

FRANCISCAN LIVING

GOD'S ENCOURAGEMENT

By Francine Gikow, OFS

"Blessed be God, and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement; who encourages us in every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. For as Christ's sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow. If we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation; if we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement, which enables you to endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is firm, for we know that as you share in the sufferings, you also share in the encouragement." 2Cor. 1:3-7 (NAB)

You may recognize this scripture verse using the traditional word, "consolation" rather than "encouragement." However, I chose the New American Bible version for a reason. First, sometimes reading the same passage in a different version of the Bible may open up new ways of thinking about it. It breaks open the complacency of "oh, I know that one" to hearing what we weren't expecting, so we pay closer attention.

Have you thought of God being an encourager? Have you experienced our merciful God urging you into areas of your life where you did not want to go? He encourages us in those small "whispers" or nudges to do something out of our comfort zone. Sometimes God has to drag us reluctantly to take that leap of faith. I'm sure God's encouragement impelled many of us to explore the Secular Franciscan Order for the first time. For many, myself included, God had to do *a lot* of encouragement over and over again before we stepped into our first fraternity meeting. I know it was this way for me—it took about four or five years of dragging my feet before I relented!

In this age of pandemic and social unrest, we definitely need encouragement. Social distancing can be very lonely. Sometimes, encouragement comes by a specific thought returning time and time again. It may be a whispered idea that keeps nudging us. It may even be a sudden unsettling conversion which pushes us until we follow the

urging of the Holy Spirit. God, the Master Encourager, cheers us along the path to what He created us to become.

The "status quo" for God is not acceptable. He wants us—rather he *yearns* for us—to be His disciples and grow in holiness. So God allows hardships to bring us to Him and then He encourages and supports us through those difficulties as we learn to rely on Him alone. It's another form of penance and conversion; being stripped of our own will and offering it to God. God as my encourager not only consoles but supports me in my journey through life's tribulations. In fact, God's encouragement is "overflowing," never ending, lavish and abundant—for our God is the God of abundance. His mercy is never ending!

Like Francis, we look at the cross of our Savior and see His sufferings. But the cross is *not* just about suffering. For Franciscans, it is the way to redemption. It is the way to resurrection. It is a way of hope and joy.

The passage goes on to say, *"Our hope for you is firm, for we know that as you share in the sufferings, you also share in the encouragement."* In other words, God gives us His encouragement so we can "pay it forward" and build up the Body of Christ here on earth.

Many we meet may not yet be able to "see" God or hear His word for themselves. Our experience of God as the kind and gentle "encourager" can introduce others to Him through our experience: the yearning, urging, encouraging God wants a relationship with Him. For after all, God's main plan for us is salvation—to live in His Love forever.

"Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others." (OFS Rule, Art. 19)