

Lifelong Formation: An emerging vision and new direction

Beginnings of this Holy Spirit Moment in the Third Order, Society of Saint Francis

In the late Fall of 2016, Tom Johnson invited me to join Chapter as Fellowship Coordinator. Following his vision to "Rebuild the church (the Order), he asked me to revise the Convener Handbook. After studying the handbook, I felt it necessary to write an essay which could guide our conversation at the California Chapter that year. A main part of my proposal then was that Fellowships could be centers for nurture, ever deepening faith, study of Scripture and primary sources of the Franciscan founding vision, lifelong formation, and Franciscan mission. This essay generated a lot of energy and so Tom wanted us to consider it at more depth at our next Chapter meeting a few months later in Cincinnati.

In Cincinnati, a task force was formed to explore what ever-deepening faith of a Franciscan over the course of a lifetime might look like. Four of us newbies had begun to explore the essay in California: Tracey Carroll, Jotie Noel, Phil Geliebter, and me. We asked others to join our number and sit with us in prayer and conversation. They were Brother Desmond, Bishop Scruton, and Mike Carsten from the OSF. We started our reflection by bearing witness to what had attracted us to the Order and what kept us here. All of us remembered significant person(s) who introduced us to the life and mission of Francis. In two cases the ones who introduced us to Francis were deeply engaged with responding to the needs and suffering of those in the inner city. We worked side by side with them and discovered Francis. Others remembered being introduced to Francis by a friend and discovering that Francis was a kindred spirit we wanted to devote our lives to. When the group presented their findings to Chapter as a whole, we spoke passionately about what we had heard the Spirit saying and after prayer and conversation, Chapter embraced the work we had done.

In the Fall of 2017, Tom Johnson and the Minister General asked me to present our work at the IPTOC meeting near London in September. I enlisted Masud Ibn Syedullah to join me in that presentation. As we made the presentation, we again experienced deep resonance from the Ministers and other leaders gathered there. In fact, we found that the same move of the Spirit was happening in other Provinces of the Third Order. In the last session of IPTOC, the Minister General with the advice of the IPTOC community, created a small task force to do further study on lifelong formation in the

Third Order and how it might be accomplished. We were made up of one person from each Province. We have subsequently added new people to the work including indigenous people so that we might discern together how best to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying in all parts of the Franciscan global community.

I did indeed rework the Convener Handbook and have now updated it three times to reflect the emerging vision. It is now named, *Life in Francis: a Handbook for Conveners and Fellowships*. The introduction of *Life in Francis* attempts every year to capture a snapshot of where we are in the discovery of the Spirit's work in our midst.

Franciscan Balance: Contemplation, Community, and Missional Action

One of our first findings was the need to work toward Franciscan balance throughout the Third Order in the areas of Contemplation, Community, and Missional Action.

We do not use the word prayer because sometimes that limits us. The word prayer is derived from the French word *priere*, to ask. Prayer is one part of contemplation. Contemplation is that way of being with God which allows God's deep to call to ours. It is the place where we learn to hear and know the mind of God and what he is asking us to do or say at any moment. It is coming into the very presence of God, either individually or as a community, attempting to discern what the Spirit is saying.

You probably remember from the Gospel of John that Jesus says I do not do my own works. I do what I see the Father doing. I do not speak my own words. I speak the words I hear the Father speaking.

That, it seems to me, is what we are inviting Fellowships and small groups (Bible studies, telephone small groups, etc.) to be; a garden where we learn to nurture each other to hear what the Spirit is saying to each of us as we live out our vocation in the world. We learn to listen to God, to hear what He is saying and then begin to do the works of mercy he asks us to do, to speak those words and do the work we are given to do.

What would happen in a community where we spoke the words we were given to speak instead of trying to figure out what we are supposed to say? It could be very redemptive. My father, a missionary to Indonesia, practiced this principle. He came

into a village one day and there was a woman there with matted hair who looked elderly. The village people were deeply concerned about her and they wanted the visiting missionary to speak to her. He sat down with her and he heard the Spirit say, "Ask her how she felt when her mother died." She started weeping and she wept for hours. He came back a year later and a young woman bounced up to him and she said, "Do you remember me?" It was the same person. She had been transformed by one question.

