

Stewarding the Grace of *Fraternitas*:
Living Out the Franciscan Charism of “Being Brothers” in Service of God’s Mission
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*“And after the Lord gave me some brothers,
no one showed me what I had to do,
but the Most High Himself revealed to me
that I should live according to the pattern of the Gospel.”*
*The Testament, 14*¹

Introduction

The presentation that I was invited to give was entitled
“Mission through the lens of evangelization.”

The presentation was to be guided by the question:
“How does evangelization prod us to listen and respond to the world?”

But the more I thought about it
the more I realized the following:

Good title.

Good question.

But ... before we talk about mission and evangelization,
some prior reflection on brotherhood is in order.

As I pondered the words of the *Testament*,
I became attentive to the fact that it was only *after* the Lord gave brothers to Francis
that the Most High God revealed to him that
he should live according to a form of life based on the Gospel.
His experience of call did not unfold as many might think:
commitment to the evangelical life first,
and relationship with the brothers second.

Informed by this insight,
I realized
that perhaps a more adequate and appropriate way
to reflect upon your participation in *God’s mission* - the *missio Dei* -
is not through the lens of evangelization,
but rather,
through the lens of brotherhood
or to be more precise
the grace of *fraternitas*

¹ Francis of Assisi, *The Saint: Early Documents*, Volume I, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J.A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M. (New York: New City Press, 1999) 125.

that uniquely Franciscan missionary charism of
“being brothers” in the Church and the World.

We know from *The Testament* that Francis received this grace of *fraternitas*.

We also know that he stewarded this grace
in the company of those he embraced as brothers
in times of exuberant joy and in times profound grief.
For Francis, both in the best of times and in the worst,
fraternitas was the foundation for living the evangelical life.
As the Jesuits would say:
it was his “way of proceeding” in the service of God’s mission.

And What About You? Disposing Yourself to the Grace of Fraternitas

Following the example of the General Minister,
my Franciscan brother and my former classmate, Michael Perry,
I, too, will turn to Scripture as a starting point for reflection.
[On this occasion of Catholic Theological Union’s 50th Anniversary,
this is definitely a hallmark of our shared CTU formation for mission].

Mindful of the *Parable of the Talents*,
always a thought-provoking point of reference from the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 25:14-30),
I invite you to take a few moments to think about the three servants
as examples of *stewardship*
particularly for you as brothers
upon whom the grace of *fraternitas*
- the *charism* of brotherhood -
has been, is and will continue to be
poured out
through the Spirit’s holy manner of working.

There are those servants who are faithful
yet fearful about losing the little they have been given
and overly cautious to their own detriment.

There are those servants who are creative,
doubling the portion that they have received,
but ever-conscious of being endowed with less than others.

And, there are those servants who,
in their exercise of fidelity *and* creativity
with what they have been given and what they have received

are neither afraid of risk-taking
nor constrained by the human tendency to be diminished by comparisons.

But before you start identifying with one of the three examples
individually – in terms of yourself

or

collectively - in terms of the fraternity to which you belong,

I urge you to consider what these examples reveal

about the interactive dynamics of stewardship

and the ways in which the grace of *fraternitas*

- no matter in what measure it is divinely given or humanly received -

is buried, doubled or quintupled.

Setting the Grace(s) of Fraternitas at the Service of God's Mission

Drawing upon the *Writings of St. Bonaventure* on grace,

I invite you to consider the following passage:

“Therefore, if you wish to have the love of the Son

and of the originating Principle,

and of the Gift that is the Holy Spirit,

dispose yourself for grace.”

Bonaventure then goes on to question:

“Whence does grace take its origins?”

And in response to the question, he answers:

“I say that it has its beginning with the Father of lights,

through the incarnate Word,

through the crucified Word,

and through the inspired Word.”²

Taking these insights from Bonaventure as a framework for reflection,

I would like to explore three ways in which the grace of *fraternitas*

– as experienced in the life and witness of Francis of Assisi –

and in your own

may be understood as an *extraordinary* charism

given for service in God's mission.

To the extent that

every brother

– by virtue of his profession –

² Works of St. Bonaventure, *Collations on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (1.8), introduction and translation by Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., notes by Robert J. Karris, O.F.M. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publication, 2008) 35.

disposes himself to this grace of *fraternitas*
each one must render a response
to the generative question
that I put before you today:

What kind of stewards of this grace of *fraternitas* have you been?

What kind of stewards are you now?

And perhaps, most importantly,
what kind of stewards of this grace do you desire to become?
As together you contemplate
not only your respective futures
in the service of God's mission
but your *shared* future
a future that is unfolding
right here, right now.

