

AFC Keynote Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Franciscan Federation
2016 Celebration: Fifty Years of God's Love and Mercy
"We Have Observed These Things: Past, Present, Future"

The Mission Statement (MS) of the Franciscan Federation is to "promote the exploration and study of the Franciscan Evangelical Life...for these times and for our world." More specifically, the Federation functions "so that the brothers and sisters can better live the Third Order Regular call to conversion, contemplation, poverty and humility." (MS) My intention is to identify (as Margaret Carney had planned to do by her original title for this keynote before her life's pilgrimage shifted) how faithfully the Federation has "observe[d] these things" (Art 32) and draw out implications for the Federation. The 1982 Third Order Regular (TOR) Rule and Life, one of the Federation's great contribution and the Annual Franciscan Conferences (AFC) will be the backdrop. Francis's *Letter to the Faithful* will help define just what 'these things' are to celebrate the good of the past. Then honor the power of the present through insights laid out in the beginning chapters that peek in Chapter 6, Life in Poverty that inspires a new generation and is exemplified in Elizabeth of Hungary. Last, enlightened by the last chapters of our *Rule and Life* a gospel reflection will challenge us to grasp fresh possibilities for the future.

But first a bit of introduction for I am here with Margaret's encouragement. She has been my teacher, mentor and advisor for my Franciscan studies. She has passed to me and others knowledge of our Rule and Life and also a passion for the evangelical life. We are here for jubilee which coincides with the papal Year of Mercy. As the Federation, we have spent this past year in the work of Sabbath to hallow the fiftieth year. Jubilee suggests thick listening moves us to compassionate care. After honoring the fiftieth year we must, like Francis, be propelled into the work of "holy newness" (1C103) for which he so longed. The real focus I believe for this AFC will be the "Dare to Image" component. So from this Jubilee AFC, may our vision be greater than our memories. We go forth courageously converted once again from a paschal experience. As witnesses to the resurrected Christ and committed to "observing these things." We become fresh for "the one thing...the Spirit of God at work within us." (Art 32)

A. Celebrate the Good of the Past

Historian Michael Cusato, OFM has shed light on that call which introduces both the Third Order *Rules* Francis's *Letter to the Faithful*. Cusato states it is truly "an exhortation written by Francis on behalf of the whole Minorite movement to the penitents...who have become associated with the movement by a desire to live in accord with the values espoused by Francis." Scholar David Flood, OFM adds that verifiably the specific and narrow focus "the faithful" being addressed were and are those penitents who turn "to a Christian practice of life by taking more seriously the injunction to help those in need." We are these penitents called to "bring forth from within

themselves fruits worthy of true penance.” (LtF 4) This, historically, is our call to conversion, not only announcing the in-breaking of the Reign of God, but actually "give birth through a holy activity which must shine as an example before others." (LtF 10) The call is manifest both in presence and witness. Bonaventure may have the image in his consideration of the stigmata when he speaks of both an “ecstasy of contemplation” and an “ecstasy of compassion.” (LM13)

Cusato notes the penitent must be known not only as a preacher as emphasized in the *Longer Version*, but also by acts, emphatically by doing penance as specified in the *Shorter Version*. Francis “showed mercy” (Test 3) after his initial encounter with a leper. He claims this action of mercy for everyone and later as a priority for those who possess authority (LtM 17) to exercise that hallmark manner: mercy.

“O how happy and blessed are those men and women.” (LtF 5) Cusato notes that this beatitude Francis applied to the classic description of male and female penitents of the Third Order living in their own homes, i.e. *in domibus suis*.” The *Shorter Version* is directed to lay penitents who, like the friars, are also called to do penance. By carefully adding a line from John 17:20 not cited in the *Longer Version*, Francis’s intention to remind us that Jesus is praying for his disciples, i.e. those already living the life of penance. We are reminded by these ‘letters’ to be faithful so that through our vowed living together we manifest our belief in a God of relationship, a communion of beings. Thus even here and now, “the one who reads and does these things will find life and experience salvation from the Lord!” (LtF 1900 published title)

I believe throughout the years the Federation has faithfully observed these things by providing “national and regional opportunities to collaborate, gather and celebrate.” (MS) Our Annual Franciscan Conferences (AFC) have manifested both a presence and a place where we have given witness. Faithful to the Vision the Federation has engaged speakers and membership to “deepen the understanding of this [TOR] charism” “in order to share this gift with the Church and the World.” It was at an AFC that scholar Joe Chinnici, OFM proclaimed “evangelical life”, Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ brought Duns Scotus alive for the whole Franciscan family and Ilia Delio, OSF gave new meaning to *conversion* as a life in evolution, to name just a few. And we can recall how these instructions have been incarnated with a purposeful act of justice each time.

