

AUTUMN 2013

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as ministry

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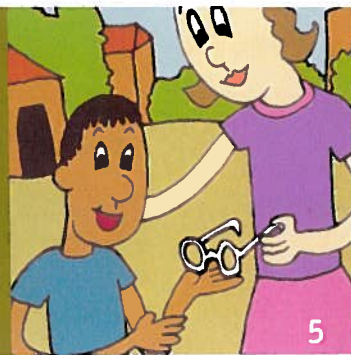
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St. Francis Preaching to the Birds by Giotto di Bondone (ca. 1267-1337)

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Trusteeship as ministry

This summer, trustees of Franciscan colleges gathered to discuss how board work is God's work. In Trust talked to two of the conference organizers to learn more.

By Christa R. Klein

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY and Father John O'Connor believe that serving on a board is a form of ministry. And one of their goals is to help board members believe it too. This past summer, Sister Margaret and Father John spoke at a program titled "Trusteeship as Ministry," which was sponsored by the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities. What made the event distinct was the targeted audience: Franciscan sisters and friars who fulfill the dual roles as leaders in their religious congregations and as board members of Franciscan educational, health, and service institutions. (For a more complete description of the program, see <http://bit.ly/FranciscanInstitute2013>.)

Christa R. Klein, former president of In Trust, interviewed the two in order to explore the topic further.

Q What prompted you to convene Franciscan trustees for this program?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: As our sisters and friars age, it's becoming more difficult to find persons to serve in administrative roles in our colleges and on our boards. We're seeing in some instances a

dearth of persons who have the scope of knowledge and professional experience to be effective trustees. How can we address that lack of breadth of experience except through education?

Q How does the variety of governance structures among the institutions fit in the picture?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: In some cases, Franciscan institutions have a two-tiered membership — that is, there is a board made up of lay and ordained trustees, and, over that, a member corporation made up of members of the sponsoring religious community. For those schools that don't have a two-tiered board, chances are that members of the religious community — that is, the Franciscans — are a numerical minority.

FATHER JOHN O'CONNOR: At one time, boards such as those serving St. Bonaventure and Siena College were primarily friars from Holy Name Province. Some years ago, changes were made and, as Sister Margaret mentioned, now the Franciscan friars and sisters are still on the boards but are a minority.



It seems there are two issues here: One is preparing Franciscans to be good board members and the other is helping lay members understand the distinctive Franciscan ministry and mission — their “charism.”

FATHER JOHN O’CONNOR: Because we have a Franciscan president of St. Bonaventure, we work closely to help trustees understand the Franciscan charism and the charism of the specific university.

Thinking institutionally

Sister Margaret, at the conference you spoke of institutions as “vehicles of grace.” Why did you choose that language?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: When I talk to members of our religious communities, I stress that holding on to our institutions is a powerful act of ministry and witness in today’s culture. This is to counteract a tendency that cropped up in the ‘60s and through the ‘80s at the height of the period when liberation theology was making a big impact on theological education and spirituality in Catholic circles. Some said we should divest ourselves of our institutions in favor of direct ministry to the poor.

In 1974, the Jesuit scholar Thomas E. Clarke wrote an article titled “Societal Grace: For a New Pastoral Strategy” [which was published in a book called *Soundings: A Task Force on Social Consciousness and Ignatian Spirituality*]. In the article, he argued the danger of

assuming that institutions are always vehicles of oppression. His point was that institutions are neutral. The people in them decide whether the institutions are vehicles of sin or grace.

It’s important to use institutions to mediate grace. For example, if we don’t maintain institutions such as our hospitals and universities, we lose the power to assist the poor by offering discounted care in emergency rooms or awarding scholarships to students from low-income families. I’m pleading with people to recognize that our institutions are powers for good, and if we don’t care about them, we’re going to lose them.

Your thesis that trusteeship is ministry rests on this powerful assumption. Would you say that just as they did in the days of massive European immigration, American Catholic institutions protect Catholic teaching against the pressures of anti-Catholicism? It seems that recent government rulings challenge the religious freedom of Catholics and other Christians to express their beliefs in church-related institutions.

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: Yes. The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities is now looking at what’s going on with public policy and higher education, and who’s funding what. It’s clear that the playing field isn’t level. When I speak to board members, I provide examples as to how a board functions to protect the institution and guard its freedom to use its resources, whether it’s for the

empowerment of the poor or to take a stand on a controversial political position.

For example, it might involve a board weighing in with a faculty that is not comfortable with an overt claim of Catholic identity. Many of our faculties are happy to be called “Franciscan,” but they may not be so ready to embrace an identity as a Catholic institution, which may be seen as more restrictive. So the idea is that lay trustees are furthering the Church’s work with an astonishing level of effectiveness, but their work isn’t always recognized as ministry.

FATHER JOHN O’CONNOR: It works both ways. When members of religious orders serve as trustees, they’re not just mascots for the sponsoring team. They have a responsibility to understand what the institution is about and what the endeavor of higher education is so that they have credibility with faculty, staff, administration, and the lay trustees.

