

**Franciscan Federation
Annual Conference 2010
Sr. Ramona Miller OSF
Presidential Address**

Happy Birthday everyone! Yes, we are celebrating the first year of the new organization of the Franciscan Federation—**new** bylaws, one year with the **new** board elected from the three **new** commissions, ... Have you ever attended a birthday party for a one year old child? The parents are ecstatic that they have come through the year with sleep deprivation and many new parenting trials and jublations; the grandparents look on admirably pleased that the family tree will continue to have branches... The painful and messy birthing process has been forgotten in the companionship of new life, and all are filled with wonder and hope for this child.

So with us as an organization; The competent midwives beginning with the Transformation Task Force of four years ago who passed on their procedure manual to the Implementation Task Force have all brought us to this one year birthday of our new organization. So, how are we doing? At this conference we have shown that we can walk on our own, and our baby talk is quickly becoming strong and confident with hope for the maturation process. Our present organization may be young, but it has a foundation that is 800 years old. This year is the 800th anniversary of Saint Francis' exhortation to those penitents who were inspired by his preaching and example to live the evangelical life, embracing Gospel living. That's right—800 years ago Saint Francis wrote the exhortation, the first chapter of which is the prologue to our 1982 Rule and Life of the brothers and sisters.¹ Francis wrote for the new penitents--the tertiaries--a vision, an articulation of their new found spirituality:

How happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things, and persevere in doing them because the Spirit of the Lord (Is. 11:2) will rest upon them and God will make a home and dwelling place with them (Jn 14:23). They are the children of the heavenly Father (Mt 5:45), whose works they do. They are the spouses, brothers and sisters, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 12:50).²

WE are mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ?? Yes. Did not Jesus Himself say that whoever does the will of my Father is my brother and sister and mother (Mt 12:50)? And Francis who took literally being the Gospel said

We are mothers when we bear Him in our hearts and bodies (1 Cor 6:20)with divine love and with pure and sincere consciences, and when we give birth to Him through our holy actions which must shine in example to others (Mt 5:16).³

I would like to offer three aspects of this motherhood for our consideration as we leave this assembly to go forth to shine as examples for others: 1) pregnancy, 2) birthing and 3), nurturing the new life.

Pregnancy

Saint Francis was comfortable with his own femininity, so much so that he could say “I am pregnant with the Word”. He clearly shows by word and example that the Word of God was the impetus for all his choice making, his lifestyle, his prayer... A true listener, a zealous student of the

¹ For further historical background, see *History of the Third Order Regular Rule* edited by Margaret Carney OSF, Jean Francois Godet-Calogeras, PH.D. and Suzanne Kush CSSF. Also, Margaret Carney OSF, “The ‘Letter’ of Fourteen Names: Reading ‘The Exhortation’”, in *Francis of Assisi History, Hagiography and Hermeneutics in the Early Documents*, ed. Jay Hammond (NY: New City Press, 2004), 90-104.

² For the comparison of the 1982 and 1987 translations, see “The 1982 Rule Text” in *History of the Third Order Regular Rule* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Pub., 2008):311.

³ Ibid. 311

Gospel, he exemplifies Jesus' teaching: *from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks* (Mt 12:34). We have the inspiring Word of God from Deuteronomy, that we do not need to travel across the sea, or climb the highest mountain to reach the sky, we have the Word, the mandate for our lives, within us.⁴ Yes, God never intended to make life difficult for us, - the Word of God is within us.

Clare's language of pregnancy can be found in her third letter to Agnes when she exhorts Agnes to cling to His most sweet mother who received Him in the enclosure of her holy womb. "Indeed,[she writes] *it is now clear that the soul of a faithful person, the most worthy of all creatures because of the grace of God, is greater than heaven itself, since the heavens and the rest of creation cannot contain their Creator; only a faithful soul is His dwelling place and throne...*

Saint Bonaventure wrote a small classic treatise on pregnancy and birthing. In his ***Bringing Forth Christ*** on the five feasts of the Child Jesus, he describes how the Son of God, Christ Jesus, is conceived spiritually in a devout soul. Touched by hope, repentant of desires for worldly things, resolved to lead a new life, the soul conceives by the gracious kindness from the Source of all Good, the Beloved from whom we receive every good and perfect gift.⁵

Pregnancy results from passionate love. We passionate Franciscans embrace the Word of God and experience the Spirit of God at work within us, illuminating our minds and enflaming the desire of our hearts to be about proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ by our lives as well as by our example.