I bring up these examples for more than just remembering them in a jubilee moment; those times were meant to lift the very words of Francis’s *Letter to the Faithful* and celebrate the good of the past. Moreover, Pope Francis challenges us during this jubilee year to develop a “more tolerant, more patient, and more tender attitude,” cultivating a “revolution in tenderness.” May this encourage us to more consciously participate in the

fundamental experience of encounter approaching the Other as sister/brother and proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, imitated by Francis: mercy, manifest both in word and deed. And may we more boldly explore and embrace the lay character of the Third Order which lies at the heart of the *Letter to the Faithful* while at the same time be more intentional to nurture the TOR distinction for the greater Franciscan family.

B. Honor the Power of the Present

Given my fifteen or so years teaching the Franciscan tradition to novices of Franciscan Common Novitiate (FCN) and now in a Franciscan university setting it has been a privilege for me through the Federation's ongoing formation to pass on the knowledge and passion for our TOR distinction around the globe. With a special focus on the TOR distinction in expressions of poverty, prayer, the common life, the nature of works, I have seen the members of the Federation come to own its particularity of this basically lay character within the Franciscan movement. I have used on Francis as founder, Clare as "abbess of the penitents" (Bull of Canonization), and TOR models especially Elizabeth of Hungary, patroness of the Third Order. Canonical recognition was given specifically to Elizabeth who devoted her heart, hands and words in making the compassion and mercy of God present among the needy of society. She is our model fully integrating the daily itinerancy of Francis and the contemplative stability of Clare to give the Franciscan penitential life a social aim so intrinsic to the Third Order.

Elizabeth was madly in love with Love which spilled out in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. She loved Love feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, caring for the sick, the lepers, less fortunate. And she did this with others-at first her handmaids and loving husband, Ludwig, and later with those whom she formed community. Elizabeth's love impelled her to act, and along with her intelligence, made her wisely know that united efforts would be sustainable. She added, for all, the requirement of community life, in order to make charity and prayer more fecund and effective. This was made clear for the Third Order in 1521 from Leo X *Inter Coetera Nostro Regimini* with the distinction of living in "continuous penance and mercy or active charity" (Ch IV). This also formally established two entities, the regular and secular paths, respectfully, as women and men living in community professing vows and as women and men living with their families making promises. Perhaps some members, even some congregations have drifted into a more Third Order Secular lifestyle. It seems our Associate/Co-Journer programs are somewhat of a replication of a Third Order secular formation. Might we dare to image a more federated aim to these efforts for their efficiency and effectiveness?

The first two chapters declare our TOR identity and proclaim the rich history about inclusion and welcoming in contemporary language at the same time urging us to share our deep story. In greater detail Chapters 3, 4, and 5 define the conditions necessary for such a life of *servitium caritatis*. This TOR tradition is one that Elizabeth

demonstrated: a contemplative stance (Ch. 3) bound by a single hearted love of Love itself (Ch. 4) and expressed in a specific *minoritas* manner of doing (Ch. 5). Elizabeth, I believe truly lived our charism “as poor people” (Ch. 5) not simply like or with the downtrodden. As in Francis’s imitation of Christ, we, too, must literally become poor, i.e. the poor One (Ch. 6).

The preconditions laid out in the first chapters of our Rule and Life lead to a Life in Poverty (Ch 6) the apex toward which conversion is accomplished. The self-emptying of *eros* yields to where there is only *agape*. By becoming poor, we become a living sign to the Sign. The 1969 document *Go to My Brethren* states our core value conversion is to become the poor Christ which “will then become not a system of practices confined to the novitiate, but a style of life with a preferential love for God with increasing generosity and discernment of spirit.”

