

*“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . .”*

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

In the Introduction to his book, *Francis and Jesus*, our brother Murray Bodo points to two transforming events in young Francis Bernardone’s life: the embrace of a leper and his attendance at Mass on what was then the Feast of St. Matthias, February 24, 1208.

There is a third iconic event that has spoken powerfully to me over the years. I know you all remember the scene. Pietro di Bernardone was furious! There was the matter of merchandise and funds taken from his store. But largely, Francis had become an embarrassment to him and to the family. Having been unsuccessful with his appeal to the civil authorities, Pietro went to Bishop Guido who, in turn, called Francis to appear before him to respond to his father’s demands.

Challenged to return his father’s money, Francis stripped off all of his clothes, placed the money on top of the pile and appearing completely naked before the bishop, his father and the citizens of Assisi, placed it all at his father’s feet saying, “until now I have called you, Pietro di Bernardone, my father, but from now on I have only one Father – our Father who art in heaven.”

In this powerful scene, I see Francis “emptying” himself just as Paul exhorts us to do in his letter to the Philippians where he declares that Jesus “emptied himself”. Paul uses uniquely here a Greek word – *kenoio* – from the root *kenosis*, to empty oneself. To be absolutely sure we understand what he is talking about, Paul clarifies it in considerable detail. Affirming that while Jesus was, indeed, part of the Godhead and enjoyed all the glory that equality offered, he did not, Paul tells

us, “exploit” his position, but rather, in an act of self-renunciation, willingly gave up his authority and rank to take on human form.

In like manner, Francis, standing naked before his father, Bishop Guido and the citizens of Assisi, renounced his status as the son of a successful, wealthy merchant, relinquishing any claim to his family heritage, in order to answer the call of God.

In the Philippians passage, Paul clarifies even further by citing two critical characteristics of this unique action of “emptying.” First, it required *humility*. In “... the Principles...” humility is the very first “note” in the symphony of our lives as Third Order Franciscans. Echoing Paul’s words to the Philippians, we read every month that Jesus “took on the form of a servant” and we are challenged to “likewise seek to serve one another with humility.” These two things – *humility and emptying* – are inextricably linked together. It is, in part, through humility that the emptying takes place. And, the emptying is an absolute requirement for receiving the gift of humility.

Jesus emptied himself by renouncing his place in the glory of glories to become a mere human being. Francis renounced the wealth and status of his family to become a humble servant. These both are, I believe, symbols or metaphors to help us understand that the road to humility is to set aside our *ego* – all the trappings that we feel make us special and deserving – so that the Holy Spirit of God can infuse in us the gift of humility that leads to servanthood.

Now, Paul tells us that there is one more important characteristic of “emptying.” In humbling himself, Paul tells us that Jesus “. . . became obedient.” There are two

important things to recognize here. Obedience is at the core of any religious order. We are reminded of it often. But what Paul is describing here is not obedience to a rule, or obedience to the dictates of Chapter, or obedience to a Superior. Clearly, what Paul is talking about is obedience to *the Father*. Jesus came into the world with a mission and he was faithfully obedient to the one who commissioned him.

Paul emphasizes that by continuing, “. . . to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Jesus never wavered in his obedience to the Father. He stuck with it through good times and bad – going all the way down to the lowest, most humiliating place possible, a cruel, excruciatingly painful death on the cross. That, my friends, is *perseverance*. How often we are tempted to let the ego slip back into place and abandon – even momentarily – the path of obedience to the Father. Paul challenges us walk in the footsteps of Jesus who gives us the ultimate example of perseverance.

Over the last couple of years, as individuals, Fellowships and Convocations – and in small groups over the last few days – we have been working hard to re-imagine what “rebuild my church” means for the Third Order in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As I have listened to discussions, read reports from Convocations and Fellowships, read letters from individuals and often struggled with the question myself, there has always been at the back of my mind a lingering question. What is the spark that will ignite a flame of renewal? What is the seed that will shoot up new growth to revitalize the church and change the world around us?

Considering questions like that, it is easy to let our thoughts dwell on structural institutional changes. Is our institutional structure too cumbersome? Or, do we need to change our network of Fellowships? While there may be some benefit in

things like that, they are not the seed of renewal. Or, we begin to imagine new programmatic efforts of outreach. Should we set up a network of Franciscan community gardens? Or develop a network of Climate Change action cells? As helpful as those might be, they do not represent the seed of renewal. Or, we imagine that if we grow bigger – attract more members – we will become more effective. While it’s always wonderful to welcome more people walking in the way of Francis, that does not get to the root of things, either.

My friends, I believe that the starting point for a genuine movement in the Third Order to become for our church and our world what Francis and his followers were in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century is this:

*“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. . .”*

It is as simple – and as difficult – as this: When you and I and Third Order Franciscans around the world “empty” ourselves – that is, set aside our egos – and walk in humble obedience to the Father, God’s Holy Spirit will be able to truly use us as a channel for transformation in our church and in our neighborhoods.

Day Thirty of our “Principles” speaks of being “willing to be emptied of self. . .”

**Where are you this afternoon with your ego?**

**Are you holding on to some feelings of superiority?**

**Are you clinging to some of those privileges you are so fond of?**

**Are you fearful of the consequences of complete surrender?**

**Do you want to truly follow Christ in the way of Saint Francis?**

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In closing, I leave with you the words of our beloved father Francis, “Let us begin, sisters and brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing.” Amen.