

# The Franciscan Forms of Service

## Hopeful Reflections in a Perilous Time



“Saint Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio”, *Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero*, c. 1363  
Fresco, Chapel of San Francesco, Pienza, Italy

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2021

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# Foreword

At our most recent (2019) meeting of the five Ministers Provincial with the Minister General on Long Island, New York, we spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the climate crisis and what our response might be as a Franciscan Order. In our conversations we were greatly helped by the words of Archbishop Mark McDonald TSSF, the National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Canada who offers us the ecological vision of Indigenous peoples around the world. And we were also greatly helped by the presence and input of Rev. Canon Jeff Gollither, the Assisting Minister Provincial for Sacred Ecology in the Province of the Americas.

I had first met Jeff the previous October, at a meeting of the Chapter of the Province of the Americas. On the final day he took us through the very recently released IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. Jeff had been the Anglican spokesperson on Climate Change at the UN for most of the previous 30 years. With tears of frustration, he outlined how we had nearly reached the tipping point and how humanity needed to act now! We have until 2030 to halve our greenhouse gas emissions, and until 2050 to entirely eradicate them. It was a shocking moment for many of us. I knew climate change was a pressing issue, but, like many, I had lived in the mistaken belief that we had lots of time to act. It was important but not urgent. It was a very rude awakening to discover we have little or no time. I felt paralyzed with fear, disbelief and despair. While I still find myself drifting back into this response, for those of us who listened to Jeff, and for the ministers who met a year later, the challenge is how to respond from our Franciscan charism. We do not need more fear. What is needed is an urgent reframing of our relationship with God's gift of creation and for people to act on this. Or as Jeff says, we like Francis, need the Spirit to open our souls to the sacred in the whole fabric of life so that we might put our Franciscan principles into action.

So out of his years living as a Franciscan priest immersed in the issues of climate change Jeff offers us this much needed book inviting us to deepen our understanding of the Rule and Principles of our Order. This is not a manifesto of actions. There are already many of those. Instead, he offers this as a means for the Spirit to lead us in the Franciscan way of hope and discernment.

The purpose of our Rule and Principles, he says, is to deepen our relationship with God and creation and to provide a vehicle by which we might weave our souls within the fabric of life. In light of the climate crisis, he invites us to take up our cross and follow the hopeful way of Christ through intentionally living out our three forms of service; prayer, study and work.

In this wonderful little book Jeff individually explores each of these ways of service as a means of weaving our souls, while reminding us how they are also deeply interwoven themselves. In the intentional living of our three ways of service he suggests our task is to discern the extent to which that we, as Franciscans, are helping to weave the fabric of life in life-giving ways. It is also to discern the ways we have taken part in the whole colonising process that has been so destructive for many Indigenous people, and exploits, disrupts, and deforms. To know the way forward we need to repent of how we have and still do contribute to this current crisis. In this work of discernment, we are reminded that The Third Order began as a Penitential Order for the 'conversion of life'. He reminds us that Francis was committed to more than rebuilding a church; he wanted to renovate a whole way of thinking. This conversion happens through prayer, study, and work.

So I invite you to prayerfully read this book, allowing its words to shape your practice, inform your understanding, and lead you to live with hope and discernment, honouring that 'our lives are continuously woven into a single, hugely diverse, sacred fabric of all life, which is our common home and life together'. (p28)

Te pai me te rangimārie (peace and all good)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Hebert TSSF." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Heberton TSSF

Minister General

Third Order, Society of Saint Francis.

# Preface

These reflections are meant to encourage the lively conversation, deep discernment, and spiritual friendship found at the heart of the Franciscan charism. They are not position papers, but invitations to an unfolding in our collective soul that's been happening for many years. The introduction gives some background to many of the issues involved, both spiritual and scientific. The reflections themselves have been slightly revised from previous versions in order to incorporate insightful feedback from throughout our diverse global Third Order.

I give many thanks to Maggie Ross, Jon Sweeny, Janet Fedders, Mark MacDonald, John Heberton, Charlie McCarron, Celso Franco de Oliveira, Masud Syedullah, Carol Tookey, John Brockmann, Ken Gray, Joyce Wilding, Asha Lynne Gollhofer, all the Minister Provincials in the Third Order, and to four colleagues who passed away some years ago - Emmett Jarrett, Ted Roszak, James Hillman, and Darrell Posey.



