

## TO EVANGELIZE AMERICAN CULTURE: A FRANCISCAN APPROACH

(Excerpts from an essay by Daniel McLellan, O.F.M from *Franciscan Studies*, Vol.47, 1987, St. Bonaventure, NY. Used with permission of the Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University)

The task of evangelizing American culture is intimidating. Ours is a complicated way of living that seems impervious to the message of the Gospel. Moreover, many of us still suffer from that "immigrant inferiority" which cripples our ability to bring the insights of our faith to bear in the public order.

This reflection is an attempt to overcome that intimidation and to suggest that the Franciscan vision offers some helpful ways of renewing our understanding of "work," an activity which sociologists and philosophers judge to be the key to a renewal of American life and culture.<sup>1</sup>

The first object of evangelization is ourselves. Before we presume to bear witness, we need to involve ourselves in the power of the Gospel. Secondly, we are commissioned to involve others in the power of the Gospel by helping them to construct new ways of thinking and doing things. As Francis showed during his "silent sermon"<sup>2</sup> walking through Assisi with Brother Leo, we do this best by insinuating ourselves into the fabric of life, creating as imperceptibly as salt flavors and yeast makes rise a new vision and a new embodiment of God.

When I was a novice I met a friar who collected the memorial cards my province issues when a friar dies. These cards are simply photos of the deceased with dates of birth, profession, and each inscribed on the back. I was only twenty-three and thought it weird that someone was so preoccupied with a somewhat morbid project like this. But today I have my own collection of such cards. Franciscans are a "community of memory" that is flesh and blood. As often as I look at these men, I come to a better sense of who I am. I realize that these men developed ways of thinking and doing that involved black Americans, Jamaicans, college students, Franciscan novices, New Jersey Catholics, and peoples of the Orient in the power of the Gospel. These men were cut from the same flesh and blood as ourselves. They came from the streets of Manhattan, the coal fields of Pennsylvania, the neighborhoods of Buffalo. but in their own time and place they learned to embody Someone that captivated me. Through these men I came to know Jesus as Francis knew him. In a simple straight-forward way, these friars had done what God gave them to do.

I remember these men, not because I am sentimental (some I loved, some disappointed me) but because I dare not forget that God's pastoral care is still incarnate; I need to trust that flesh and blood, recreated in baptism, can transform the world. I can never forget that I live amid the stuff of creation which, however scarred by human sin, is also scarred with the *vestigium Dei*. This "community of memory" helps me never forget that the care of that scarred creation is work entrusted to me. Moreover, this community of memory is

testimony that the work of evangelizing American culture can be successfully undertaken by those who are products of that culture.

#### AMERICAN AND FRANCISCAN CULTURE: HOW COMPATIBLE?

Perhaps when we are asked to evangelize American culture out of our Franciscan heritage we might wonder what an 800-year-old tradition rooted in Umbria has to say to a way of life only 200 years old.

It ought to be clear that an evangelizer needs to speak the language of those among whom he goes. the way a person walks, dresses, combs his hair, votes, spends her money, the art he admires, the movies she walks out of - all this is language. Language is a device for communicating meaning: the meaning of our thoughts, our feelings, our fears and hopes. Do we American Franciscans "speak" a language our fellow Americans can understand? Believing that actions, our habits of living, are our most powerful words, let us explore the possibility of Americans understanding the Gospel as it is filtered through the tradition of Francis. We do this first by looking at what constitutes an American, by looking at what "language" America speaks.

Being American is quite different from being a Pole, a Frenchman or an Italian. Being American is not a matter of language, geography, birth, or folkways. To be American is to embrace an ideology, a set of ideas that conditions how one acts. To be an American is to be one who subscribes to a "republican" ideology. Born in Commonwealth England and reborn in colonial America, "republicanism" is an ideology that has at its heart *freedom*. This freedom can only be had through the preservation of individual liberty. To the colonialists, power was a roaring lion seeking to devour liberty. Steps had to be taken to check power and so preserve freedom by safeguarding individual liberty. And so we have mixed government, the separation of powers, a balanced constitution; we call official and leaders to account.

