

## 2012 AFC Presidential Address

Good Morning, good people!" Three years ago at the 2009 Annual Federation Conference the Implementation Task Force introduced us to the new organizational structure of the Franciscan Federation with music and drama. The music was the "Circle of Life" from the musical, *The Lion King*. I have brought along our mascot, Simba, to assist our recall! The words to the song go like this:

It's the Circle of Life  
And it moves us all  
Through despair and hope  
Through faith and love  
Till we find our place  
On the path unwinding  
In the circle, the Circle of life

1965 was the year for the beginning of the circle of life of this Franciscan Federation brought into being by the inspiration and leadership of Mother Viola Leininger of Millvale, PA. In 1966, at the first gathering of Franciscan major superiors and formation personnel, those assembled articulated the purpose of the federation to be mutual assistance in renewal and adaptation. Remember that 1966 was the year following the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council's "Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life."

My experience of serving as the president of the National Board these three years has been an ongoing experience of mutual assistance and renewal as we lived through the circle of life-- despair to hope and faith and love. Perhaps despair is too strong a word, but there were dark clouds of concern hovering over us three years ago as we faced 1) a large debt, 2) continued payment of the copyrights for Franciscan Prayer books, and 3) an uncertainty of the implementation of a new organizational structure with three Commissions. In less than three years, we have no debt, the prayer books are sold and out of print, and the Commissions and National Board are truly signs of vitality!

### **Signs of Vitality**

Let's reflect on the source of the vitality that we witness to the world. Our source is The Source of all Goodness, our Creator God who bestows on us such blessings by calling us into the Franciscan way of life. We are the modern day penitents whose history begins in the thirteenth century with those lay persons who responded to the preaching of the friars by evangelical conversion, a conversion to a lifestyle that Francis describes in the "Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance" as

found in the Prologue to our Rule. These early penitents and ourselves become signs of vitality because we strive to

- love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul and our neighbors as ourselves
- hate personal evil e.g. our vices and sins
- partake in the Eucharist
- produce worthy fruits from our penitential life.

We have wonderful exemplars in our history to inspire us to live Franciscan Evangelical Life. Among the early penitents was a married couple, Luchasio and Buonadonna, whose story can illuminate our own stories. They were business persons in commerce in Poggibonsi in the Tuscany region of Italy. Touched by grace in hearing Francis preaching, Luchasio began to give money and food to the poor. His wife joined him in a lifestyle of charity which became the ruling passion of their lives. They both became poor in their giving and serving the poor and the sick, but they knew the richness of God's presence through prayer. One of the stories told of them was that they heard *that several poor sick persons were lying on the sea shore, exposed to all the inclemency of the weather, without help or care. They set out with their donkey to act as infirmarians and to try to locate shelter for these homeless.*

We can resonate with such a story because these are the stories of our own lives and our congregations—stories of self-giving on behalf of the poor and the sick. This year on October 21, Sister Marianne Cope will be canonized a saint, an exemplar of holiness for us and the whole Church. When she left Syracuse, New York in 1884 as the Mother Superior to accompany the sisters she had missioned to serve in Hawaii, she could not have imagined what the Spirit of God would place on her heart when she arrived in Hawaii and saw the needs of the poor and the sick. Two years later she met Father Damien who had come to Honolulu for medical treatment. And, the rest is history!

By bringing to mind Sister Marianne, I desire to remind all of us that in our simple way of being, serving with God's steadfast Love, we provide hope and healing to the tired, the weak, the doubting, those frightened without proper documentation, and those searching for God, -the list is endless. Reflecting upon the resolutions we have adopted at our annual conference over the recent years reminds us of how we as a Federation are a sign of Hope doing the works of mercy for the poor. In the year 2000, we committed ourselves to call for a moratorium of the death penalty; In 2004, we committed ourselves to be informed about the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa and to advocate for global funding. Beginning in 2005 we resolved to promote a comprehensive approach to immigration issues and to advocate for just and humane immigration policies and laws. In each of these past seven years and again for this coming year, we members of the Franciscan Federation consistently give our attention

to ministry with, and advocacy for persons migrating to our country; persons who come in hope of finding work and a life away from war and persecution. These past seven years annually we have resolved to advocate for comprehensive approach to immigration issues, and to educate others and promote advocacy against human trafficking. In our contemporary ministry of advocating for the immigrants and victims of human trafficking, we are continuing the very charism of our founders and foundresses in the United States, - to reach out to the marginalized in our society, - the lepers today.

Occasionally we see rays of hope that we are making a difference by our prayer and advocacy work for systemic change. One such light of hope was announced by President Obama on June 15<sup>th</sup> of this year. Citing his frustration with the failure of Congress to pass a DREAM Act, President Obama issued a policy authorizing U.S. immigration enforcement officials to grant young illegal immigrants who enter the U.S. before the age of 16, and who pose no security threat and meet other requirements, a two-year deferral from deportation. Such immigrants meeting all of the requirements for deferral of deportation will be eligible to apply for authorization to work legally in the United States. This may seem like not enough, but it is something!

## **PRAYER**

Signs of vitality are everywhere where each of us brothers and sisters live and minister. We are more than a sign; we are a “sacrament” because each of us presents the mystery of God’s Love. Our outward expressions of love and concern for others flow from an interiority, our prayer life. We will be forever grateful for all our brothers and sisters who contributed to the preparation and publication of the *Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise*. That common prayer book deepens in us our self-awareness of continuing the legacy we have from Francis, Clare, Bonaventure and all the holy ones whose words and example inspire us. Ilia Delio OSF wrote: *One cannot be restored by the grace of Christ interiorly without expressing transformation through grace exteriorly. ...contemplation is really an ascent and descent to God and that is why it is linked to imitation. The higher the soul ascends to God through divine illumination, the lower it descends in imitation of Christ.*<sup>11</sup>

What does Imitation of Christ look like? It looks like Jesus’ action told in the gospel of John: *So when he had washed their feet and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, “Do you realize what I have done for you? ..IF I, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you,*

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<sup>1</sup> Ilia Delio OSF, *Simply Bonaventure* (New York: New City Press, 2001):131.

*you should also do (John 13:12-15).* Francis and Clare of Assisi embodied this teaching of Jesus. We, who are called by God to live this Franciscan way of being, aspire to be the sacraments of God's tender and healing Love. In the coming months, we will also be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. These fifty years have indeed been an experience of the circle of life that has transformed us Third Order members. Recalling the 1966 statement of purpose for the Franciscan Federation, mutual assistance in renewal and adaptation, we recognize that through the circle of life over the years we have refined the purpose of the Federation as stated in our new bylaws:

*The Vision of the Franciscan Federation is to deepen the understanding and love of the Third Order Regular Charism in our lives, in order to share this gift with the Church and the World. Our circles are widening out as we welcome our lay associates who join us in living this way of life.*

The vitality of the Federation into the future is assured through the many members that are actively involved on the Executive Committees of the Commissions, the JPIC committee, the regional Steering Committees, the National Board, and all other efforts for the vision of the Federation. We are well situated for continuance as a life-giving organization. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

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<sup>1</sup> Ilia Delio OSF, *Simply Bonaventure* (New York: New City Press, 2001):131.