## Introduction: Franciscans and the Sacred Fabric of Life

*Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'. (Luke 22:19)*

Our Franciscan Principles identify Prayer, Study and Work as the three Forms of Service of the Third Order. We know those words well and realize that the meaning of the words goes much deeper than their standard definitions. When we imagine how the sacred fabric of life might perceive it, then our Rule and Principles become sacred threads that weave together our souls, hearts, minds, bodies and communities with God's creation, our common home. In our Eucharistic liturgy, they arise from the deep river of meaning flowing from the Body of Christ - our giving thanks, the body broken, rising to new life with Him, and the prayerful remembering about which he spoke, *Do this in remembrance of me*. To remember in this way must have happened profoundly for St. Francis and St. Clare. They had reached a turning point in their lives, and with God's help, they moved through Christ's Door.

Each of us can remember our own turning points, when we needed to rethink and reweave our ideas about who God is, who we are, and what our relationships are like. It isn't easy, but then we remember what Jesus said, *my yoke is easy, my burden is light* (Matthew 11:30). Turning points lead to times of welcome unburdening and unwrapping ourselves from what we neither need nor want. Friends often help. When the Holy Spirit led Francis and Clare into unaccustomed places like that, they found the presence of God, simplicity, and far-reaching friendship. That's why we can imagine St. Francis speaking to our souls now: *what are you waiting on, get on with it*.

My purpose here is twofold. First, it is to share encouragement and hope, so we can extend Franciscan friendship outwardly as far as our hearts and souls can imagine. I understand hope in the way of Paulo Freire (1992), the Brazilian liberation theologian, who believed that genuine hope must be based on a discerning view of present realities, difficult as they may be. For that reason, our conventional view of discernment must be deepened too. It means perceiving the difference between what is morally right and wrong, and also perceiving the differences among truth, illusion, and delusion. This is important because hope is real - and hope, like love, is essential. Yet as Freire knew well, we often undermine hope by confusing it with wishful, but distorted assumptions and ideas. Hoping and wishing are not the same. With that understanding, my second purpose is to affirm something we already know - that to move ahead is to take up our crosses, individually and together, and follow the way of Christ.

## Our Shared Turning Point

Everyone reading these words has been living through a time of mounting political, economic, ecological and climate peril – the turning point that we all share. Without exaggeration, it has been described as both ‘unthinkable’, and ‘like no other in human history’. We mislead ourselves to think of this as only the background or context of our lives – an external condition that needs to be fixed so we can then continue with life as before. Efforts to break through assumptions like that have been mounting in modern times, yet they extend back through the centuries, including in the Anglican tradition. Think of Richard Hooker in the 1500’s, adviser to Elizabeth I, who with Thomas Cranmer established the theological foundation of Anglicanism. Affirming Reason and Natural Law, Hooker believed that we have two principal shared texts: *Holy Scripture and Nature* (Kirby 1999). Living in confusing, disruptive times too, he was making the point that, together with holy scripture, the fabric of life is a profoundly sacred manifestation of God’s presence. Nevertheless, since that time the sacred fabric of life has increasingly come under attack throughout the world, frequently in the name of God, which is one of the forms that idolatry takes when it’s used to rationalize colonial exploitation.

In more recent times, activists, scientists, philosophers, policymakers and in 2020 UN Secretary General Guterres, have all described this continuing ‘war on nature’ as the cause of our present emergency. It has involved persistent, prolonged exploitation that includes human slavery, genocide, and land theft in addition to ecological destruction. For the last seventy years many nations and the world’s religions have taken steps to turn this war around. It’s not been nearly enough, and not even close to quickly enough, but it has been happening. One significant step took place in the 1970’s and 80’s, when scientists began to confirm that the ‘world’ we know on earth is not machine-like (a patriarchal metaphor), but a dynamic, interwoven, living planet that fills us with awe. This emerging vision has been hugely important; but as many people realized, it was anything but new. The lives and cultures of Indigenous Peoples have been intentionally grounded in the living fabric of life, even as they were massacred and their land stolen. Chief Oren Lyons (1999:450) – Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Council of Chiefs, Haudenosaunee – describes the Indigenous view in this way, using the Lakota as an example:

*The Lakota end all of their prayers with: ‘all my relations’. This means more than their families or extended families. It includes all life upon this earth. It is the recognition, respect and love for the interconnected ‘web of life’ that Chief Seattle spoke of. It is instruction to the human community of our relationship to the earth. We call the earth ‘mother’ to emphasize this relationship. It is the recognition that this mysterious power of the life-force springs from the seed. This is the great regenerative law of life upon this earth.*



**Chief Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan**

photo: Vincent Schilling



Just a few months ago, our own Archbishop Mark MacDonald (2020), National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop of Canada, encouraged us to remember times in Franciscan history when our Order was complicit with colonial exploitation, including theft and genocide. In saying this, he's making an appeal for our return to 'ecological wholeness' and 'standing with Indigenous Peoples', while emphasizing that remembering, reconciling and restoring in this way can be a form of reparations to Indigenous Peoples and to Mother Earth. The critical questions, then, are essentially these: Are we willing to do the spiritual and moral examination we need? Will we stand with Indigenous Peoples and Mother Earth?

Picking up the historical threads once more, by the 1980's and 90's a race was underway to stop the war on nature, much of it organized by the United Nations with the active collaboration of religious and environmental organizations on every continent, including the World Council of Churches. A substantial effort to move nations toward a post-colonial era was the underlying intent. This was not just talk, but a realization that a turning point had been reached and the fate of the earth would depend on how we respond. Philosophers like Rene Dubos, who worked with the UN and treasured the connection with St Francis, introduced the modern terms 'sacred ecology' and 'think globally, act locally', both pointing to the 'practice what we preach' road that must be taken to live respectfully with ethics, justice and awe for our common home.

In 1992, the United Nation's Earth Summit gathered in Rio to begin a comprehensive process for addressing the global crisis. The initial phase would take ten years, followed by negotiations that continue today. High on the priority list have been sustainable development and poverty, women and women's rights, human rights, migrants and refugees, population, climate, food, water, energy, small island states and biodiversity. Some corporations understood what was at stake and adopted policies and practices in keeping with the post-colonial global vision. The ultimate goal was to weave together science, economics, politics, ethics and religions not only with the fabric of life, but also as a buttress against the colonial forces that, it was feared, would exert their power in new ways.

Not surprisingly this was also when the 'principalities and powers' began to push back. It took many forms. The 'invisible hand' of Wall Street made enough decisions behind the scenes and publicly to slow down or disrupt efforts to stop the war on nature in favor of profit. Global trade agreements were made that at least on the surface honored ecological realities and human rights but met sustained resistance from environmental and human rights activists. Another concern was that words like 'ecology' would be distorted or co-opted by corporate and political powers in the same way that genetics was once seen through the lens of eugenics.

Eco-psychologists like Roszak (1999) hoped that the scientific principles and ethics of ecology would not be distorted by the agendas of the old regime but become a hopeful path towards a genuine global awakening. For all those reasons and many more, NGOs participating in the UN meetings often protested the substantial corporate influence on global policymaking. The churches and church leaders often joined or led these protests, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Another implicit concern was that the spirit of global co-operation would be undermined by the rise of authoritarian political movements. Today, this concern has been realized. Movements of this kind have emerged in many countries where nationalism has combined with corporate power to infiltrate or co-opt the democratic process. Any genuine respect for the 'global commons' does not enter into discussions. Their propaganda foments racial injustice and environmental exploitation, sows fear and confusion through political division, and in doing so lures people's attention away from the spiritual foundations of a genuine 'life together', as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Nazis-resisting pastor and theologian, put it in the 1930's.

St. Francis is our historic exemplar of a 'life together' seen through an expansively inclusive lens, which is why he's been called the 'patron saint of ecology'. The Spirit opened his soul to the sacred life of a leper, and then, to the whole fabric of life. It should be no surprise, then, that the challenge in putting our Franciscan Principles into practice today arises from the same calling - recovering within ourselves a deep feeling for a genuinely moral and ethical life, while re-weaving our lives together within the sacred fabric of life, our common home.