Consequently, arrangements essential to the preservation of power - heredity, patronage, and dependency - were rejected in favor of opportunity, independence, and self reliance, characteristics of individual liberty. Not every lifestyle was thought capable of sustaining this "republican ideology." Jefferson described the paradigmatic republican, the yeoman farmer, simple and close the earth, whose lean lifestyle and rejection of luxury made him an incorruptible partisan of liberty.<sup>3</sup> Republican ideology, Americanism, is sustained by "virtue," an unencumbered way of living that reverences independence and individuality.

At its best, then, the ideology which makes one an American puts a premium on the individual's inalienable rights to life, liberty, and opportunity. But such rights are not ends in themselves; rather, such rights, given by God and not conceded by a benevolent human institution, were to be secured by the structures of society, politics, economics, and religion and so become pillars of what "republicanism" called a "morality of social cohesion."<sup>4</sup>

Americans, then, privilege individual liberty, the rights of the person, and self-reliance. These secure freedom. The American ideology also privileges the "common good" as that

which balances individuality and protects *individuality* from turning into *individualism*. American culture understands a language that communicates the meaning of these values.

The Franciscan heritage "speaks" the language of the American ideology. At its best, Franciscanism has always reverence the individual. In the *Testament* Francis acknowledges that the brother are God-given. Their call, like his own,. came from God. And Francis was always well-aware of the singularity of this call. He was not like others who put together a way of life by gleaning insight from those who had gone before. "When God gave me some friars, there was no one to tell me what I should do; but the Most High himself made it clear to me that I must live the life of the Gospel."5

From the beginning, Francis honored personal liberty. Respecting the individual and his liberty and aware that a friar's call and his way of living that call came from God and not some ecclesiastical office, Francis wrote a lean Rule that lays upon the friar no burden greater than the gospel itself. When a friar joins the fraternity, he is free to dispose of what he owns; no friar is to judge anyone else's way of life. Near death, Francis did not demand that the friars walk in his footsteps doing as he did; rather, "I have done what God gave me to do, I pray that you will do the same."6

As the republican ideology as not meant to culminate in a narrow individualism, neither is Franciscan liberty. The writings of Francis continually admonish his followers to live for others and to entrust themselves to each other in every situation. The Franciscan is personally free in order to be *fraternally* responsible. Franciscans are to anticipate one another's needs, not wait for a leader's directive or a provincial plan. Personal freedom is meant to energize the fraternity in it pursuit of the common good.

The Franciscan disposition to freedom and the rejection of that power and luxury which corrupts freedom fits nicely with the dispositions of the American ideology. The Franciscan tradition has a healthy respect for individuality and its attendant liberties, a respect for the common good, and an awareness that balance is key to their preservation. Evangelization from a Franciscan perspective will always privilege these "republican dispositions."

With that in mind, let us look at what a group of sociologists and philosophers have discovered about contemporary American culture and see how our culture might benefit from what we Franciscans can contribute from what our tradition, our "community of memory," has made us.

**THE STATE OF AMERICAN CULTURE** In the book called *Habits of the Heart*, a group of sociologists and philosophers have asked some questions about contemporary America. The book inquires into the American "character" asking how we can "preserve or create a morally coherent life." The question arises from a concern that "individualism," an important dimension of the American character, has become "cancerous" and could succeed in destroying freedom itself.<sup>7</sup> The inquiry concludes that we Americans find ourselves in this situation because we have committed the cardinal sin of unbalancing life by "putting our own good as

individuals, as groups, as a nation, ahead of the common good.<sup>8</sup> What has failed at every level is integration, the ability to see personal fulfillment in terms of the fulfillment and happiness of others. The authors note that efforts to turn things around, to achieve an integrated society, are hampered by a desperate fear that such an achievement can only be bought at the cost of our private dreams, of private success.<sup>8</sup> Americans fear that *integration* means the demise of the individual.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* say that what is needed if we are to ever achieve an integrated society free of cancerous individualism is a new understanding of work. Bellah and his associates say that "a change in the meaning of work and the relation of work and reward is at the heart of any recovery of our social ecology."<sup>10</sup> Fundamental to such a change is the realization that work is responsibility to the public welfare and not merely a means to personal profit or prestige.

