



BEARERS OF PEACE AND OUR UNCONSCIOUS BIASES

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“Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon. Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others.” (OFS Rule, Art. 19)

When we speak of being bearers of peace and trusting in the divine seed in everyone, we must recognize and become aware of our unconscious biases towards them. We cannot be bearers of peace while operating out of an unconscious bias toward another. **Unconscious bias** refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. They are automatic associations; the things that automatically come to mind when we experience certain stimuli. We then make uninformed, non-premeditated assumptions from those associations. They could be verbal or non-verbal and can malign, insult, or snub people who are of a different color, age, gender, physical ability, culture, language, etc.

Author and columnist Malcolm Gladwell states in his 2007 book **Blink**: *“Our minds reach conclusions without our knowledge.”* Our brains are constantly sorting through data, coming to conclusions without our realizing it. We couldn’t get through our everyday lives if we had to consciously think and sort through every piece of mind data. It is a necessary process that our brains sort through all of this data for us without our knowing it. Sometimes our brains will come to really quick conclusions; then we act on those quick conclusions. This all happens unconsciously, of course, and it originates from our cultural backgrounds and experiences. If we have encountered one or two people who behaved a certain way, we will tend towards believing that all similar people behave that way. We end up vilifying the group instead of convicting the behavior of one or two individuals.

What are your initial and automatic gut reactions or assumptions about certain people or situations? Do those initial reactions honor the divine seed in that individual? Is the person with all the tattoos and piercings of criminal mentality? Since a group of Muslims bombed our structures, are all Muslims terrorists? Trusting the presence of the divine seed in everyone means just that: everyone. Each and every person is a child of God and must be treated as such; regardless of any other differences. We are to hold people accountable for unjust or criminal behavior, not because they are of a different nationality or religion.

In Verbum Domini, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI writes: “God does not reveal himself in the abstract, but by using languages, imagery and expressions that are bound to different cultures. This relationship has proved fruitful, as the history of the Church abundantly testifies. Today

it is entering a new phase due to the spread of the Gospel and its taking root within different cultures, as well as more recent developments in the culture of the West. It calls in the first place for a recognition of the importance of culture as such for the life of every man and woman. The phenomenon of culture is, in its various aspects, an essential datum of human experience.” (VD, 2010)

As Franciscans, we *are* the spread of the Gospel to all people by our very lives and courageous initiatives. We are called to counter-culturalism as we behave in the manner of our Lord Jesus. We recognize the culture of another as a means of learning and growing in love and connection; not as a means of division or exclusivity. Notice the exchange in the following Gospel passage:

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24 – 30)

The woman, being different, was not afraid to approach this preacher and healer from another culture and country. This was not about her, but about the healing of her daughter. She even stood her ground in the face of being called out as not being “one of us.” But Jesus recognized her faith which surpassed her differences. Can we look beyond the differences and see into the hearts of those we encounter? Can we look with the eyes of faith and compassion to truly see the other? Can we stop, take a deep breath and ask ourselves what am I really thinking about this person right before me? And, is it fair to judge this person based on those thoughts? How can I take a step back and really see the person with the eyes of faith as Jesus would?

Take these questions to prayer and keep them close to hand and heart when faced with making a decision that might be based on an unconscious bias. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in those decisions. You will not only begin to trust in the presence of the divine seed in others, but in yourself as well. May the Lord give you His peace.