## **The Forms of Service in a Penitential Order**

How can we do that? How can we create a life together that is faithful to God - honest and respectful of 'all our relations', as Indigenous Peoples put it? In a recent discussion about this, Charlie McCarron TSSF emphasized that the penitential taproot for Third Order Franciscans is the conversion of life. This transformational vision lies at the heart of the Franciscan charism. And we know that St. Francis and St. Clare took the meaning of 'penitence' to a deeper level than normally understood in their time or ours. We all need to open ourselves more fully to the Spirit who will help us discern what 'penitence' and 'conversion of life' actually mean in our relationships with each other as part of the fabric of life.

To seek the conversion of life, Prayer, Work and Study must be pursued in intentional ways that meet the realities of the present. In doing this, two slippery issues inevitably arise: (1) the interplay between unity and diversity within our Order, and (2) our personal and collective identity as Franciscans. Before moving ahead to the three reflections, I want to explore these issues briefly here.

## Unity and Diversity

In our life together – including Prayer, Study, Work – it's crucial to appreciate the value of both unity and diversity. This is especially true in the present day, when the lives and experience of everyone are disrupted not only by the pandemic, but also because of conflict in politics, racial relations, law and justice, and even family life, as they relate to ecological destruction. These forms of conflict are all interrelated, which affects how we think, interact and form organizational plans, in subtle ways that we often don't realize.

A common response to stressful times is to perceive diversity as a problem, weakness or a threat. To strengthen our Order, especially in times like this, it's crucial to remember that the relationship between unity and diversity is not either/or, but both/and. Both are equally important. When the UN commissioned its intellectual and experiential framework for the Biodiversity Convention, the answer given was that cultural and biological diversity are inextricably linked in the fabric of life (Posey, et.al, 1999, Gollither 1999). The sacred fabric thrives because of its vibrant diversity.

The same principle is true for our Order and the whole Society of Saint Francis. We are all part of diverse cultures and ecosystems across the earth, and every member of our Order has special interests or gifts in one or more of our Forms of Service, which any of us might pursue in distinctive and creative ways. All these are expressions of diversity within our unity – as was the original vision and intent of St. Francis.

## Self-Emptying and Remembering

One great irony in all this is that the word 'remember' has spiritual significance that we usually overlook or forget! The crucial meaning here involves a depth of remembering that emerges when we loosen or unwrap the ego's grip on our conscious minds. When we can stop talking to ourselves so much, we recover the capacity to listen – to hear the Spirit, the fabric of life, and each other. This process is described in a contemplative-spiritual-psychological way as *kenosis* or self-emptying. Prayer that encourages inner silence is the key, and its relevance is not confined to the lives of contemplatives. Turning points are times for integrating the contemplative dimension of our lives with action – as Thomas Merton encouraged years ago. To do this is to create the sacred space within our selves from which we can genuinely embrace the diverse world of 'all our relations' with loving-kindness.

This brings us, as Franciscans, to the crux of our shared turning – our shared purpose and identity. Let's pause a moment to recall our Vows, Rule and Principles, to discern their deeper implications, and to begin weaving our lives with the fabric of life. In the



### **Conversion of life**

Francis renounces his inheritance, stripping off his clothes before the Bishop of Assisi

Giotto di Bondone, Fresco in the upper church of St. Francis in Assisi, 1305-1306

1970's and 80's, Brother Geoffrey of the First Order (on behalf of the entire Society of Saint Francis) put together a helpful reflection on the Principles, called 'The Way of St. Francis'. The first section on *The Characteristics of Our Life* (Humility, Love, Joy) begins with these words:

*The Gospel calls us constantly to a death to self-centeredness and a rising to new life. This means a radical transformation of our being so that henceforth the Holy Spirit will fill us and act through us* (Br. Geoffrey, c. 1986).

