



ELEMENTS OF
 FRANCISCAN UNITY
 FRANCISCAN UNITY

by
 EDWARD L. SHIRLEY, SFO
 ECUMENICAL/INTERFAITH COMMITTEE CHAIR

This past April and May, I had the privilege of helping to present two workshops on the Elements of Franciscan Unity. Through a long process of work and discernment, the Joint Committee on Franciscan Unity (on which I have written in previous articles) shaped this list, beginning in 2005 (Marcella Bina and Jean D. were our representatives), and culminating in 2007. This list was then submitted to, and approved by, the leadership of our Orders.

We had already offered two similar workshops to national leaders of our Orders, and these were so successful we decided to “take the show on the road.” Our workshop in April was held at Little Portion Friary in Long Island, and the one in May at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California. These locations themselves illustrate the ecumenical nature of the Committee’s work: Little Portion is the home of Anglican friars, and Mercy Center is run by the Sisters of Mercy.

In both workshops, the presentations on *Baptism and Vocation* were facilitated by me, *Charism* by Anne Mulqueen, SFO, and *Prophetic Voice* by Father Masud Syedullah, TSSF. I cannot recreate either the marvelous presentations, nor the exciting interaction and discussion of the participants, nor could I even begin to do justice to the sharing that took place simply in our evening social, but I can say that real relationships were born, and seeds for local and regional joint activities were planted.

The approved descriptions of the Five Elements, and thus, the kernels of the presentations, are:

BAPTISM:

Our Franciscan Orders understand that our Franciscan Unity springs from a shared relationship with God through Holy Baptism. The waters of our birth in the name of the Triune God signify our unity in one baptism by the one God.

VOCATION:

Our call to Franciscan Vocation implies being conformed to the image of our Lord Jesus Christ by means of the radical interior change that the Gospel defines as conversion—taking up our cross daily to follow Christ. Our particular vocation is to observe the Gospel by following the examples of Saints Francis and Clare.

CHARISM:

As Franciscans, we see in the life of St. Francis of Assisi these gifts of the Holy Spirit: Holy Poverty (humility), love and joy. Through our rules and through the individual and collective work of our Orders, we seek to manifest these gifts.

CHRIST CENTERED:

Franciscan spirituality is Christocentric to the extent that Francis fell in love with Jesus. This transformed Francis’ life. All that Francis did was shaped by what he saw in the Incarnation and in the ministry and passion of Jesus.

PROPHETIC VOICE:

Fundamental to Franciscan spirituality is a commitment to strive for justice and peace among all people—and to affirm the inter-relationship and holiness of all creation. In a world torn asunder by conflict, division, intolerance and exploitation, our unified prophetic witness is an expression of God’s light in a dark planet.

Our gathering ended with a celebration of a common Agape service, also approved by our three Orders. Because of the sad divisions among Christians, Franciscans cannot share a common Eucharistic table. However, as with our Holy Father Francis, we do what we can to help heal that division. As Francis himself blessed and shared bread among his friars, we, too, shared our common feast.

Jesus told St. Francis to repair his Church, which was falling into ruin. Today we, also, live in a Church torn apart by doctrinal, ethnic and political divisions. We live in a world torn apart by the same divisions. According to Catholic belief, the Church is the Sacrament of the on-going Presence and Ministry of Jesus in the world. It is the leaven that should raise the entire loaf. As long as the followers of Jesus bicker among ourselves, we cannot give a credible witness to our proclaimed faith that Jesus came to heal all divisions. Jesus calls us Franciscans, just as surely as he called Francis, to repair the Church. Like Francis, we do not know what Jesus ultimately has in mind. However, like Francis, we can begin with what we can do and leave the rest up to Jesus. As members of the SFO, TSSF and OEF, it is our hope that by working together, we can do our little portion of this witness.