

Minister's Insights

By Carol Gentile, SFO
National Minister

"La Novitas Franciscana" Part 1



Fr. Michael Higgins, TOR, CGSA, Dcn. Juan Lezcano, SFO, Encarnacion del Pozo, OFS, Minister General, Carol Gentile, SFO, National Minister, Fr. Richard Trezza, OFM, and Fr. Lester Bach, OFM Cap.

The Innovations of Francis: Mission & Testimony

On November 7th 2005, Fr. Lester Bach, OFM Cap. and I presented at the General Chapter in Assisi. At this Chapter, there were representatives from 60 countries. In the coming issues of TAU-USA, I will continue to summarize our presentations.

We approached the issue of Franciscan Novitas from three perspectives.

- 1) What is our vision of Church for today, reflecting both on the early Church and the Church of Vatican II;
- 2) How did Francis influence his world and give new life to gospel living, examining his call to rebuild the church;
- 3) What is the vision of Secular Franciscans today according to the Rule of 1978?

Keep in mind that Fr. Lester will speak to the vision in each of our three talks, and I will share how the vision might be given flesh in the Church and the Secular Franciscan Order.

Vision

Let us begin with this thought in mind: if we are Church in the fullest sense, what would that look like? Luke in the Acts of the Apostles gives the example.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Acts 4:32-35 – NRSV

Luke writes that everything was held in common. This indicates that the community of believers shared their possessions so that no one would be in need. Since some **structure** is needed, the apostles were responsible for the distribution of the material gifts. The individual Christians recognized their responsibility for personal stewardship. This enabled the early community to care for anyone in need. The **vision** that Luke proclaims illustrates that a sense of stewardship, i.e. sharing of all things, is one ingredient of community life. It does not mean it is easy nor does it persist in this pristine form. Within a few chapters, the Acts of the Apostles will show the presence of conflict. Christians were not sharing everything with the community. We see the consequences of clinging to possessions. We see that not everyone was of one mind and heart. The Acts of the Apostles shows the development of a structure that serves to implement the **vision**.

As time passes, the community faces conflicts and finds ways to deal with them. As an entity grows in numbers, the development of a structure is a natural consequence. What at first seemed simple becomes complicated. It becomes necessary to have a way to discern a correct understanding of the gospel. A structure is needed to assess procedures and practices that would enable the Church to bear witness to the resurrection with great power, i.e. to proclaim the **vision** of the gospel – to evangelize!

In the early Church both **vision and structure** contributed to evangelization, i.e. Christians proclaiming the gospel to the whole world. The danger, as time went on, was that some **Church** structures began to be more important than the **vision**.

One task in this series is to renew our vision of Church and Order while recognizing that it is supported by the structure and to ensure that the structure does not dominate nor diminish the vision, but serves to promote it.

Vatican II gives flesh and direction to the vision!

Vatican II gives flesh and a sense of direction to the vision in these times of the third millennium. Vatican II put a new emphasis on the universal call to holiness and making the Gospel accessible to all people. Therefore, the People of God want to share with the whole world their own inner nature and mission.

Listen to how the People of God are described in Lumen Gentium: *We can say that we, the Church, are a people united by our common heritage: created in love by God, assembled in the name of Jesus, and bound together by the Holy Spirit.*

Lumen Gentium (Par 4) as found in: Vatican II in Plain English - Vol 2- Wm Huebsch & Paul Thurmes - 1996 - Page 24

Vatican II reminds us of our vision of joy and hope with Christ in the Gospel. Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) lays the basis for examining how the Church interacts on the world stage. I will describe it in my own words. No longer are we to be an entity to ourselves. We are to share the Light of Christ with all people for He is Lumen Gentium, the light of humanity. Therefore, the Church, as the People of God, finds itself in every race and nation. The laity are exhorted to proclaim the Kingdom of God in the temporal affairs of the world. As such, we are to be in the forefront of evangelization, proclaiming God by our words and deeds. The family is the preeminent place of evangelization for our Church. It is the domestic Church. Lumen Gentium sets forth the universal call to holiness: all persons, regardless of their state in life, are called to be holy.

Each one of you is a son of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with him. There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ you are the descendants of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised.

Galatians: 3:26-29

The Spirit unifies us all in love. We are family. When Christ is the center of our lives, we are bonded to each other. We are brothers and sisters. Christ is our brother. We have a relationship with one another that is understood. No words have to be said when I see your Tau cross. **I may not know your name but I know you.**

Vatican II explains our relationship in this way:

We are, in fact, the very Body of Christ! But what does this mean, to call ourselves the "Body of Christ?" First, it means that we are united with Christ in a remarkable way because of baptism, which forms us in Christ's image. In baptism, every aspect of Christ's being: life, death, resurrection, takes root in us, body and soul. And second, in the Eucharist, that which was begun in baptism is constantly nourished and affirmed. In the Eucharist, we experience real communion, true fellowship, and undeniable connectedness with Christ and all people. By these two sacraments we become full members of the Church, and members of the Body of Christ. What we're actually saying here, is that the Church is the Body. Lumen Gentium (Par7) - Ibid - Page 26-27

Therefore, if we claim to be the Church, and we claim to be the Body of Christ, then we must resemble Christ as much as possible in everything: our thoughts, our words, our actions. We are the Church. We are joint heirs with Christ and are commanded to love as Christ loved.

The challenge that we face today is to renew the sensitivity of the vision by assuring that the structures do not dominate or diminish the vision, but serve it and promote it. Our vision is to resemble Christ as much as possible. **Not only do we share his message, but we are called to BE his message.** We cannot receive Christ in the Eucharist and go back into our homes, our places of employment and be uninvolved in the world around us.

Therefore: Secular Franciscans must take in those who are afflicted, forgotten, and suffering. The Church itself, like its members, is always in need of being renewed and forgiven, purified for its mission, which is the same as the mission of Christ. Our deepest source of strength will come from the Eucharist and our highest moments of spiritual insight will come from the Body of Christ. Because the Spirit has given each of us a gift and promises to assist each one of us in using it, we will use this gift to promote the Kingdom of God. Our God calls us. God has become one of us in Jesus Christ, so that we might be united as human beings. That being said, everyone who is baptized is charged with the mission to present the Gospel to the whole world, so that people can share in God's love. Secular Franciscans are among the people charged with this mission.

My brothers and sisters, we have been called.

WE ARE THE PEOPLE OF GOD!