With the same intent and spirit, the TSSF Principles in Day One cite the biblical image of a grain of wheat falling to the ground:

*Jesus said, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor'.* (John 12:24-26)

These teachings beckon us to pick up our crosses and follow Christ – the Franciscan conversion of life. We all know this. Yet when reading those words we might acknowledge but skip over them, assuming perhaps unconsciously that this is 'not an urgent issue for me, at least not now', or that 'I'll reflect on that later, but I need to move ahead with more urgent matters'. It's good to laugh at our selves now and again; nevertheless, this is much more than an amusing incident in our individual stream of consciousness. Inner thoughts of that kind point directly to our self-centeredness, which has always been a slippery deceiver because the tempted ego is slippery, and that can make discernment all the more slippery and sometimes hugely contentious, especially in colonizing times.

Like everything discussed here, it's very personal for all of us and it cuts deeply into our life together, including our shared purpose and identity. For that reason, Archbishop MacDonald's (2020) appeal to our Order includes a necessary time of 'spiritual and moral examination'. This is how he describes it:

*A sincere and dedicated examination of ways in which the colonial cultural-social system of the past four centuries has distorted and deformed Christian understanding and witness. This has ecological implications, in addition to a concern for Indigenous Peoples.*

It goes without saying that spiritual and moral examination is found at the heart of our faith – and of the Franciscan Forms of Service. The following three examples illustrate that very point, and there are many more. First, at the onset of his conversion of life, St. Francis himself, recently engaged in military service, removes his wealthy clothing in the Assisi town square to make a public declaration about his spiritual turning point. Much later, he takes that declaration to a different, politically

charged level by pursuing reconciling relationships with the Muslim world. Second, many of us in the Province of the Americas will remember back to the early 1990's when the church had some difficult discussions about the 'Doctrine of Discovery', five hundred years after Columbus. Our self-examination included the need for repentance and further decolonization. Third, in a different, but surprisingly related vein, in the second half of the last century parts of the Christian world rejected some interpretations of sin and 'original sin' because of the spiritually paralyzing impact it can sometimes have through imposed shame and humiliation. The implication was (and is) *not* that we should disregard 'the death of self-centeredness' or the 'grain of wheat falling to the ground', but that the idea of sin can too easily become a tool of soul distorting propaganda in the hands of a colonizing culture and sometimes a colonizing church.

All those moments in our life together illustrate different forms that de-colonization can take for the conversion of life. Taken together, they show us how much we need to deepen our understanding of the Rule and Principles – so the Spirit can help us weave our souls, minds and bodies within the Body of Christ *and* the sacred fabric of life which is a great Body of Life. We've been living in exile, when what we need is a homecoming – soon. Sometimes in the West a misleading but popular assumption has been that to receive mystical experiences of God we must 'get out of our bodies'. In practice the process is usually the opposite, while the path feels circuitous. The road to union with God is through a process of healing reconciliation that brings our minds, souls, *and bodies* into a genuine relationship with the love of God, the Body of Christ, and the sacred Body of Life.

Returning to the Holy Eucharist as St. Francis always encouraged, we might find that the ecological vision of Indigenous Peoples has much to teach us about sacramental life – if we can unwrap ourselves enough from our colonizing baggage to remember again deeply in the soul. About thirty years ago a well-known Kayapo shaman from Brazil, whom I had previously known, traveled to New York City for a United Nations meeting on cultural- and bio-diversity. The following weekend, he visited the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where I worked, for Sunday worship.

Later in the day, when I asked him privately what his experience was like during the Holy Eucharist, this is what he said:

*when the priest raises the host and breaks it, that's when the Door opens ... and my soul travels through it to the Tree.*



# Why We Must Deepen Our Prayer Life: A View from Sacred Ecology

I think most Franciscans realize that the current pandemic is one manifestation of our larger ecological and climate emergency. The Earth's ecosystems form a complex whole. When we – people – destroy wildlife, forests, parts of or whole ecosystems in one part of the world, the impact can be felt worldwide. We might not notice it at first, but Mother Earth does. Life's interwoven fabric is part of its sacred nature, and we are part of it. Those would not be surprising statements to Alexander von Humboldt back in the 1700's, when he first wrote about the interwoven 'web of life', nor would it be surprising to people of any part of the world who have known the harsh hand of colonial exploitation.

