

HUMILITY

We come to this presentation as the culmination of our reflection on the four values. Today our focus will be living in *a spirit of humility*. In the major life of Francis, Bonaventure wrote “Humility, the guardian and embellishment of all the virtues, had filled Francis with abundance. In his own opinion he was nothing but a sinner, though in truth he was a mirror and the splendor of every kind of holiness.”ⁱ Our contemporary exemplar of humility, Pope Francis, teaches us the essence of humility. The humble person honestly accepts themselves with their God-given gifts and interacts with others in the same loving manner whether the other person is a head of state, or a homeless person. As our Rule states: “let them neither dominate nor seek power over one another.”ⁱⁱ An American author, David Brooks, wrote that humility relieves you of the awful stress of trying to be superior all the time.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our Franciscan word for this virtue is living as *minores*.

I will offer three aspects for living in a spirit of humility: 1) personal humility which is self-acceptance; 2) the challenge of humility for congregational ministers, and 3) reviewing Franciscan *minores*.

Personal Humility

All virtue begins with imitation of Jesus who “did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness.”^{iv} Following the conversion of St. Francis’ embrace of the leper, he happily went to the leprosarium to minister among these poorest of the poor. This exemplifies *minores* as an operative virtue for Franciscan ministry. Clare’s conversion has a similar trait; she was not satisfied to give alms to the poor, but rather left her noble status to make the life of the poor her own life. The Franciscan movement expresses identification with the poor Christ who lives among us.

Our Seraphic Doctor, Bonaventure, in a sermon for Christmas, described the humility of God in this manner: “God has humbly bent down and lifted the dust of our nature into unity with His own person.”^v God came to us in a particular manner, in the person of Jesus whose poverty and humility expressed God’s Love for us. God’s desired to lift us up by becoming one of us. In the sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into God’s own life; a life that calls us “out of darkness into

His marvelous light.”^{vi} Through baptism, we “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27) and we walk **humbly** in the newness of life because in the words of St. Paul, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”

In 1995 I was visiting in South Africa, in the diocese of Tzaneen. There I had a powerful and impactful experience of witnessing the Baptism of one hundred adults and children. They had been catechized by a deacon, and waited for two years for missionary priests to come for a worship service for the Baptisms and Eucharist. Their joy expressed in the fullness of their singing, their clapping and dancing affected me deeply. I was humbled by their witness of joy in becoming a member of the Body of Christ. This is the core of our humility, - that God lifts us up to share in God’s own life. Through this shared life in the Trinity we extend God’s love to others.

Consider the humility of Jesus who becomes flesh in Mary’s womb—the physical characteristics Jesus acquires are from the genetic pool that Mary has in her ovaries. The lowliness of Jesus is to submit to the darkness of developing in the womb of this Israelite teenager. He must accept the biology of her humanity, and the physical form of her Israelite family. In a wild imaginative thought, I wondered if Jesus in the Trinity before the Incarnation might say to the Father: “I don’t like heat. Could I be born to an Inuit woman near the Arctic circle?” But, God would say: “No, you are promised to the people of the Covenant who live in Judah; there are pre-ordained conditions for your birth.”

I would invite us today to reflect on our humble beginnings. We did not choose the ethnic origin that we carry in our genetic make-up. Through an act of love of our parents, we came into being in a specific time, a specific place, and a specific culture. In our mother’s womb our physicality was determined: our bone structure, our susceptibility to certain physical weaknesses; maybe genes that are pre-disposed to spawn cancer, or diabetes, or a familial tremor; the color of our hair and eyes aligns us with our ancestors. Our self-acceptance of our God-given uniqueness and natural talents enables us to interact humbly with others, truthfully with love.

Article #18 of our Rule reminds us that we are “poor people...to whom the Lord has given the grace of serving or working with our hands.” We acknowledge that each member of our congregations has a special “grace” – we call it a talent or a gift-- for building up the kingdom of God. And, as leaders, we take into consideration the requirement to provide ongoing education

and enrichment for the furthering of these gifts for the greater mission of caring for the Body of Christ.

Humility for Congregational Ministers

Election to leadership in our congregations is its own school for learning humility. The expectation of being sister and brother, while at the same time being a person with major responsibility that affects the lives of the members, requires the virtue of humility. By virtue, I mean the habitual and firm disposition to do good, -an inner spiritual strength that moves us toward our full humanity. The virtue of humility creates an inner disposition of listening carefully to the good of the other, and responding with the truth from our perspective. It helps us to keep in mind the etymology of the word "dialog:" it is from the Greek where "dia" means "through" and "logue" means "word." The word of God coming through the other gives us a truth that we humbly listen to in order to learn and engage further in the conversation.

