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Building a More Evangelical World

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Franciscan Family

by The North American OFM, Conventual, and Capuchin A

Rooted in the Incarnation, Franciscans have always embraced the joys and hopes, anxieties and sorrows of the human family as the context for our evangelizing mission. From the beginning, they have striven to create a more fraternal, evangelical world.

At the dawn of the third millennium, we see good news on some fronts and troubling news on others. Some parts of the world have found the path to greater stability, peace and economic health. Sadly, other areas have fallen in even greater numbers into de-humanizing poverty, violence, and ethnic conflicts. The unchecked spread of AIDS threatens whole regions and, indeed, entire countries with extinction. Tragically, abortion, assisted suicide and euthanasia have been accepted as solutions to various human challenges. We know that sin disfigures our original innocence. Sin hides best when it appears normal, in structures and human conventions that are alienated from God's gracious mercy. In the light of these developments, we have come together to build our fraternity and renew ourselves in our Franciscan heritage.

We, the North American Capuchin, Conventual, and OFM animators of justice, peace and the integrity of creation gathered to reflect on the Franciscan intellectual tradition with two Franciscan scholars, Joseph Chinnici, OFM and Michael Cusato, OFM. We sought to know how that tradition might support and challenge our efforts to wrestle with the pressing social problems we face and how we might build a more evangelical world.

We appreciated their insights on the historical foundations of the tradition. They welcomed our input on social trends today. We were both enriched by the dialogue.

A Holistic Vision of Human Dignity

We learned from our conversations that, from the very beginning of our movement, Franciscan brothers and sisters have been intimately engaged with issues of social justice. Our work has changed over the centuries but it has always been animated by a holistic vision of the dignity of the human person as created in the image of God. Franciscans have offered a model of holiness that involves us in and sometimes sets us against the world of commerce, politics and economics, and have presented a new ethic of creation that recognizes all creation as brother and sister. Inspired by this example, we seek ways for all creation to better reflect God's plan for a more peaceful, just and fraternal world.

We recognize the breadth and range of activities that Franciscans perform each and every day to build this more fraternal world. Among them are their example and sacrifices, their prayers and preaching about virtues and the works of mercy. Other activities include work in health care and parishes, soup kitchens, prisons and refugee camps, attention to issues of housing,

discrimination, racism, access to the legal system and efforts to reduce poverty and world debt. Other members of the family are making contributions by promoting life at all its stages, protecting the environment, teaching and writing about the efforts to build a more peaceful and fraternal world.

We are grateful for all Franciscans who work outside our countries. Wherever they serve, they have built the foundations for justice. We thank them for the ways they have educated us about our world's mutual interdependence.

From the very beginning, the Franciscan movement resonated with people of various nations and reached out to men and women across traditional religious and cultural divides. Within a few years of our founding, friars were preaching, Poor Clares were witnessing and Secular Franciscans were influencing all levels of society through their various professions, each witnessing and announcing the good news that God loves all peoples, welcomes conversion, and sustains our efforts to build a more peaceful and just world. One of the newest developments in this international outreach is Franciscans International through its work at the United Nations in New York, Geneva and in other parts of the world. In every age, Franciscans have been bridge builders and peacemakers in polarized societies.

Even with our extraordinary history in the practice of peace, justice and the care of creation, we know how easy it is to be discouraged by the complexity of the task, the size of the problems, and the legitimate differences over which strategies best help us promote the common good. But, we are encouraged by our Franciscan intellectual tradition and the resources now available to us from our Franciscan sources. We know that this rich tradition can be easily used for the purposes of partisan politics. It should not be thus. Rather, our vision ought to challenge any and all political programs and positions which promulgate and promote injustices. For our Franciscan tradition challenges all our assumptions and thus opens us to a more creative set of solutions across a broad spectrum of problems.

Help From Our Tradition

We appreciate the work of the Commission on the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition (CFIT), with whom we are in dialogue. We recommend the Franciscan Heritage Series, the first volumes being Kenan Osborne's overview of the Franciscan intellectual tradition and Ilia Delio's volume on Franciscans and creation. Our work here has made a contribution toward CFIT's projected volume on Franciscans and economics.

We would like to share with you some of the excitement we experienced in our dialogue on the ways that the Franciscan intellectual tradition can assist our work. The Franciscan tradition has emphasized our God-given freedom and our ability to choose to create an economic world that recognizes God's dominion and the fundamental right of all men and women to be in communion with God, one another, and all creation. We know that our globalized world is in danger of being dominated by a vision of individuals and groups that does not reflect the gospel.

We have an alternative economic vision that is a more solid foundation for security and peace. Rather than the dominant picture of inevitable competition, ambition and greed, Alexander of

Hales, for example, saw economics as the activity by which mutual needs are recognized and supplied. By the end of the 13th century, friars were promoting a just wage, a just profit and a fair interest on loans. Franciscans also struggled with issues of need, necessity, indigence, abundance, prosperity and what to do about surplus. They knew firsthand society's need to recognize the "law of necessity": the right of each person to be materially sustained in his or her basic human dignity by one's neighbors. In Franciscan terms, we do not exist as competitors under a stingy Lord but rather are bound in the communion of a good and generous God, so that the exchange of goods and services builds up the human family under God.