The present emergency is a consequence of colonialism, and it's simply not true that we live in a post-colonial age. How greed manages us politically, bankrolls us economically and rationalizes its actions has changed through the centuries, while God's creation has become more commodified and thing-like in our minds. We have become more estranged from so-called 'it', despite the fact that we might see ourselves in a more favorable and elevated light. What we need to do now, if we're willing, is to take the whole of our lives into prayer, and then with God's help transform how we live. Our Prayer, Study, and Work are interwoven, but the primacy of prayer was in the mind of St. Francis when he wrote to St. Anthony of Padua: *I am pleased that you are now teaching sacred theology to our brothers, providing one thing: As it says in our Rule, please see that you do not squelch the spirit of prayer and devotion in them as they undertake studies of this kind* (Sweeney 2018:84). The First Rule also says the same about Prayer in relation to Work.

More recently, Thomas Merton wrote in a similar vein about bridging the gap between contemplation and action, but the deep issues have not essentially changed. This requires us to go deeper within the soul in our prayer life, no longer separating prayerfulness from



*Prayer in action is love, love in action is service*  
Mother Teresa

action or giving action priority over prayer. One time-tested path is to strengthen our capacity for discernment and effective action in the spiritual fire of inner silence – the outcome will be love, humility, joy, and the recovery of a deeper capacity to listen.

## Discernment and the Prayer of the Heart

I'll return to my sense of urgency about this – and the colonialism – in a moment. Putting first things first, in keeping with the penitential roots of our Franciscan Order, it is advisable to go directly to the 'Prayer of the Heart' or the 'Jesus Prayer':

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.*

The Prayer of the Heart is a prayer of repentance that carries us to the Heavenly Gate, the Door that Jesus proclaimed himself to be. Traditional spiritual writings in the *Philokalia* explain that repentance and forgiveness along with spiritual virtues make our passage through the Gate possible. To consider where the Prayer of the Heart really takes us, think of St. Francis in relationship with Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the befriended Wolf of Gubbio.

This is not simply a matter of being quiet, as if it's a curb on our freedom of self-expression. The purpose of the Jesus Prayer is not to cement feelings of shame or humiliation within our sense of ego or self. The challenge is to free ourselves of our incessant, quasi-hypnotic, inner dialogue – our apparently never-ending talking to ourselves. Whether the content of our inner dialogue is 'right' or 'wrong' about anything (or everything), it still cements the world's grip on our lives.

Sit in a comfortable chair or lay flat on your back on the floor – whatever is the most comfortable. Breathe deeply, the best you can, without holding your breath. You might have noticed before how much we habitually hold our breath, probably an unconscious expression of anxiety and fear. Then say the prayer quietly, repeatedly, for ten, twenty, thirty minutes, even an hour. The exact words of the prayer can be changed for any number of reasons; and always remember that our prayers are not magical incantations. Inner dialogue gradually slows down and stops, while we're wide awake. That's when we become especially open to the Spirit.

Praying the Jesus Prayer with faith and dedication, we soon realize that we can live in its clarity much of the day, every day. It becomes possible to be 'in the world, but not of the world'. Our attention is surprisingly less cluttered, while we're free to truly listen and communicate with more capacity for watchfulness and discernment. Again, think of Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the befriended wolf of Gubbio. Think of neighbors and strangers. Think of the fabric of life wondering who we are, who we've become, and why we began to distance ourselves from our one and only common home so many generations ago.

In the *Philokalia*, St. Gregory of Sinai (1979) identifies five main virtues in relation to the Jesus Prayer: *silence, abstinence, watchfulness, humility and patience*. He writes, 'Nothing is better for rendering the heart penitent and the soul humble than wise



solitude and complete silence. Nothing has a greater power of disturbing the state of silence, and of depriving it of God's help, than the following principal passions: *presumptuousness, gluttony, talkativeness, and vain cares, arrogance and the mistress of all passions – self-regard'* (italics are mine).

