



"LET US BEGIN, FOR UP TO NOW, WE'VE DONE NOTHING"

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When St. Francis said this, he didn't mean it literally: of course, he and his early followers had "done something." However, Francis knew how easy it was to become self-satisfied, to think, "Well, that about takes care of it; I guess I can sit back on my laurels and take it easy." He knew that saying yes to the movement of the Spirit was not something that was done once. He knew that yes had to be a daily assent, indeed, even moment-to-moment. When it comes to the Christian life, we are all and always beginners. This reminds me of a title of a book on Zen: *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. When you move into the Infinite, there is no "I've finally arrived."

I've been thinking about this as I begin my second term as the chair of the Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee. When I think of where we, as an Order, were ten years ago, I realize how far we have come: we have good relations with two other "third" Orders, the Third Order Society of St. Francis (TSSF, Anglican) and Order of Ecumenical Franciscans (OEF). Together, representatives from these three Orders form the Joint Committee on Franciscan Unity. These relationships began before I was appointed chair, and they have continued to grow; I count many of those "other Franciscans" not simply as "brothers and sisters," "over there," but also as personal friends. In the past three years, the SFO has also begun to build relationships beyond the Christian household: dialogues with Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims are being formed. We have, indeed, come a long way. However, St. Francis' words keep drifting through my mind: "Let us begin, for up to now, we have done nothing." Like the spiritual life itself, the work of building relationships is always new: old relationships can be deepened, and new relationships can be forged.

I am reminded of Catholic marriage vows: we are not asked, "Do you...?" nor do we respond, "I do." Rather, we are asked, "Will you...?" and we respond, "I will." "I do" is for this moment. "I will" goes on forever.

So, where do we go from here? I know that the members of the Ecumenical Committee can meet twelve times a year; we can work with the Joint Committee to write three documents annually. I can write these articles for the Tau. All of that is important. However, unless the work of building bridges, the work of dialogue and understanding, is lived on the local and regional - dare I say "grassroots"? - levels, it will all remain only a good idea. Imagine, for example, that no one actually read papal encyclicals or bishops' documents or tried to put them into practice? Imagine if Francis had simply heard the Gospel and reflected on the plight of the poor, but had never actually crossed a very physical road to kiss a very physical leper. What if the teachings of Jesus or the conversion of St. Francis had remained only "good ideas?"

This is where you come in: I need your help. I do not know your local situation; only you do. The Ecumenical Committee can offer guidelines, can set visions, but friendships only begin when one person steps out into the unknown to embrace another. Some of you have shared your local stories with me. I would like to hear more. I would also love to come to your region, to your local fraternity, to hear your situation and perhaps share some practical tools with you.

And so, I invite you to suggest to your local and regional councils that you would like to begin the work of building relationships. The simplest way to begin is to begin, and we must do it soon, for up to now, we have done nothing.

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Request for Applications: Editor of the TAU-USA

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