In reading and reflecting together on the story of the Wolf of Gubbio (Fioretti, 21), we learned lessons about economics, about the origins of violence and the possibility of achieving new forms of social reconciliation. Social injustice fuels violence. This story and others like it in the sources can be overly sentimentalized but they are, in fact, part of our Franciscan tradition's social challenge to a culture's assumptions about the ways that justice and peace are attained.

Francis' vision of human dignity was so broad that, shortly before going to Egypt in 1219, he rejected his society's readiness to categorize the Sultan as "enemy" and its willingness to take up arms against the Muslim world. Risking potential injury or even death, Francis went to Egypt to preach against the aims and methods of the Christian crusaders at Damietta and to share his vision of the inviolable nature of the human fraternity with the Sultan, Malik al-Kamil. So profound was this latter encounter that for the rest of his life Francis regarded the Sultan as both brother and friend.

In addressing the problem of violence in Gubbio and in meeting the Sultan, Francis did not shrink from facing conflict. His practice of humility in situations of extreme conflict enabled him to promote social reconciliation and lead men and women to God.

Francis and those who first created our Franciscan tradition posed significant social and religious questions to the men and women of their time. They continue to do so today. Inspired by the example of Francis, we'd like to invite you to reflect on and address these questions at local chapters, fraternal gatherings or assemblies.

Questions

- At Gubbio and in his meeting with the Sultan, Francis took considerable risks to promote reconciliation between people based on the Gospel vision of human dignity. What kind of risks are you taking regarding social injustices?
- Which assumptions of the dominant culture are you now challenging or do you feel called to challenge, based on the Franciscan vision of human dignity?
- What concrete steps can you take with other Franciscans to act on this challenge? What action can you take with others who are not Franciscan to address this challenge?
- Francis warned the brothers against arrogance. Given that minority is so important for Francis, how would you use minority in the practice of social reconciliation?
- Are you committed to justice within the Franciscan family and with your co-workers?
- Are you sharing with fellow Franciscans what you have found to be effective ways to promote social justice?

- Conflict is an inevitable dimension of the promotion of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. What resources in the Franciscan tradition might help you promote reconciliation and lead men and women to God?

God's justice will prevail. In time, by God's grace all threats to human dignity will disappear. God will then be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). Because of God's mercy, we can now work to build a human society that shares in the gracious love and communion of the God who is all good, supremely good, all the time and to everyone.

May God make us instruments of peace.

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Additional Resources

CFIT materials may be found on the web page WWW.CFIT-ESC-OFM.ORG. The first two volumes may be obtained from the Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, New York: Kenan B. Osborne, OFM, *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition: Tracing Its Origins and Identifying Its Central Components* (2003); Ilia Delio, OSF, *A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in A Sacramental World* (2003).

Fundamental for understanding the viewpoint of Francis of Assisi in this area is Jacques LeGoff, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (New York: Routledge, 2004), especially chapter 3, where Le Goff treats of "models related to the evolution of the economy."

This perspective on Francis can be supplemented by the analysis of the academic sources in Odd Langholm, *Economics in the Medieval Schools, Wealth, Exchange, Value, Money and Usury according to the Paris Theological Tradition 1200-1350* (New York: Brill, 1992), which has several chapters on the Franciscan tradition. His summary of the mendicant ideas on "need," "exchange" and "power" may be found in "The Economics of the Mendicant Orders: A Paradigm and a Legacy," in *Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani Centro Interuniversitario di Studi Francescani, Ethica e Politica: le Teorie dei Frati Mendicanti nel Due e Trecento* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'Alto Medioevo, 1999), 155-172. Scotus' fundamental ideas on law, power, consent, freedom, and economic exchange may be analyzed from the original texts, in English, from Allan B. Wolter, OFM, ed., *John Duns Scotus, Political and Economic Philosophy*

(St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2001).

A great deal of accessible material with contemporary application to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation may be found in the excellent collection of fundamental articles in Dawn Nothwehr, OSF, ed., *Franciscan Theology of the Environment, An Introductory Reader* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002); and the more programmatic essays in Ken Himes, OFM, Roberta A. McKelvie, OSF, eds., *Franciscans in Urban Ministry* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002). The soon-to-be published CFIT booklet (2005) by Dawn Nothwehr, which treats of the dignity of the person in Francis, Clare, Bonaventure, and Scotus, will provide good material for JPIC reflection.

Another part of the CFIT project that we recommend is the annual symposium at Washington Theological Union (WTU). These have addressed an overview of the tradition, Franciscanism and postmodernism, plus Franciscanism and the environment. Future symposia will address Scripture (2005) and ecclesiology (2006). Papers from these symposia are available through the Franciscan Institute (St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778) and will be useful as resources for those interested in animating for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.