This self-emptying was explored by one student inspired by the Franciscan message, reflecting on Elizabeth. In light of Pope Francis’s recent encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*, the student got excited about a new focus on the role of ecology to help shape a more just society and to attend to the cry of the poor. He wrote about the Franciscan manner saying that “access to water needs a communal effort for it is entangled in many economic and political issues. Water is becoming commodified in such a way that obfuscates its role in the conflict.” An FCN novice came to understand the need for a contemplative view of water leading to a singular focus on access for all, which clearly calls for a different “manner of working.” Her congregation now contributes toward the building of water wells to support a disadvantaged community. These two new comers of our tradition accurately illustrates how Francis, too, saw the circumstances in his time as living *uptown* to the detriment of those *downtowners*. Honoring the power of the present challenges hearers of this message as ones living upstream to own the impact on so many who live downstream. Pope Francis’s message reverberating in our hearts “to become a poor church,” would be fruitful when we convert to live and act “as poor ones.” (Ch. 5)

In *AFC’s Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creations Proposals*, I believe the Franciscan Federation has observed so many of these things by helping identify and magnify the cries of the poor and to suggest ways that we could respond together. As such, poverty is not a vow we take, but a lifestyle that pulls us together and promises strategic focus for our stewardship in the world. The resolutions from nuclear disarmament to human trafficking, from closing the School of the Americas to countering global abuses and addressing immigration issues, embraced by the Federation faithful under the guidance of our patron, Elizabeth, have allowed us to act much more powerfully in solidarity and with intelligence as poor ones. As active and contemplative evangelical members, we are working to be in right relationship with those places in the world where suffering and

deprivation are deepest and most resistant to healing and reconciliation. We are the body of Christ and called to identify, literally, with the suffering of the world today. As we enjoy God's extravagant love and goodness, we have and must continue to allow our gratitude to move us into becoming poor for a fruitful transformation of the world. May we live conscious of our presence of communion as the fruit of the evangelical conversion of life and in a witness to do penance in each encounter so that we and others may have "life to the full." (Jn 10:10)

C. Grasp Fresh Possibilities for the Future

Turning to the future 2013 AFC Keynote speaker, Ilia Delio, OSF offers the idea that, "Christian life is a commitment to love, to give birth to God in one's own life and to become midwives of divinity in this evolving cosmos." We are to be whole-makers of love in a world of the broken. Delio pointed out that creativity and invention would forge the modern path of evolution, but also that science alone cannot fulfill the cosmic longing for completion. God rises up at the heart of cosmic evolution through the power of love, which science and technology can facilitate but not surpass. The future of the earth, therefore, lies not in science and technology, but in the spiritual power of world religions and the power of love. In her keynote address, Delio put forth this challenge: "We are born out of love, we exist in love and we are destined for eternal love. . . . It is time to reinvent ourselves in love." This calls for a full lifestyle change. Personal transformation and social transformation are connected. The world cannot be changed by love to become just unless we are changed by love to become whole, but we cannot be made whole without engaging in the work of making the world whole.

Embracing the power of poverty in the concrete here and now has implications. In "observing the gospel" (Art 1) to be poor is clearly evident in the last three chapters of our Rule and Life. Perhaps from here we can see fresh possibilities for the future. Our emptying allows us to become rich in the life of Christ. I have learned from my own encounters that the antidote to poverty is not riches but rather relationships rooted and born simply in love. The Franciscan movement in poverty is one toward an evangelical life in relationships – *fraternitas*. This is a choice we make as TOR: to literally live *fraternitas*. Gathered in relationship with our brother Jesus (Ch 7) we can hear the Word (Ch 8). As in *Vita Consecrata* (#92) "Community life is the privileged place in which to discern and accept God's will, and to walk together with one mind and heart...Each individual engages in a fruitful dialogue with others to discover the Father's will." From this we are sent forth (Ch 9). *Fraternitas* defining us as evangelical and, with all Gospel people, is mandated by our TOR Rule and Life. I believe with a Clare-like holy resistance to a restoration movement, it is our gift to pass on and be carried into the future for religious life even as the current form reaches completion.