In some sense, it seems that Franciscans themselves need a "conversion experience" with regard to our thinking about and our doing of work before we can make bold to call upon our fellow citizens to imitate us. Some Franciscans no longer seem to value work: they see it as a consequence of sin, an obstacle to fraternity. Others have come to believe that their human worth depends upon their occupational status or the size of their paycheck. Still others are willing to work but only according to their own specifications: they seem to have little sense that work is a gift and, like all God's gifts, needs to be ordered for the sake of the common good by those who have charge of that good. Our common memory can make present to us a vision of work that energized Francis. This vision can provoke us and enable us to contribute to the restoration of that balance between a healthy individuality and attention to the common good.

In his study of human development, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, Daniel Levinson noted that a person's work is the primary base for his life in society. Through work, a person is "plugged into" the social matrix. The study reaffirmed the value of work to one's psychological health as a vehicle for fulfillment or negation of central aspects of the self. One's work defines and brings to reality one's dreams for the future. Those who do not make a commitment to work are deprived of the satisfaction of engaging in enduring work that is suitable for the self and valuable for society.<sup>11</sup>

Levinson's study points out two critical and inseparable dimensions of work: work as self-actualization and as work as a way of being in and for the world. The very meaning of *Existenz*, as Heidegger would have us remember, is who and how one is in the world. Work nuances this "being-in-the-world" by asserting that the *who* is "worker" and the *how* is "working." Work enables a person to fulfill himself in service of the common good. Work is the point of integration, the fulcrum that brings balance to the tensions of community and individuality.

Jesuit John Kavanaugh reminds us that "the ways we cultivate the world...are also

the way that we ourselves are cultivated."<sup>12</sup> There is a reciprocity between how the world effects us and we the world. Work is that cultural construct by which we engage the world around us and by which the world around engages us. Moreover, work, as an element of culture, is a way God enters into history. Thus, modeling a unique work ethic enables us to evangelize American culture.

To create an integrated society, one in which individuals do not fear the common good, requires not only personal commitment but also a social movement to nurture individual conversion and bring it to bear in action. Franciscan are in a position to be such a movement cooperating in the recovery of America's "social ecology" by "constructing a new way of thinking" and therefore "a new way of doing" work. We do this by bringing to bear on the American work ethic those values deemed critical to the process of evangelization.

### A FRANCISCAN NOTION OF WORK

The General Chapter (OFM) of 1985<sup>13</sup> formulated a plan for evangelization which accents three values of our Franciscan heritage: contemplation, an option for the poor, and formation in the missionary spirit. *Contemplation* reminds us that what we are and what we have come from God. Our *option for the poor* reminds us that it is among those of apparently little worth that we discover that it is God's valuation of persons that really matters; option for the poor keeps us alert to the fact that human rights are not concessions of a benevolent society, but are inalienable fits from God. To be formed in the missionary spirit encourages us to remember that we are proofs of the resurrection, that it is not an empty tomb but ourselves that testify to Jesus's resurrection. "Missionary spirit" means that we need to bear witness everywhere to God-given liberty which dignifies each person. These Franciscan values serve the cause of that "moral cohesion" which our American culture need to retrieve. These values enable Franciscans to offer a new understanding of work, the prescription necessary to restore America's social cohesion.

The purpose of work for Franciscans can be found in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (4:12) where he states that "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers [are given] in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ." The common good of a body is achieved when each of the individual members enjoys liberty to carry out its work, not in isolation, but in a harmonious tension with every other member. Francis saw this clearly. In chapter 5 of the Rule of 1223, Francis speaks to those friars "to whom God has given the grace of working."<sup>14</sup> Work was a gift given for the sanctification of the individual friar, but a gift that was efficacious only when used for the sake of the many.