"Behold," says the Lord,

doing something new!
Now it springs forth,
do you not perceive it?" (Is 43:19)

"I am

Since I have raised these questions,
it is only fair that I offer some ways of approaching them.
Returning to Bonaventure's insights,
I propose the following framework for reflection.

The Grace of *Fraternitas* and the Incarnate Word:
The Evangelizing Mission of Being Open to the New

The Grace of Fraternitas and the Crucified Word:
The Evangelizing Mission of Confronting the Mystery of Evil

The Grace of Fraternitas and the Inspired Word:
The Evangelizing Mission of Participating in the Mystery of the Reign of God

**I. The Grace of Fraternitas and the Incarnate Word:
Embracing the Mystery of God
and the Evangelizing Mission of Being Open to the New**

*“Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that
he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus:
We no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’
but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’.”
Evangelii Gaudium, 120³*

When it comes to using the language of “mission” and
arriving at a precise definition of the term,
it seems there are as many ways as there are desires.

For our purposes today,
it is my understanding that the term mission
does *not refer to something the Church does or something that Franciscans do.*
Rather, the word mission refers to the very being of God –
the Triune God who is God-for-Us.⁴

Mission understood in this Trinitarian sense originates in the *MISSIO DEI*
– God’s mission –

As the mystery of the God is revealed in the
sending of the Son to be *God-with-Us* (Jn
1:14; Is 7:14; Mt 1:23; Jn 1:14),
too, the grace of *fraternitas* is revealed in the Incarnate Word,
as Jesus, our Brother (Heb 2:10-18),
so,

As bearers of the divine image and likeness,
we are called to *participate* in God’s mission,
ever mindful of the fact that your God is a God who acts in history.
As participants in God’s mission

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (24 November 2013) 120. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

⁴ See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

we, too, are called to act in history as disciples of Jesus Christ
and as missionaries gifted by the Spirit and
sent to proclaim God's Word
as a "community of missionary disciples."⁵

⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 24

As a protagonist of missionary discipleship,
Pope Francis has made the concept a hallmark of his papacy
and a source of inspiration for engaging the missiological imagination
of local churches throughout the world.

Mindful of the signs of the times,
Pope Francis has emphasized the critical importance
of specific aspects of formation
in the lives of missionary disciples:
to embrace a vocational identity,
to experience a grace-filled sense of purpose
and to sustain a passionate commitment
to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the world
through the evangelizing mission of presence and encounter
characterized by joy.

.As brothers responding to the call to participate in God's mission
have been challenged by your own documents
as well as countless ecclesial documents
consider the ways in which your ministries of presence and encounter
must be at the heart of your particular witness to the Gospel.

By way of one concrete example,
I encourage you to think about the young women you have accompanied
in the discovery of their Franciscan hearts
and their vocations as missionary disciples
through *FrancisCorps*, *Franciscan Mission Service* and *Cap Corps*.

Over the years,
I have had the privilege of teaching some of them
I am conscious of the fact that
joining a congregation like my own,
of which I am one of the younger members in North America,
holds little attraction or appeal.
Moreover, their primary bonds of Franciscan affection
are with you -
with your provinces, your friars, your histories and your particular charisms
charisms that they know and love
and with which they have roots.

As the Synod on Youth, Vocation and Discernment concludes this week,
we are all urged to think about vocations to FranciscanClarean life
in the United States and other places in the world.

With this in mind,
I ask you to think about the initiative of Francis on Clare's behalf,
and similarly, about the initiative of Fr. Pamfilo of Magliano in the 1850s
as he facilitated entrance into Franciscan life
for a few young women who later became the Allegany Franciscans,
and a few other young immigrant women who later became the Joliet Franciscans.
He took a risk and opened himself to the new.
Might you consider doing something similar?

Returning to Italy a few years later,
Father Pamfilo trusted that these foundations were not his work,
but the work of the Spirit.
He did what was his to do.
And, he trusted that God would act.

A century later,

quite

by chance and more work of the Spirit,
these two congregations would meet in Goiás, Brazil,
to embark on something new-
not alone, but in the company of
friars from the Holy Name province, the Society of the Atonement,
the Poor Clares from Wappinger Falls,
New York, the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother from Wisconsin,
the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor from Ohio,
the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph from Hamburg, New York,
and an OFS diocesan priest from Camden, New Jersey,
formed by the TOR friars in Pennsylvania,
found themselves involved in an evangelizing mission
of presence and encounter.⁶
that over time has given rise to new communities, monasteries and provinces in Brazil.
Amidst the life processes of beginnings and endings,
of flourishing and completion,
of legacy and leave-taking,
this history underscores
one intuition and imperative:

⁶ Margaret Eletta Guider, "U.S. Franciscan Missionaries in Goiás, Brazil (1943-2013): Leave-Taking and Legacy," ACHA Annual Meeting, Marriott Wardman Park, Washington, D.C., January 4, 2014.

