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# FORMATION COMMISSION

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## POVERTY

by Diane Menditto, OFS

During the last few months, the question of “*poverty*” has come up in discussions during formation classes, at visitations, at fraternity meetings and in some podcasts I have been listening to. Here are some thoughts I would like to share with our National Family.



Fr. Dan Horan, OFM, in his excellent series of lectures, *The Saint and the Pope: What the Spirituality of Two Men Named Francis Can Teach Us about Christian Living*, speaks of poverty in three different ways: **Abject or material poverty**: lacking the basic needs of life—poverty that is not experienced by choice; **Spiritual Poverty**: “...the surrender or letting go of those things that are non-material or internal—our pride, selfishness, self-centeredness, opinions, judgments, prejudices, etc.” (here he cautions us not to use “spiritual poverty” in a “self-justifying” way); and **Evangelical Poverty**, which is called for in our Rule and Constitutions. Evangelical poverty is a voluntary self-emptying—“*[it] demonstrates confidence in the Father, creates interior freedom, and disposes them [us] to promote a more just distribution of wealth.*” (GC 15.1) “...it requires a strong personal commitment and the stimulation of the fraternity in prayer and dialogue, communal review of life, and attentiveness to the instructions of the Church, and the demands of society.” (GC 15.2) [Refer to Rule Article 11 and Constitutions Article 15 quoted in full below.]

As I prayed about this and asked myself many of the questions you will read below, it came to me that the **fruit of Poverty is generosity**. Doesn't *that* sound strange! How can we be generous when we have

nothing? Give it some thought. Even the truly poor can be generous, because generosity, just like poverty, doesn't always have to do with material possessions. Spiritual Poverty and Evangelical Poverty have to do with **how we handle our state in life and our relationships**. A person might not have money or possessions—in that sense, yes, he or she is poor. However, that person might **not** be “poor” in the way that we are called to be poor. The poverty of Christ was a **voluntary** self-emptying. Francis and Clare were poor temporally and spiritually by choice. This is the poverty that we are asked to imitate.



When we embrace **Spiritual/Evangelical poverty**, **we are free** to share with others anything and everything that has been given to us. We are generous when we give our **full attention** to our brothers and sisters. When they speak to us, **we listen!** How often have we stopped listening to someone because we don't agree with him or her? Do we reject and judge others because what they say does not sound like what we are so sure is right? Could we be the one who is described as “not giving an inch” in challenging or difficult discussions? Listening also requires giving our **time** to another person. This might require us to put aside something we would rather be doing. This is a kind of **generosity that requires no material gift except the gift of ourselves**.



In fraternity are we willing to get out of our “comfort zone”? Do we fulfill our role as Franciscans, our call to follow Christ in the footsteps of St. Francis, in a way that **leaves room for others to suggest new ways** of achieving the same goal? When we gain **knowledge, do we share it** with others without forcing them to agree with us? Are we willing to let go of our own agendas and **collaborate** with others, or do we sulk and make things difficult for the group if things do not go our way? Do we look at our Rule and Constitutions, *not as RULES*, but as **a way of life** to be lived by the imperfect beings that we are? We must remember that we are called to **daily conversion**—that means that we are not perfect today and are not likely to be perfect tomorrow either. When we are poor enough to **empty ourselves** of our personal desires and biases, we have room in our hearts and minds to **generously accept the ideas of others** and to live the true **spirit of what we have professed**.



**Evangelical Poverty** also calls us to reach out to the materially poor and to work for causes that will help to make their lives better. As Franciscans we are not only called to a contemplative spirituality. We are also called to action. Do we get involved with our fraternity apostolates? Are we willing to give up our time to volunteer in a soup kitchen or to visit the sick? This Year of Mercy gives us ample encouragement to work for justice and peace in our communities.

As Secular Franciscans living in the world, we are called to be **poor enough to be generous**. Through our Baptism, we are called to **make ourselves available** to bring others to God. As professed Franciscans, this commitment is strengthened. We see Christ through the eyes of St. Francis who said, “*So, let us go out into the world and remind everybody by example as well as word to turn to God.*” (*Legend of the Three Companions*)

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**References:**

**Rule 11:** “*Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. Let the Secular Franciscans **seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs.** Let them be mindful that according to the gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God’s children.*

*Thus, in the spirit of “the Beatitudes”, and as pilgrims and strangers on their way to the home of the Father, they should strive to **purify their hearts from every tendency and yearning for possession and power.**”*

**Constitutions 15**

1. *Secular Franciscans should pledge themselves to live the spirit of the Beatitudes and, in a special way, the spirit of poverty. Evangelical poverty demonstrates confidence in the Father, creates interior freedom, and disposes them to promote a more just distribution of wealth*

2. *Secular Franciscans, who must provide for their own families and serve society by means of their work and material goods, have a particular manner of living evangelical poverty. To understand and achieve it requires a strong personal commitment and the stimulation of the fraternity in prayer and dialogue, communal review of life, and attentiveness to the instructions of the Church, and the demands of society.*

3. *Secular Franciscans should pledge themselves to reduce their own personal needs so as to be better able to share spiritual and material goods with their brothers and sisters, especially those most in need. They should give thanks to God for the goods they have received, using them as good stewards and not as owners. They should take a firm position against consumerism and against ideologies and practices which prefer riches over human and religious values and which permit the exploitation of the human person.*

4. *They should love and practice purity of heart, the source of true fraternity.*

Fr. Daniel P. Horan, OFM,

***The Saint and the Pope: What the Spirituality of Two Men Named Francis Can Teach Us about Christian Living***

*(Lecture series available through Now You Know Media).*