They also have a responsibility to communicate the charism of the institution in cooperation with the administration of the institution. This helps lay persons understand the uniqueness of Franciscan institutions or the institutions of other religious communities. What’s the history? What’s the tradition? How is that translated into the teaching experience on the campuses? Through interaction between the religious and the lay trustees, we come to a common understanding of why the institution was founded and what it is that makes it unique.

An 800-year heritage

Both Sister Margaret Carney and Father John O’Connor are Franciscans — members of a Catholic religious tradition that harks back to their 13th-century founder, St. Francis of Assisi, who embraced poverty and dedicated himself wholly to God’s service. Francis himself is known for going to the Holy Land and engaging in a religious dialogue with the sultan of Egypt. His followers were also tireless missionaries, soon spreading their message around the world. Franciscan friars reached Beijing by 1299, the Philippines by 1577, and California by 1769. Franciscans were especially influential as early explorers and settlers in the Southwestern United States and in French Canada.

Today, the various Franciscan orders for men and women sponsor 24 colleges and universities in the United States. Carney is president of **St. Bonaventure University** in Allegany, New York, and board chair of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. O’Connor is the provincial minister of **Holy Name Province**, a regional division of the Order of Friars Minor, one of the main Franciscan communities for men, which sponsors both St. Bonaventure and **Siena College**.



Probing a charisma

Q Are there any aspects of the Franciscan charisma that are hard to translate into commitment to trusteeship as ministry?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: When we invite members to join our communities, we use images that depict works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless. Those are the works that attract people who want to serve society. I think boards do that — they just don't do it directly. But they do make things happen by voting on a budget, or reviewing policies, or paying attention to a strategic plan.

Those are works of mercy, even though they don't get reflected in the PR of a religious institution. The picture in the publicity brochure is the person in the soup kitchen, not the person approving the budget. It's subtle but very real. As a trustee you don't always feel a direct sense of satisfaction. I think administrations need to create experiences that keep trustees in touch with traditional and nontraditional works of mercy.

Q What are some examples that illustrate the challenges of trusteeship?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: Making the tough calls. Asking, "Is the president effective?" "Is it time to ask the person to step down?" "Has there been some egregious violation?"

It's up to the board to decide what actions to take in those regards. Franciscans, by and large, don't enjoy being hatchet people. Sometimes the level of difficulty of a decision is not understood until you're in the midst of it, and sometimes it's in making difficult decisions that religious representatives can help lead.

FATHER JOHN O'CONNOR: In 30 years on the board of St. Bonaventure, I recall two times when the college faced difficult decisions related to the president. One was an athletic scandal

some years ago, and the other was when the president — who was a fine person — lacked certain competencies.

What's difficult is that leadership involves the ability to forgive but also the willingness to judge. We find forgiveness very easy because of our formation and training, but when we have to make critical and difficult judgments, you'll often hear board members from the religious community saying, "Oh, I don't want to do that. It's not my charisma; it's not my gift." Yet when you're on a board you have to be willing to be a part of both sides of leadership — the judgmental side as well as the reconciling or the pastoral side of acceptance.

Q How do you teach board members to address challenging issues?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: For us it's critical that the provincial leader is also a strong board leader. For example, John is on our trusteeship and finance committees. Unfortunately, the lay board members don't always appreciate and understand the extensive background of our religious trustees. Religious trustees bring much to the table because of their ministry experience, so can be effective on a variety of committees, not only the committees that deal with mission and ministry.

FATHER JOHN O'CONNOR: On the other hand, our religious trustees need to be open to learning about new things. They're not there just to talk about their own ministry, but to contribute on several levels. They bring specific skills to the task, but they shouldn't be passive. If they don't understand finance or student development, they need to keep an open ear and be willing to do some studying.

Q Who communicates that to the religious trustees?

FATHER JOHN O'CONNOR: I do some of that. The president, Sister Margaret, does some of it. And the trustees on the committees — the chairs — they do, too.

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: We work on it through our initial orientation. Also, in recent years, we've tried to dedicate a small portion of every meeting to that. We ask a friar trustee to lead the discussion. We always celebrate a Catholic liturgy in the course of our board meeting, and I make sure whoever is selected for the day's homily is in touch with what we're doing with the mission section of the agenda. We're aiming for a harmony through the course of the meeting.

FATHER JOHN O'CONNOR:

St. Bonaventure has a vice president for mission. It's another way of complementing all of what we've talked about here. And certainly the board interacts with that VP, who happens to be one of my friars who's in the administration of our Holy Name Province. I think the vice president for mission is going to become a more essential role because of diminishing numbers in religious communities. When I first went to St. Bonaventure in the 1970s, we had something like 35 or 40 friars involved on different levels at the university. Now we have maybe 10 or 11. It's possible that in the future we might have four or five.

Q You have given us a living and faithful institutional example of an adage often quoted by the late Jaroslav Pelikan, the historian of doctrine at Yale and former board member of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary: Tradition is the living faith of the dead, while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY: As they protect the mission of our colleges and universities, and create more resources for these institutions, our trustees are really safeguarding and furthering the church's work to an astonishing degree. That's not always appreciated. **IT**

Christa R. Klein, a consultant on North American theological schools, was president of In Trust from 2003 to 2012.