So how do we raise up a community of people who have this sort of compassion for God, who are willing to listen to Christ and then speak his words of grace and healing? I think the Fellowships and all the other emerging small groups can be the place. These groups may become gardens to nurture us in contemplation, Community, Missional Action.

Let me describe what a balanced Fellowship might look like. Chapter over the past years has become a community. Janet brings us together often. We listen to each other and Janet calls forth the gifts that each of us brings and trusts that the Spirit is going to work through each of us. She is modelling to us what the ideal convener looks like: a person of prayer who sees the gifts, skills, passions of the people who share the ministry with her and calls them forth in a way that they causes something beautiful for God.

This sort of community life is what I suspect the Fellowships are called to be; a garden to nurture this sort of passion, this sort of love for God that is not so enamored with our own words but is more concerned about speaking the words that God gives us to speak. And doing the things that God gives us to do.

I look around at this Chapter and I see incredible gifts. My two colleagues who work with me on Fellowships, Tracey and Jotie, bring knowledge and wisdom and skill. Jotie's sense of humor but also his deep sense of mission that has carried him through his obedience to the Spirit, to leave a Cathedral in order to serve people in a mission field far to the North. What great passion. Or Tracey's willingness to continue to be incredibly productive for God even though her life is so complicated. She loves deeply and it comes through everything she says.

Charlie brings to us a deep sense of what it means to us to be fully Franciscan. He knows the lore, he knows the history. He teaches us new things all the time by his understanding. And when we have the privilege of having Brother Desmond here, he keeps us connected to the rest of the Order and brings us deep clarity on the Franciscan vision.

Bishop Celso offers us his years of the study of psychology because he has been informed by these things and he has a deep understanding of human nature as a result. We are enriched by his understanding, by his knowledge.

John brings a sense of structure and detail. We are in a visionary moment and we need order structure as we follow the Spirit. Needed are both our visionaries and those with the gift of administration. I have seen these incredible gifts of the people in this Chapter. And as I think back over my 33 years in the Order, I think of the incredibly gifted people on whose shoulders we stand. Aldan Whitney, Anita Catron Miner, Ken Norian to name, but a few of these gifted tertiaries. These are the ones who led us at one time, but there are countless other tertiaries who quietly serve, work for justice, demonstrate mercy, and walk humbly with God. Their gifts may not be known to us all.

Franciscan Bonds of Unity

The IPTOC task force spent one session gathering our Bonds of Unity. We suggested three bonds that hold us together in the Third Order: The Daily Obedience, our daily prayer for each other across the Province (we used to pray for all Tertiaries globally), and our Rule of Life.

***Plumblines* that help us hold our Franciscan Balance of Contemplation, Community and Missional Action: Study, Spiritual Discernment, Lifelong Formation, and the Development of Spiritual Gifts**

- Study.
 - Day 17 calls us to study Scripture. One of the things the task force has asked us to emphasize was to begin to know Scripture as well as Francis did. Almost everything he writes is emersed in Scripture. A deep devotional reading allows Scripture to sink deep into our soul and spirit

speak so that we know what it is the Spirit wants of us to do throughout the day, or say to this person in front of me.

