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FRANCISCANS ACROSS BORDERS

This summer, I have had the privilege of participating in two ecumenical Franciscan gatherings. The first, in May, was a mini-conference hosted by the Joint Committee on Franciscan Unity at the Cenacle in Chicago. The committee has two representatives each from the Third Order Society of St. Francis (Anglican Communion), the Secular Franciscan Order (Roman Communion) and the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans (from a variety of Christian ecclesial communions). The theme of the conference was “The Elements of Franciscan Unity.” These elements are: Baptism and Vocation, Charism, Christocentric Dimension, and Prophetic Voice. Key leaders from each of the three orders were invited to participate. We began by dividing into groups of three—one from each order—introducing ourselves and sharing how we came to the Franciscan way of life, and the differences it has made in our lives.

What emerged was a remarkably similar pattern: often, it was not so much that being Franciscan introduced people to a *new* way to live the Gospel, but rather, it gave a name to the *only* way they knew how to live the Gospel.

Our calls were shaped by individual personalities, circumstances and Christian persuasions, but our stories resonated like the very different instruments that make up a grand symphony, in this case, the symphony, one sound, of the Eternal Word, echoing in our hearts and lives. Later, members of the Joint Committee gave 20-minute presentations on each of the four Elements, followed by 30 minutes of small group discussions. Later, we tried to pull it all together in the large group. Presenters were Fred Ball, OEF (Baptism and Vocation); Anne Mulqueen, SFO (Charism); Ed Shirley, SFO (Christocentric Dimension); and Masud Ibn Syedullah, TSSF (Prophetic Voice).

One thing that struck us was how much the four elements overlapped. It was as though they were four names of the same reality: the call and charism, rooted in our baptism, to see Christ in all creatures, and to live out the consequences of that reality. In the evenings, we gathered together, shared snacks and drinks, conversation, and had sing-alongs, all of which prepared us for an agapé celebration Saturday morning, before we left our cave and returned to the streets of our lives.

This truly was an ecumenical chapter of mats: we came together as brothers and sisters, and we left immersed in, and transformed by, the experience of siblinghood. We *knew* it to be true.

The second gathering this summer was the annual chapter of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans (OEF). As with our national meetings, representatives from the other two orders represented on the Joint Committee are invited as observers (and though we have no vote, we are encouraged to participate in every discussion; they want our perspectives). I was the SFO representative. I’ve been to so many of their gatherings, I think they have to remind themselves that I’m not a professed OEF! The OEF has postulants, novices and professed from many different Christian Churches, from Baptist to Episcopal, from Quaker to Catholic, & everything in between. Their General Rule sounds very familiar to SFO’s, because they drew from both the Anglican Rule and our Rule to write their own (and, in fact, I’ve heard that some Anglican Franciscans actually had input when our Rule was written: isn’t our God strange, wonderful and full of surprises?)

Since the OEF is so small and scattered, every member may take part in the annual meeting, which is both a chapter (*like our October NAFRA meeting*), conducting business, and a convocation (*like our Quinquennial*), for formation and fellowship.

Every day, we would switch from chapter to convocation mode and back again. Every day had Morning, Evening and Night Prayer (they do various styles. One service was Quaker style, sitting and waiting for God to speak to our hearts, then sharing those “stirrings.” I could only think how occasionally praying like this could enhance our own SFO gatherings. Every day, there was a Eucharistic celebration, drawing again from their respective traditions (their Rule, like ours, instructs them to participation in the sacramental life of their respective Churches).

And, of course, no Franciscan gathering would be complete without the social times. One night, we had a Holy Hootenanny. Picture an SFO (me) on banjo, the provincial minister of the Anglican Franciscans on harmonica, and an OEF from NY (*originally from the Caribbean*) on a djembe—Caribbean drum. And for additional rhythm, an OEF on spoons.

This has been a very busy, but very fulfilling summer, and there is more to come. It is my hope that these types of experience will radiate outward to our entire orders. Not only do I look forward to similar gatherings in the future, but I also fervently hope that this experience will be manifested on increasingly local levels, as well. This is, after all, where the rubber meets the road. If Franciscans can come together as brothers and sisters, then, perhaps, the Church as a whole, and beyond that, the world.