You must be open to the new!

The new that awaits you, like the Reign of God, is already in your midst.
It is both “already” and “not yet.”

When it comes to embracing the new that God places before you,
consider how many times in the course of your life
you have pondered the words from the Prophet Isaiah 55:8-9 –

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,” declares our God.
As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”*

When these words, like ardent pieces of charcoal,
were placed not on the tongue of the prophet Isaiah,
he knew in his heart,
that our Most High God was not kidding.

“How long have you been following Jesus on the way,
and still you do not comprehend?” (Jn 14:9)

***New means new,
not just an updated version of something old!***

**II. The Grace of *Fraternitas* and the Crucified Word:
The Evangelizing Mission of Confronting the Mystery of Evil**

“Go and repair my house, for as you see, it is falling into ruin.”
Celano, *Second Life*, 10

What does it mean for you as brothers
to break open the Crucified Word of God,
to confront the mystery of evil
and make meaning of its significance for your lives
and the lives of others?

Last year, I met with one of my former students,
who now is in a position of leadership within his religious institute.
At the time he was dealing with the ongoing consequences of the sexual abuse crisis
that were affecting his own congregation directly.

He said to me, “This is something for which you never prepared me.”

For days, I pondered his words.
He was correct.
Rarely was reflection on the *mysterium iniquitatis* a part of the curriculum.

As witnesses to the tragic consequences and unrelenting after-shocks
of the phenomenon of abuse
you know all too well
the countless ways in which
“this *mysterium iniquitatis* that continues to run its course.
Indeed, it is a soul-devouring dragon (Rev 12:17)
that has yet to be slain or definitively tamed,
a beast that continues to be stronger than the chains put in place to bind it,
a nefarious force that vomits raging torrents of life-threatening waters throughout the earth.
“Yet, as you know from the Book of Revelation,
the soul-devouring dragon of the apocalyptic vision
is not slain, chained or tamed by human forces,
yet, we know how the story ends
and that ultimately the power of heaven prevails (Rev 20:10).”
A vision of a new heaven earth is revealed, and with it,
the promise that God is with God’s people,
promising to wipe every tear from their eyes,
promising that there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain,
for the former things have passed away (Rev 2:3-4).”
“For all of those affected by the phenomenon of sexual abuse in whatever form,
living into this new vision may seem impossible
as the anguished question “Where is God?”
continues to echo in the minds and hearts of so many.
For those of you entrusted with the responsibility
for forming a new generation of brothers to serve the People of God,
it is essential that you accompany them
in the process of learning to live with this haunting question
and with the dangerous memories that gave rise to it.
At the same time, you also must create the conditions
that will enable them to find the river, the water,
the tree of life, with all of its fruits, and especially its leaves (Rev. 22: 1-2),
that they may be the brothers the People of God need - and deserve.”⁷

Indeed, the Crucified Word invites you to do more than see and judge;
it requires you to act,
to make connections and to put into practice
what you say you believe:
that participation in God’s mission is central to your lives,

⁷ Margaret Eletta Guider, Conclusão do “O Dragão Devorador de Almas,” *Formação: Desafios Morais*, ed. Ronaldo Zacharias, et al. (Sao Paulo: Paulus, 2018) 279. [English translation: Conclusion of “The Soul-devouring Dragon.”]

that every vocation involves the cost of discipleship,
and that every abuse of power,
including the power to neglect,
is a failure to adhere to the prophetic example of Jesus
for whom power is rightly understood as the service of love.

As Pope Francis frequently reminds us all,
the vocation of the missionary disciple is demanding.

Inevitably, it involves the experience of having to
recognize, shoulder and carry
the weight of reality,⁸
to be witnesses, and if necessary, martyrs, to be
messengers of reality,⁹
and ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:11-21),¹⁰
especially in circumstances where people's confidence in God and others
has been eroded by an overwhelming sense of affliction.

And yet, amidst the shadows and darkness,
inherent in the vocation of the missionary disciple
is the capacity to identify with the person of Jesus Christ,
and to know through our experiences of encounter with the divine presence,
that despite all evidence to the contrary,
you are not alone.
the Most High God has given you brothers.

For our God, in whose image and likeness we have been created,
is a God who truly is God-With-Us.
And, herein lies the mystery of what it means to imitate Christ,
and to follow in the footsteps
the One who is willing to share in the sufferings of others
for the sake of love.
Faced as you may be with the
dangerous memories of the past,
uncertainties about the present
and anxieties about the future,
do you as brothers
strengthen and encourage one another
to place your trust in the One who has called you by name.