What about conflict resolution? How does humility assist us in resolving conflicts? Patiently listening and repeating what one has heard is a good beginning for a conversation to resolve conflict. Does the other person feel that we have heard their point of view? Do they feel that we understand the source of the conflict from their perspective? And, in responding, do we use "I" statements spoken with respect for the other? There is a phrase in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians that describes this: "speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ."^{vii} If we speak our truth without love we may injure others. And, if we speak with so much love that we dilute the truth, we weaken our relationships and trust. Speaking the truth in love builds up the Body of Christ until we all are united with the head, Christ.

It is our ongoing conversion in prayer that prepares us for having the virtue of humility so that we truly embody our TOR Rule # 19: "and let them never want to be over others. Instead they should be servants and subjects to every human creature for the Lord's sake." Clare, in the *form of life* for her Sisters wrote:

"Let whoever is elected reflect upon the kind of burden she has undertaken on herself and to Whom *she must render an account* of the flock committed to her. Let her also strive to preside

over the others more by her virtues and holy behavior than by her office, so that, moved by her example, the sisters may obey her more out of love than out of fear.”^{viii}

The responsibility of leadership requires us to utilize the means to develop shared decision-making. Clare did this at San Damiano by consulting with **all** the Sisters for whatever concerned the welfare of the monastery, keeping in mind that “the Lord frequently reveals what is better to the youngest.”^{ix}

Franciscan *minores*

Before our new 1982 Rule was adopted, there was an International Assembly in Rome to hear presentations on the historical and theological background for each portion of the Rule. At that time, Sister Marianne Jungbluth spoke on serving with humility, saying that St. Francis admired the humility of Christ who though He was Lord, had a special love for the poor, the little one, the despised and the exiled. Following Christ’s example, “Francis shows us how we can realize this way of being “minor’ in daily life, in interpersonal relationships, and in our dealings with all.”^x

Being “minor” is fundamental to our penitential life. Following in the “footprints of Jesus”^{xi} projects us into the ongoing and daily reality of God’s little ones, the marginal, the helpless, and the unwanted. St. Francis concretely expressed his experience of *minores* by working among the lepers. The lives of the earliest Franciscan laypersons, Luchesio and Buondonna, demonstrate that the humility of serving the marginalized characterized the Franciscan movement. We, in the Third Order Regular, have impressive histories in the stories of our founders and foundresses. What is ours to do today and in the coming years? For some of us, it is required to assess whether we need to leave well-established ministries to reach out to newly marginalized persons, such as the refugees from war and famine. Each generation of Third Order Franciscans has had, and will have, new situations to address in the manner of living *minores*.

We are edified by those Franciscans who have joined other religious in the Sisters of Migrant Project/Sicily sponsored by the USIG. The project’s focus is to be “in the street” forming relationships with the local migrants, refugees.^{xii} These virtuous women are a bridge between those migrants who come ashore in Sicily and the people of the area inundated with the newcomers. The multi-lingual community of Sisters from different charisms represent a new form

of religious living for the future. It requires great humility personally and communally to be about this mission.

Conclusion

In summary, I offer the suggestion that pondering the call for ongoing conversion of living in the spirit of humility is a multi-layered thought process. We name our personal attributes God has given us to share with others. As congregational ministers, we examine our humble stance before our members. And, in the context of Franciscan history, we assess how we are doing to live poor lives with the poor. All the while, we claim with faith that it is Jesus whose life we live, and whose life we share. Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the meaning of humility grows in us. As we appropriate interiorly this humble life of Jesus, we better understand how it is that we can be filled with joy when we live “among the poor, the weak, the sick, the unwanted, the oppressed, and the destitute” (TOR Rule 21).

ⁱ LM VI, 1

ⁱⁱ TOR Rule 25

ⁱⁱⁱ David Brooks, *Road to Character* (NY: Random House, 2015), 205.

^{iv} Phil 2:6-7

^v Bonaventure, “Sermon II on the Nativity of the Lord,” *What Manner of Man?* Trans. Zachary Hayes OFM (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974, 1989), 57.

^{vi} *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 323.

^{vii} Eph 4:15

^{viii} FLCI, 8

^{ix} FLCI, 18

^x Marianne Jungbluth, FHF, “How to Serve and Work,” *History of the Third Order Regular Rule* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2008), 284.

^{xi} RegnB XXII, 1

^{xii} <http://www.internationalunionsuperiorsgeneral.org/mission/migrants/> (accessed 9/6/2016)