The *Testament* reflects Francis's perception of work: "I worked with my own hands and I am still determined to work; and with all my heart I want all the other friars to be busy with some kind of work that can be carried out without scandal. Those who do not know how to work should learn, not because they want to get some for their efforts, but to give good example and to avoid idleness."<sup>15</sup>

**Work as a grace, a gift, is a "dynamic process of personal interaction, expression, even surrender."<sup>16</sup> This gift is part of one's call from God. To work is to use what God has given. To use well what God has given is to use it for the sake of others since "to each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." (1 Cor. 12:7) To accept this grace and to work is to understand how God has surrendered himself to us and to learn from that model how to surrender ourselves to one another for the common good.**

#### **A. CONTEMPLATION**

**Much of the contemporary problem with work and the inability to appreciate work as "grace" comes about because contemplation has been neglected, and people have focused attention on the material recompense of work rather than the work itself, which as gift, is a personal expression of the giver, God. Contemplation reminds us that what we are and have is from God. What is from God reflects God and is ordered to him. Thus, the true nature of work reflects a God who is kenotic, self-emptying. Work done poorly reflects God poorly; incompetent or unprepared work reflects God in an incompetent and twisted way; idleness, laziness reflects God not at all.**

**In the sixth chapter of the Rule of 1223, Francis cautions us not to appropriate anything for ourselves lest we replace God with money, power, or prestige.<sup>17</sup> Francis came to this awareness as a child of Europe's new capitalist economy which conditioned people to see work in terms of gains and personal ambition. The money economy favored possession and profit, what people could get rather than what they could give. Francis saw this enfolded in his own father whose preoccupation with his textiles led him to see work as a means to wealth and power rather than as a way of serving others. For Francis, work for the sake of personal wealth and power was work that oppressed, sin. Work leading a person to attend to the needs of others was grace. The reason for this grace is to imitate God, to impoverish oneself for the sake of another, to empty oneself so that another might have life. Work as a God-given gift "implies reciprocity... a mutual giving between person,;<sup>18</sup> a remedy for alienation, a force for integration. Work was and is the means by which the friars move among the people as one of them. Contemplation shows that work is a vale because it is a self-emptying that makes the worker aware of his status as a "pilgrim and stranger" in this world utterly dependent upon God.**

## **B. OPTION FOR THE POOR**

Francis had a deep and abiding love for the Church and felt called to work for its rebuilding. Like Francis, our work must be ecclesial, work in and for the Church which is the body, the sacrament of Christ. We need to take as our own the spirit of Francis who loved the Church even though the thirteenth-century church was scarred, disfigured, and hard to love. Like Francis, we see our experience of Jesus and the carrying out of his work within the life of this Mystery, this People of God. We strive to work "to repair [God's] house which is falling into ruin"<sup>19</sup> with full realization that "this fragile, weak and vulnerable trophy to the weakness of God is still a privileged instrument in mediating to a rich experience of Christ."<sup>20</sup>

We need to recall that this fragile instrument called "Church" is a People who proclaims the Gospel. The marrow of this gospel is the "good news" of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. This means that, whatever our work, it is always an occasions where the "good news" ("Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again") is made tangible for people. Franciscan stand in profound awe before the Mystery of the Incarnation. Like Francis, we are humbled by the humanity of God and see in each person what God sees, a potential for divinity that is more fundamental than gender, national origin, or sexual identity.

Because it is grace, work is never task oriented but person oriented. The Franciscan doctor doesn't cure disease, she heals patients; the Franciscan professor doesn't teach theology, he teaches students. The Franciscan cook doesn't prepare meals, he feeds people. The good news is the news that flesh and blood - precisely in its sinfulness and hurt - matters to God. Sinful flesh and blood is worthy of the self-emptying of God. Work is an expression of that redemptive love which embraces the whole of a scarred, imperfect yet wonderfully graced creation.

In being ecclesial, a Franciscan's work is an option for the poor. Ecclesial work does not aggrandize an institution; it serves that "school of sinners" which testifies in every time and place that grace, true freedom, is not cheap, it is free; grace is not the largess of a government, an economy or a religious body, but that inalienable *existential* that can never be taken away and always demands the reverence of food, drink, clothing, shelter, opportunity, a just wage.