Birthing

Pregnancy, a stage of inner nurturing of new life, becomes externally manifest for us penitents in the good deeds that we do.-- *we give birth to through our holy actions*. During this AFC we honored our members who were chosen by their congregations as persons alive with passion, and persons who allowed the light to shine through them as a beacon of light for others, especially the marginalized. Their witness stirs our hearts because they are us, and their stories call forth in us a renewed commitment for the mission we are all called to.

Birthing the Social Presence of Christ by our mission and ministries truly gives glory and honor to God whose Love we bear. We are familiar with the statement from Matthew's Gospel, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them"(Mt 18:20), **the Social Presence of Christ**. What if we extended our interpretation of the birthing process? We birth the Social Presence of Christ whenever we intentionally offer a loving thought and words, intentionally extend God's love in specific contexts, intentionally visit with a brother or sister who seems isolated from their local community. I believe that Francis' statement of giving birth to Jesus Christ would happen so profoundly that peoples would say, "Look at how they love one another. Look at how they are making a difference in their neighborhoods" This Love that we bear and give birth to in social context has its origins in the heart of God.

Our good deeds, our holy actions, all flow from the heart of God⁶. God's mission of overflowing self-diffusive love is channeled through us. A self-assessment, measuring tool, of the ways we are on mission, the ways that we birth the Presence of Christ, could include the following:

- Praying with heartfelt compassion for our brothers and sisters who are in need
- Advocating for justice for the oppressed

⁴ See Dt.30:11-14.

⁵ See Bonaventure, *Bringing Forth Christ: Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*.

⁶ See *The Cord* (55/6 (November/December, 2005) for articles from AFC 2005 on Franciscan Mission

- Initiating joyful greetings toward those who are different from us when we meet them on the elevators, on the streets, in the hallways of our institutions
- Reverencing creation by our respectful use of material resources

Nurturing

As I continue to describe motherhood, I want to alert the brothers in our midst that I am not speaking of gender specific qualities but of the qualities we all have through our shared life in the Trinity. The creation story in Genesis depicts men and women created equally in God's image (Gen 1:27). We know God's maternal love in our lives over the years. We have known in times of pain and grief God's promise: "Even though a mother forgets her infant, I will never forget you." God never abandons us, and God has called us to serve our brothers and sisters with God's own maternal love. Language about God as mother carries a unique power to express that aspect of human relationship that is generative and caring. Jesus used such language for himself, comparing himself to a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them from harm (Mt 23:37).

Healthy Motherhood requires a non-possessiveness so that children may become mature and independent. All of our congregations are in various stages of deliberation about the long range plans for our institutions so I do not intend to imply that motherhood is to continue to sustain the children that we brought into existence in our corporate ministries. Using the family metaphor, the children are parented at home until they reach the stage of maturation when they need to break the ties and make their own way in society. In recent years we have all faced the fact that we "let go" of some of our favorite ministries to reassess our current resources and prioritize what we desire and need to do for the future.

As Heirs of an 800 year old legacy to care for the marginalized and the poor and vulnerable of society, we Franciscans are asking ourselves "What is ours to do in the coming months and years?" When our founders and foundresses came to a young country of the United States of America, they responded without reserve to the pressing needs for education and health care that they encountered among God's people. Education and health care are needs that still exist today, but have been taken over by systems now in place. I invite us to ask ourselves "what is our call today to nurture the life of the poor, the uneducated, and in many cases, undocumented immigrants among us"?

Our Motherhood

As the Franciscan Federation, we've adopted the resolution to work for passage of legislation for comprehensive immigration reform with family unity and a path toward citizenship as priorities. This is God's maternal love operative in us. We are mothers who desire to protect the rights of the vulnerable poor. Recall how St. Francis exhorted his followers to live in this world as pilgrims and strangers (1 Pt 2:1), persons in solidarity with the poor. With that spirit of Franciscan exhortation, I invite us to respond to one or more of the following concrete actions:

- 1) To feel God's own visceral maternal energy directed toward the immigrants in the United States
- 2) To personally adopt a daily prayer for those immigrants who are in most need of our help to keep their families together
- 3) To develop a mutual relationship with an immigrant family--to share stories of our lives as pilgrims and strangers (identify with them)
- 4) To support and encourage educational and awareness raising events on Comprehensive Immigration Reform
- 5) To speak up with accurate information in response to such phrases as "people are illegal and committing a crime by being here... Why don't they follow our rules?"
- 6) To call or write our US Senators and Representatives exhorting them to pass legislation making our country a welcoming place for the stranger

Let us exercise nurturing love for the immigrants so that when we gather for AFC 2011 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin next summer it will include the celebration of the passage of the Comprehensive Immigration Reform bill.

Let us go forth with passionate energy, maternal generativity, birthing the WORD of God among us!