

Reflection: Walk for Peace and Justice in New York City

By Christian Seno, OFM

On the evening of Thursday, March 3, several friars, including **George Camacho, OFM**, **Ramon Razon, OFM**, **Julian Jagudilla, OFM**, **Stephen Mimnaugh, OFM**, and myself, organized a “Walk for Peace and Justice” in New York City. During this meditative, silent walk, we prayed for immigrants’ rights and an end to racism. Carrying signs that read, “Christians build bridges, not walls” and “When I was an immigrant, you welcomed me,” we marched from the Church of St. Francis of Assisi on 31st Street, up Broadway, through Times Square and finally ended at Columbus Circle. This was an impromptu event that emerged out of a desire to express solidarity and support on behalf of the many individuals who are on the receiving end of so much violence and persecution as a result of the increasingly polemical political dialogue in this country.

For **Julian Jagudilla, OFM**, the Walk for Peace and Justice “did not involve a statement of purpose — no interviews were given and no speeches were made to promote our agenda. But it was a powerful testimony in support of thousand of voiceless immigrants and those who have been targets of racism and bigotry. We walked in silence and the people we encountered on the streets seemed to know who we are and what we stood for. There was a sense of reverence.”

This sense of reverence was one that was felt by all of the friars involved, and which elicited a lot of reflection in the days afterward. **Julian** continued, “For some we were a subject of curiosity but to serious inquirers who asked who we were, we simply said, ‘We are Franciscan friars.’ I think that speaks volumes — five Franciscan friars wearing placards walking in silence and witnessing for peace and justice.”

This sentiment was echoed by **George Camacho, OFM**. “Getting attention in Midtown Manhattan at the start of evening rush hour is no easy feat. Nevertheless, our habits and signs did generate curiosity. Some bystanders cheered us on and various tourists even took pictures. One gentleman challenged our message by noting that the Church has also been an agent of persecution. Overall it was a humbling experience and an important reminder of how important it is for us to live the Gospel message of hope, healing, and reconciliation ourselves. The people of God are watching!”

Ramon Razon, OFM was similarly moved by this encounter that challenged our presence and motivations for the prayer walk. The gentleman asked, “How could you get on your moral high horse to ‘end hate and bigotry’ when you have persecuted people in the name of Christ for 2,000 years?” **Ramon** reflected, “Christianity has not always been good news to many who have experienced it as a form of oppression. I learned this through an encounter with an individual who resisted our silent march for peace and justice. I realized our prophetic voice does not naturally possess moral ascendancy. We are here to proclaim the Gospel by begging for forgiveness for the harm Christians have done to fellow human beings and by affirming the values of Jesus Christ as our basis to advocate for peace, justice and equality.”

For me, it was this statement of reconciliation that was the most moving experience of our silent prayer. I empathized with the gentleman and the persecution he has felt at the hands of he

Church and, perhaps too boldly, I apologized for the many injustices that have been done in the name of Christ. This was a humbling reminder that our prophetic witness must always be accompanied by ready humility and tempered by an acknowledgement of our own complicity with the systems of oppression and hate that continues to affect so many of our brothers and sisters. It was my hope that this prayerful, silent witness served to express solidarity with those who are marginalized and oppressed in our society, while also building bridges of loving reconciliation to those who have been hurt by us.