## **C. MISSIONARY SPIRIT**

Testifying that work is redemptive, that is, proclaiming that flesh and blood can redeem flesh and blood is the source and summit of the missionary spirit. The missionary spirit is that spiritual and emotional tone which energizes efforts to serve freedom by modeling for others the fruit of liberty: self-fulfillment through service to the common good. That tone is a vital energy of Franciscan work: flesh and blood redeeming flesh and blood with that person-centered affection that characterizes the love of God made flesh in Jesus.

This means that the tough sinews of Franciscan life - the evangelical councils - need to be rooted in work, what we do and how we do it.

## **THE GOSPEL COUNSELS**

### **A. OBEDIENCE**

**It would have been understandable for Francis to conclude from the invitation he got from the cross at San Damiano that God had set him over and against a disintegrating Church whose abuses and reprobates he was to replace. Instead, Francis promised obedience to the Lord Pope and his successors, for many the source and summit of the Church's problems. Francis promised to be obedient, that is, to listen. This promise was an embrace of the Church's sin and folly as well as its holiness and wisdom. The ecclesial quality of work, that quality which guarantees an option for the poor, is preserved by an attentiveness to something greater than the Order or any individual friar. For Francis, obedience was the need to "listen," to attend to the common good. Conscious of the disasters which befell similar movements in his time when they ceased to listen, Francis call his followers to obedience as a way o integrating the energy of the fraternity with that of the greater Church, a way of securing that balance which preserved true freedom.**

### **B. POVERTY**

**To be poor with simple clothes, a rude shelter and plain food is not a praiseworthy goal for a Franciscan or for anybody. Rather, the praiseworthy goal is participation in the mind and heart of Christ, and it is the mind and heart of Christ to live a poor and simple unencumbered life. In the Rule of 1221, Francis cautions his followers not to let the result of their work influence their attitude toward work;<sup>21</sup> this is a natural consequence of thinking of work as grace and doing work as an exercise of God's freely given gift not for acquisition, personal gain, or ambition but for the building up of the Body.**

### **C. CHASTITY**

**Chastity is rooted in work that points to one who is "my God and my all."<sup>22</sup> Chastity is a needed way of life because it raises doubts about conventional ways of fulfillment. When we think about and do work because the Lord is "my Dog and my all"; when our energy is less centripetal and more centrifugal because we work for the common good, then celibacy becomes not a contrivance but a powerful symbol challenging a therapeutic culture.**

## **RESTORING THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY**

**From this notion of work, it is possible to see certain consequences both for the Franciscan live and for the restoration of America's social ecology.**

**First, we need to retrieve the original meaning of the term, "professional." It meant one who was publicly responsible. We are publicly responsible for the life that we live. We are answerable to the community and to God. Franciscans need to attend to that notion by insuring that our formation and continuing education programs**



**cultivate in us a sense of the Church which also means a sense of the world. We need to remember that the Order exists for the sake of Church and world, not in spite of them.**

**A proper sense of professionalism restores the social ecology by witnessing to the workers' need to be publicly responsible. Work is never a private enterprise but always social.**

**Secondly, we need to keep in mind the meaning of the freedom to work. We were not given to one another to perform any specific task. Every work which does not extinguish our life with God is permissible. This kind of freedom helps us to show that there is a nobility and dignity to each work which demands that it be well-developed by education and training. In this way, one's occupation can be exercised competently. In this way, the task ennobles and graces the worker. One's dignity and prestige is not in a specific kind of ministry but in the work itself. As stated in one Franciscan group's commentary on their constitutions "an orientation of this kind appears to us to be in line with our vocation. By it we are part of society in a special way, working for its upbuilding and we are brought closer to those who live by their work."<sup>23</sup>**

**Work serves to balance the legitimate needs of both individual and community, because work can only actualize the self where there is a genuine commitment to the common good. We can call for deep respect for whatever work an individual is called to do. The very nature of work as "grace" means that its fulfillment is only possible when it is exercised for the many. When work becomes solely the measure of personal success, one is unable to plug oneself into the social matrix.<sup>24</sup> Individual energy is turned inward and the result is confusion, isolation and alienation. Religious people call that sin.**

