation to live 'fraternitas', 'community', with the Trinity who forms a community of life and love. Fraternitas/community, when rooted in God's life, demands that we reach out to all people, especially the poor and marginalized.

This interdependence, this permanent and true condition of fraternitas/community, of being connected to one another in the one family of God, should not be viewed as weakness but as strength. Through a mutual interdependence within the human family, God realizes His Kingdom plan for the future of our lives and the life of the world. For St. Francis, and for many other founders of other religious Order, Congregations and Institutes, the dimension of fraternitas/community is an absolute condition for the realization of the goal of consecrated religious life, namely, communion in all of its dimensions: communion with God; communion with brothers and sisters – those who share the same charismatic vision and participate in the same form of religious life pursuit; and communion that extends to all peoples everywhere, even those who persecute and do violence to us and to others. As St. Paul reminds the Christian community in Ephesus, *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity...that he might create in himself a new person in place of two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it (Eph 2: 13-16)*

One of the greatest threats to our spiritual identity, and to consecrated life, is the *seduction of individualism*. This seduction is very insidious. Like a hidden cancer, it grows in the hidden recesses of our heart and mind, leading us to progressively close in upon ourselves and to seek to fulfill our own personal needs, our own loneliness and feelings of being isolated, exhausted from activities that do not bring life or meaning, using vicarious material or even relational

means to fill the void. Individualism leads not only to isolationism but also to a growing fear of the other, and an increasing lack of trust: trust in God's presence and work in our lives; fear of trusting our brother or sister in the consecrated life; fear of the other, of those whom we encounter, especially those who we perceive to be our enemies, closing us off to all forms of encounter and dialogue.

From my own experience of living and visiting my Franciscan brothers, it would appear that this threat increases the longer men and women remain in religious life. Why this is true is too complex to analyze at this time. Perhaps there is an element of personal narrative, the sense of failure, or unrealized dreams in the heart of an individual person. Perhaps it is the result of living with others who seem to have abandoned the radical challenges of religious life, those who have adapted to the 'status quo', divorced from any sense of holy newness and the need to always begin anew at any and all stages of our religious journey. There are no secret therapies to overcome these dangers. Rather, we must encourage one another to return to the source of life, the Lord Jesus, and to keep him at the center of our lives. We must help one another get back up when we have fallen, when we have failed. And we must be willing to never let go of one another but rather to commit and re-commit daily to life in fraternitas/community. This also will require a personal willingness to **be accompanied** throughout our religious life and to be willing to accompany one another, opening our lives to one another with ever-greater transparency and a sense of humility. Our singing Monk reminded us of this yesterday afternoon where he spoke of the need to have a spiritual guide to accompany us. This applies equally to a Master, or Minister General as to all brothers and sisters in religious life. We all need to be accompanied spiritually and humanly if we are to survive the challenges that we will encounter at every moment of the journey.

Living at the Margins

There is third dimension of our identity as human beings, members of the Body of Christ, and members of a specific type of consecrated life. I am speaking here of the **dimension of marginality or being people who are called and commissioned to live 'on' or 'at' the material, spiritual, political, social and religious peripheries**. Consecrated life challenges us to abandon all, to leave all behind, for the sake of God's Kingdom, which means also for the sake of our brothers and sisters who struggle each day to survive, to find meaning in life and to express their God-given talents in an environment that both recognizes and accepts them and their gifts as an authentic contribution to the life of the world and the Church. We are called to 'be the poor Church living with and among the poor' (Pope Francis), in all the different forms this poverty takes in the life of the world today.

I must admit that since becoming Provincial, Vicar General, and now Minister General and Servant, one of the greatest challenges I face is the distance that I feel from the margins, from the peripheries. I believe that God is calling me to serve the brothers of the Order of Friars Minor as their Minister and chief foot washer. At the same time, I feel sometimes as though I am speaking only from words that record the great deeds that God is achieving in the lives of my brothers, and of other religious and laity in the Church. St. Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis of Buenos Aires both remind us that we must be physically present as religious in the zones of marginality and the periphery if we are to renew our love and friendship with God and if we are to be instruments of renewal for all of humanity. We must not only be poor by our profession, our vows. We must be poor by our complete self-abandonment and openness to God and to God's life lived among His people, especially those who suffer and are marginalized. After all, we are disciples of the poor, crucified Lord Jesus, the one who humbled himself in order that all of humanity and all of creation might be raised up and restored to original dignity, no longer called 'slaves' but 'friends of a loving and merciful God.

In conclusion, I am convinced now more than ever that we must do all that we can to keep alive and keep growing in our 'friendship' with the Lord Jesus. It is this fundamental friendship that will enable us to take a risk, the risk that Jesus is present in our lives, our world, and is calling and challenging us to respond generously and without condition. The road will be long. The trials will be many. But "If we take Jesus' commandment to love seriously, and if we long to be called 'friend' by Jesus, then [we will be able to] give love freely and generously without counting the cost and without wondering and worrying who is on the receiving end of our limitless love" (O'Day, 2008, p. 24). In this way, we become the prophetic voice of God, of God's Church, capable of 'waking up the world'. Pope Francis, speaking to the Union of Major Superiors of Men (November 24, 2013) challenged religious to "Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living!" He added: "It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth. It is a question of leaving everything to follow the Lord..."

May God who is calling each of you by name to enter into a life-giving and life-long friendship continue to strengthen your resolve, deepen and expand your capacity to love, and increase your experience of the joy of the Gospel life!