



Reflections for Franciscans

By Lester Bach, OFM Cap

It is a challenge for anyone to read the signs of the times like a prophet. Being a prophet means listening to God more than speaking for God. It requires us to view day-to-day events and attitudes in the light of the Gospel. A prophet need not predict an unknown future. Rather, prophets view current events and practices and attitudes in the light of God's Word – the God who practices compassion and justice.

It is no great revelation that society is getting older. There are always differences between generations. Today many youngsters can run circles around many oldsters when it comes to technical tools that keep blossoming in our society. It takes no great genius to realize that differences exist among people, among Catholics, and in our Franciscan Family. E.g. It is one thing to want time for quiet prayer when we attend Eucharist. It is quite another to recognize that Eucharist is a community prayer and not quite the time for private Jesus and me moments. This is a both/and situation. Time for both community hospitality and conversation as well as quiet space to open our hearts to the Word. Both have value and neither is completely isolated from the other.

At times, the community needs sensitivity to my personal need for quiet space. At other times, I need to converse with others and enter their lives at this community gathering called Eucharist. To impose one or the other on everyone at every Eucharist, or at every moment, shows a lack of the compassion we are called to show one another.

Respect, compassion, and reverence for one another are community qualities. They develop an attitude that acknowledges the variety of needs within the community. This attitude is not a one-way street. E.g. This attitude of openness is clear to me when I am at the funeral of a loved one. I need to interact with people sharing my grief. Hopefully, they will also recognize that I need personal quiet time to remember a loved one. I need both. A healthy community will allow for both needs.

This is also true at celebrations of Eucharist and other gatherings. I respect the community's need to know me better through conversation while allowing me to be "me" with personal needs. Neither is used as a club to enforce personal opinions. Being "me" may require personal quiet time. At other times, I need community support and sharing. This is one of those both/and times. The community's compassion and reverence will recognize which one is important today.

On a personal level, I will not always have "my way" when the community has a different need. Conversation and compassion will guide my attitude at Eucharistic gatherings or at other times. Each gathering requires a decision that fits the atmosphere of that particular gathering. I don't make a lifetime decision once and for all. My decision will reflect the reality of today and will be made with that reality in mind.

This is one of a multitude of issues that may touch our lives. The goal is to develop a community spirit where one can feel at home, accepted, forgiven, reconciled, loving one another even when a good outcome is not assured, and enjoy allowing for a variety of ways to respond... with a gentle and courteous spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ (SFO Rule #13).

Scripture

When we act with compassion and reverence, we bring qualities of understanding, compassion, and reverence to the situation in which we find ourselves. A brief look at Scripture stories illustrates this way of acting - in the life of Jesus Christ in the Gospel.

Notice how the attitude of the Samaritan woman changed during her conversation with Jesus (John 4:1-30). When she first met Jesus, he was simply a man and a Jew – and she made clear her opinion about conversing with him. By the end of the story, she calls him a prophet. Had she refused to converse with Jesus the story may have ended differently. It took a prolonged conversation to achieve this result. Little did she suspect the end result at its beginning. We face the same possibility as we mingle with people at various gatherings.

In another story, when Jesus heard the news of John the Baptist's death, the Scripture says: Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself (Matthew 14:13). This is a normal reaction to the death of someone you love. Quiet time is important.

Matthew goes on: But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. (Matthew 14: 13-14). The story goes on to tell how he not only cared for them but also fed them. He put off his desire for quiet time to deal with the community's needs. His action showed love and compassion. Yet, at the end, the both/and process took hold. When the meal and clean-up was done ... Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. (Matthew 14: 22-23).

Two different decisions were required by the circumstances. Without neglecting his own need, he did not run away from the community needs. Both were met by Jesus with love and compassion.

Franciscans remain open to the needs of others while not neglecting their own needs. Franciscans, in their daily lives, learn better ways to love. The quality of love is spelled out in Scripture. As gospel people, we listen to the gospel words. They find a home in our lives. As the Rule puts it: Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel (SFO Rule #4).

... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12: 30-31). Love your enemies, do good to

those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you (Luke 6: 27-28). Let all that you do be done in love (1 Corinthians 16:14). Or as the Rule puts it ... seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue ... and in the transforming power of love and pardon (SFO Rule #19).

Whether at Eucharist or at any other time the value of love and compassion remain foundational for the life of Franciscans. In fact, the SFO Rule clearly expects us to act in this way. ... The brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state (SFO Rule #2).

Why wait? Each moment of life requires this kind of response. Francis offers us a special blessing in his Prologue to the SFO Rule.

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, because “the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them” (cf. Isaiah 11:2), and he will make his home and dwelling among them” (cf. John 14:23), and they are the sons (daughters) of the heavenly Father, whose works they do.