⁸ See Kevin F. Burke, S.J., *The Ground beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000) 127.

⁹ See Michael E. Lee, *Revolutionary Saint: The Theological Legacy of Oscar Romero* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2018) 159-161.

¹⁰ See Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S. *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998).

How does the grace of *fraternitas*
enable you
to find the courage and humility needed
to remain steadfast in your confidence
in God's grace and mercy
so that you may be witnesses to truth
and
ambassadors of reconciliation?

**III. The Grace of *Fraternitas* and the Inspired Word:
The Evangelizing Mission of Ultimate Formation for the sake of the Reign of God**

When was the first time that you passionately proclaimed:

“This is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart”?
(Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, IX:22)¹¹

And now for my second question:
When was the most recent time?

As brothers
you live in an expansive present where witnesses to the Gospel Way of life
and Franciscan participation in God’s mission are needed more than ever.

Your unfolding future carries with it one guarantee -
with every day that passes you are one step closer to completing your journey home to God.

Mindful of that fact,
here is a question that I ask you to hold in your hearts today:

What time is it?
The answer is a simple, yet challenging one:

It is time to wake up
and wake up the world.

At the beginning of your Franciscan journey as brothers,
you were invited into a process of so-called “initial formation”
followed by a process of so-called “ongoing formation” -
for life in mission: prayer, fraternity and ministry.
But when was the last time you heard a brother speak of
“ultimate formation” for the sake of the Reign of God?

When Bonaventure ascended the mountain of LaVerna, where
he wrote *The Soul’s Journey into God*,¹² he
was not laying out a Thirteenth century step-by-step Trip-Tic
or providing a medieval GPS mapping to assist souls in finding their way home to God.
Rather, he was affirming that our life is an ascent to God,
a process that is not something we are able to undertake,
control or bring to completion on our own –

¹¹ Francis of Assisi, *The Saint: Early Documents*, Volume I, 201.

¹² *Bonaventure - The Soul’s Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, translation and introduction by Ewert Cousins, preface by Ignatius Brady, O.F.M. (Maywah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978) 51-116.

“God must pull you up.”¹³

And you, for your part,
must be open to the graces and demands of this “being pulled up” (Mt 14:22-33),
precisely by remembering those experiences that are foundational
to your ultimate *formation* for the *missio Dei*.

As those brothers who have gone before you in faith know
from the vantage point of eternity,
the journey of union with God cannot be understood narrowly
as the “end-of- life” journey in service of God’s Mission.

Rather, it must be understood for what it truly is -
a daring journey in service of God’s Mission
that requires you to “live with eyes wide open”
to live joyfully and hopefully
as you move throughout life,
regardless of whether you are in the first or second chapter of your lives
or moving into the third and fourth chapters.

For those who may be wondering
“When exactly does this leg of the journey begin?”
I would say that the experience of ultimate formation
in service of God’s Mission
begins the day that you recognize
by divine inspiration
that you are one day closer to bringing to completion
all that has been
and all that continues to be yours to do

Ultimate formation for service in God’s Mission involves remembering
that you have come from God
and preparing yourselves for your return to God.
It involves the kind of intentionality, watchfulness, trust,
desire, joy and intimacy
that leads to ever deeper love.

In sum, it involves remaining attentive
to the many ways in which God is *pulling you up*
to ever greater participation in the *missio Dei* and
drawing you into an experience of ever deeper union -
with the One whom you seek, the One in whom you hope,

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, “Love sees further than reason,” Catechesis given in Rome, March 17, 2010.
<http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/love-sees-further-than-reason>

the One for whom you long, the One through whom you rise,
the One you receive, the One in whom you exalt,
and the One to whom you finally cling.¹⁴

Conclusion

As brothers of the First Order and the Third Order Regular,
do not underestimate
how much
your common witness is needed
by the entire FranciscanClarean family.
Not only is it critical to your futures
It is critical to all of our futures.

May you remain attentive
to the Incarnate Word,
the Crucified Word and the Inspired Word.

May you be enchanted by the wonder of life and possibility,
transformed by the *pathos* of human suffering and vulnerability
and
moved by the power of divine inspiration.

And may your inner capacity to receive the grace of *fraternitas*
continue to be stretched and enlarged
as you cultivate – across the life span - a genuine *desire*
to steward in *faithful* and *creative* ways
this grace of *fraternitas*
in the service of God's mission.

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¹⁴ Adapted from Saint Bonaventure, *The Enkindling of Love (The Triple Way)*, III.C.8, edited and arranged by William I. Joffe (Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1956).