Trace the terms Jesus used in addressing his followers through John's gospel. Called first by name then shifting from *apostles* to *disciples*, and finally building to the Last Supper discourse, where Jesus calls them *friends*. But as Easter people, we know the story doesn't end there, so lovely is the experience of friendship. John describes the encounter with Mary Magdala (Jn 20:17). The resurrected Jesus not in some generic call to humanity, "go to my *brethren*" but clearly specifies the *haecceitas* of the individual "go tell my *brothers/sisters* and tell them I will meet them in Galilee." In Acts, Ananias' mission is to find Saul where upon he puts his hand on Paul's shoulder with fear and identifies him not by name but simply as *brother* (Acts 9:17). I believe Jesus is the very mystery that binds us and the whole human family in communion. Jesus' salvific act makes him brother to all and reaffirms God as "Our Father." Jesus gave his life to communicate an inclusive sonship and daughterhood. Paul used words like "adopted" and "coheirs with Christ" to make the same point. Pope Francis calls us to become "experts in communion." In these times of great polarities, communion is that most sought after "worthy fruit of penance." (LTF 4) Gospel harmony is born of long, demanding, and persistent efforts to recognize Christ in the Other. We offer an alternative choice; we are called to daily decide to love the *Other* as sister/brother and God as "our Father." We choose the common good over self-interest; we choose discipline to enhance the quality of our common mission; we manifest joy in the privileged moments of a common life. I believe this is the heart of our TOR charism, faithfully celebrated at every AFC.

We have been faithful in observing these things as evidenced in the stories of our peacemaker honorees who exemplify how we choose to imitate, more than merely worship, the Lord. They are hopeful possibilities to a preferred future. They are gift of breath and fire for others like Elizabeth of Hungary, Mary Ann Cope, Thea Bowman, a partnership in Cameroon and a joint provincial adventure in South Carolina. We hold incarnation in common as Frankfort'ers, Redwood City, Aston, as the many parts of the Felician merger or the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities union-even the distinctiveness of 'Al's Gals' each in the particularity of smaller institutional foundations. We have networked to give birth to a common Franciscan prayer book, AFCU, FCN, and life to FAN, the IFC-TOR to name just a few collaborative efforts. Scholar Kenan Osborne, OFM says charism is "constitutively drenched in temporality." I believe it is also for TOR, drenched in locality. Certainly, we belong to this sacred time of jubilee, but we are also called to be faithful in our particular physical locale. AFC Peacemakers in finance and art, leadership and ecology are those who birth fresh possibilities locally for a brighter future globally. It is not a coincidence that our religious title is "sister/brother" but a call of which we might be more conscious about acting in such a prophetic manner.

And so, a concluding word as we go forth from this anniversary celebration. The TOR charism comes alive and draws us together to listen, to trust what is as the jumping-off point and work together for what can be. I believe

God will once again bring yet more life and wholeness out of seeming chaos and even death. We must live and act with faith in the resurrection poised for a *different* future, a shift to love, to create a society less destructive, more peaceful and more whole. We are to become that dream of our merciful God, as *ekklesia*, living *fraternitas* as a contrast communion to societal fractures. The newness will be how, where, with whom and to what aim, we choose to incarnate it. Like Francis did, we need strip and step outside the walls of security to stand in a different place poised for holy newness because as Albert Einstein notes: "We cannot solve problems with the same consciousness used when we created them."

Forming such relationships was precisely Jesus's mission, Paul's missionary strategy, Francis's and Clare's journey and dream for the Middle Ages and Elizabeth of Hungary's intention of the *beguine* communities. So, too, were our founders and foundresses and, I believe the very hope in establishing the Federation, drawing folks together as sisters/brothers, Jesus' disciples to make the gospel message visible: Jesus is Lord (rather than Caesar or self); sharing abundance and living as poor (rather than accumulating wealth); nonviolence and suffering (rather than aligning with prestige). As our witness takes form as a group of sisters and brothers living, loving, doing penance through, with and in our brother Jesus, may the vision for the future Federation deepen this call as we consider the breadth and depth of relationships in transforming the Federation. Our core value conversion bears fruit in communion. May the TOR evangelical life be fruitful as a blessing in the world wide Franciscan movement.

My deepest wish, as is our sister Margaret's, is that we spend all the life and love we have tending the Third Order charism, in general, and the TOR, specifically, as gift for the church and the world, daring to image God's transformational love and mercy simply as faithful, poor penitents. In Margaret's words, "These have been decades of sealing anew our penitential and Franciscan covenant with the Most High and with each other. *We should indeed be glad.*" We know not what lies ahead, but we forge on nonetheless, not sitting before an evening sunset, but rather dancing together in the morning rain (Ps 149), peaceful that "whoever will observe these things shall be filled with the blessing of the most High Father in heaven, and on earth with the blessing of His beloved Son, with the Holy Spirit, and with all virtues and with all the saints." (Art 32) Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy." May the Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on us.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me,

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Resources

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