**Thirdly, we must remember that Francis called our attention to the kind of work he did: manual labor.<sup>25</sup> *Habits of the Heart* states that "the litmus test...for assaying the health of a society is how it deals with the problem of wealth and poverty."<sup>26</sup> Francis developed a distaste for the capitalistic life that looked disparagingly at common labor and those who did this work; distaste for a way of life that measured human worth and success in terms of financial gain and material comfort encouraged Francis to opt for the *minores*, the poor. Francis wanted to work with his hands because that was how the unwealthy, the <1>minores, worked. It is spiritually healthy for us to undertake irksome and time-consuming housekeeping tasks - making beds, doing laundry - as a reminder that we can not call our selves minors if we do not do the work of the *minores*. And yet there is a more profound level of such work.**

**Redemption is the restoration of freedom, and Francis worked for and with those who were un-free because of their own or someone else's sin. The exercise of our capacity to work is never complete unless that exercise somehow includes such service. Early Franciscans ministry was eye-catching in its presence to daily and ordinary life. In our "therapeutic culture," work that Franciscans do, because it is**

**imbued with the spirit of the Incarnation, ought to be equally eye-catching by its attentiveness to the claims of society's marginal and cast out. We need to do our work with a keen sense that in doing so we represent the needs of the least among us. The underprivileged or handicapped student, the welfare mother, the underemployed father, the confusing "bag lady," the rich young man who has no sense of the meaning of life all have a privileged claim on our work. Our schools, hospitals, parishes, and seminaries need to be recognizable for the special attention given to these. Once again, it is the example of the Incarnation, God's self-gift to us when we were alienated, that is our example. When people are most disabled by their own or the sin of the world, an attentiveness born of the unique quality of work-as-grace rescues them from hopelessness.**

Finally, work must be a way of helping us to be poor so that we can be like God and thus faithful to that image in which we are made. God's poverty is a self-emptying on our behalf. Our work is service for others the way God served us. As God who was rich made himself poor for us, likewise we should be doing work that makes us "poor" as God was for others. It is important to remember that material poorness can be mere affectation. Our material poverty makes sense and informs American culture only when it is indicative of an "ample-mindedness." When our first and genuine concern is the well-being of others, we spend less and less energy crafting comfortable cocoons to leisure in. There is a healthy leanness to our houses, recreations, and personal life-styles that is not imposed or contrived. Material poverty happens simply because one's work is so good and worthwhile that one does not need the "knick-knacks" and luxuries of the consumer culture to affirm one's worthwhileness and sense of belonging.

## **CONCLUSION**

**Three hundred years ago in Boston harbor, John Winthrop and his shipmates described their mission as that of creating a "city on a hill" which would be a model for subsequent nations and generations.**

**The Franciscan of the United States, by virtue of our compatibility with elements of the national ideology, have a privileged opportunity to fulfill Winthrop's mission, to be a model for our fellow citizens and for peoples elsewhere.**

**Our fraternity was born when Francis asked to rebuild God's house. His only resources were the fruits of his life of contemplation, his option for the poor, and a missionary zeal. Francis knew that his strengths and talents were from God for the sake of the many; he knew that his stature as a man came not from whether he was a priest, a professor, a merchant, or knight errant. His inestimable worth was not the concession of a benevolent duke or obliging cleric. God made him good and filled with grace. Francis was as free as God, beholden only to what preoccupied God - the lepers, the homeless, the criminal, the social outcasts. Francis knew that others hungered for this freedom.**

**Our Franciscan tradition well-equips us with capabilities for inculturating the Gospel, that is, enfleshing, embodying the freedom won for us by Jesus. It is a**

**process that is played out in the work of parishes, schools, chaplaincies and bread lines. It calls for the retrieval of a fundamental vision, a vision shared by both Francis and, in their own way, our American forebears. Faithful to both, we Franciscans can construct ways of doing things and ways of thinking that involve us more deeply in the power of the Gospel for the sake of the many.**