- Another Daily Obedience invites us to study other things.. We Franciscans believe that all truth is God's truth and that we should seek the truth wherever it leads, whatever it costs. For this reason, we read what others are writing. We study other people's art to see what they are telling us about themselves and culture. We are formed by these things.
- Lifelong Formation. There is not actually a specific Daily Obedience that speaks to this, but it is certainly implied throughout. The call is for us to be moving toward union with God and each other. We look at these 9 points of our Rule as if they are 9 different things, but the more we grow in our faith, in our understanding, the more these nine points become one thing. They become one garden that forms us, that shapes us. We encounter a whole host of diverse people, but we are one in Christ. We are bound together in His love, all of us. Rich and poor, black and white, whatever the distinction or division we might see externally. The more closely we are in love with Jesus the more He binds us together in unity and in love. And hopefully deepens our appreciation for each other in ways that we can celebrate. Being together in community over a length of time allows us to love our unity in diversity.
- Spiritual Discernment. The Quakers have a wonderful process of sitting with one who is wrestling with issues of vocation, or decision in which a few faithful friends sit with that one to listen prayerfully and reflect occasionally what they hear, until the person hears what the Spirit is saying to them from within their own skill, gift and need. Spiritual discernment is not offering advice, but rather leaving room for the Holy Spirit to speak in the heart and life of the faithful servant of God.
- Developing the Spiritual Gifts of Ministries. The ability to develop the spiritual gifts, skills and ministry of people in this Order. It has been remarkable to see what Janet, Brother Willy, and Rick Simpson, and others have done to bring people together that had never led before in the Order, to call forth those gifts, skills and strength. If those things are functioning on the Fellowship level, if our conveners are calling forth the gifts, the skills, the talents of our people, if our conveners are functioning in mission, if they're focused on developing their people as spiritual leaders, it can be a great strength to all of us.

When we were raising our three boys, we all made a covenant together that we would not say anything negative about each other. We would not remember the moments when they did something that was really embarrassing. We would celebrate the things that they did well. So now we have 3 confident, middle-aged men, who are doing the same with their children. When I do pre-marriage counseling, I ask, "What does it mean to honor each other?" And then I tell them that story. And I say, "Here's what I think honoring means. We celebrate the things they do well, and we let the other things go."

Final thoughts for our spiritual discernment

- The current Fellowship handbook advises Fellowships to focus on missional action rather than the "therapeutic model." We focus on missional action, so that when we come to the sharing time, our sharing time in Fellowship we do not focus on the same pain that we feel every month, but rather we do that work with our Spiritual Director or therapist as needed. Instead we use Fellowship sharing time to witness to the mission we do for Christ and Francis and Clare either as a whole fellowship (which doesn't happen often), or in our own Franciscan vocation in the world.
- When we focus on the things that are broken, sometimes they never get healed. The mission in Indonesia realized that if they focused on feeling sick, they would be sick for the required amount of time to finish the cold or flu. But if the Lord God said Go Out and do mission, and they went out and did mission, they would always be healed on the way. Always.
- So, it became a spiritual principle to me that it is about the mission. It's about the mission the Lord has given us to do. What gets us to that place of mission is the willingness to do the hard work of contemplation, both individually and corporately, then to come back to the place of contemplation and community after mission, for healing, for restoration, and to understand what we have just seen. We come to the place of community, so that study might take place, that we might look at the Scriptures, the writings of Francis, of Clare, of Duns Scotus and all the others who have formed us. We should have these things so deeply committed to our heads, hearts, and souls that we live lives of mercy like Christ and Francis without being aware of it. (see Matthew 25) Because we've read it, we've studied it. We've worked it through. It's not like Francis' writings are

particularly long. Most of them can be read in a few minutes. But then they need to be examined.

- An example from The Holy Experiment Fellowship: He is a part of the Holy Experiment Fellowship with Rick Pearce, Phil Geliebter, Joan Bedell, Peter Stube and a few new people. Most of us have been together for a long time. We have focused our sharing time on mission, on the work that people are doing and so we get blown away by hearing the mission work that Phil is doing in the inner city, or the work that Rick is doing as a retired social worker, or the things that Joan is doing in her retirement center. There's so much power in hearing the story of the work that's being done.

All these things form us in Francis and Clare directed by the Spirit of God-- so that we may know our story, our Franciscan story in the context of the Salvation story. To do the work of Jesus, we must know His story. We must have the Scripture so deeply in our heads and hearts that the Spirit can call them forward when She needs them. When She needs to speak to someone's heart in that moment, She can call it forth from us because it is a jewel embedded in us to be used as the Spirit needs it. She knows where to find it and how to enhance or transform what we thought we knew. And then we can speak the one thing that someone needs to hear in order to be transformed.