Through inner silence our broken relationship with the fabric of life can be healed. Recently Maggie Ross, an Anglican solitary living in England, brought this ancient tradition and its implications into the light of day. I met Ms. Ross thirty years ago, when I was in seminary. When we resumed our conversations recently, she let me know about her writings along these lines. I'll quote at some length from Ross (2014: 222-224):

*The person who tries to live from silence is both 'liberal' and 'conservative': liberal, because he or she is aware from within (as opposed to bowing to a rule imposed from without) of the importance of approaching others with a wide and generous inclusiveness; conservative, because within that inclusiveness such a person wishes to conserve the fullness of what it means to be human, along with the natural world from which humanity arose, without which humanity will perish ...*

*But there is more: the work of silence gives a wide and generous respect for all forms of life. This respect ranges far beyond a merely scientific acknowledgement of the need for biodiversity; or the discovery that our former perceptions of other creatures as feathered, furred, or finned automatons is the produce of our arrogance. The work of silence enables us to engage with the world around us in ways far beyond the present ability of science to measure. This engagement is not a one-way street of observations; it is a true engagement, receiving what the natural world wishes to tell us as well as allowing the natural world to discover who we are.*

## Healing, Listening, and Adapting

The ecological, economic, political, moral and spiritual implications of inner silence should be evident and promising. What might not be so obvious is the profound threshold on which we stand in this very moment. I can't help but think of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian liberation theologian, who devoted so much time and energy to literacy training. Learning to read from his point of view involves the whole cultural, economic and political context of 'reading' – everything about it – which requires discernment. Literacy can be a tool of colonial exploitation, or it can become an important tool in the service of liberation. We're basically living within that threshold today. The circumstances of life make us feel vulnerable. Our response to disruption – especially now with the pandemic – has largely been to rely on technological means, primarily the digital world, to maintain relationships with family and friends, work

and commerce, government, and other basic social ties, including pastoral work and the whole ministry of the church.

The opportunities that this tool provides are obviously huge, sometimes life-saving, but so are the temptations and dangers. To be blunt, the reason for the pandemic is the fact that, in one way or another, we unravel ecosystems. Our primary adaptive response so far as been to re-create the 'social body' one step removed from actual embodied interaction. This is not a criticism of the Internet or our use of it. Rather, it's



A Maasai pastoralist checks his mobile phone in southern Kenya

Photo: Sven Torfinn

an attempt to discern what we're actually doing, spiritually and ecologically. Are we adapting by learning to interact socially in a new way, a step or two or three removed from a more fully embodied life that mirrors God's Incarnation in Jesus Christ?

The extent to which we learn to use the Internet wisely will determine a lot about whether we'll either find our common home again in the fabric of life, or let ourselves be colonized in a new way with disastrous consequences. Our first priority must be to heal our broken relationship with God and God's creation, and the temptations we face are legion. I remember nearly thirty years ago when some colleagues and I first noticed the uncanny linguistic similarity (the alliteration) between 'the web of life', as Humboldt originally put it, and 'the worldwide web'. Those conversations also recalled the work of Teilhard de Chardin the Jesuit philosopher and theologian who a few generations ago realized that humankind was creating a new human layer of the biosphere characterized by 'rationality' as he understood it. The worldwide web is the latest most popular manifestation of that new layer. Our hope was that we could and would learn to use the Internet in ways that would create genuinely spiritual awareness and action, globally. In effect, the hope was that it would become a vehicle of the Spirit.

There's no doubt in my mind that the Spirit is there. Where, after all, would we say the Spirit is not? Studies have shown however that while the versions of the social world built with this tool can be effectively organized to accomplish short-term goals, they are too 'thin' to bear enduring spiritual fruit. Put another way, the Internet should and can be a powerful tool when used with deep discernment. What we want to avoid is the temptation of going where we're headed - letting the tool lead us into a substitute world which replaces face-to-face social life, oddly, with lived representations of it (Thompson 1991).

This should be very high on our priority list as Franciscans especially during a time of ecological disruption and global upheaval. The practice of inner silence through the Prayer of the Heart, the Jesus Prayer, offers a traditional but radical way to find the spiritual ground of humility and simplicity in our contemplative lives.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.*

This prayer can open the door - the Door - to a faithful path through the present darkness. Through inner silence, we can begin to regain our lost humanity by bringing contemplation and action back together. Even more, we can recover the discernment we need to resist, with God's help, the temptation of colonizing pressures and heal our broken relationship with the sacred fabric of life.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.*



**Saint Francis in Meditation**

Caravaggio, (c. 1604/06 or 1607/10), Museo Civico, Cremona

# Franciscan Reflections on the Meaning of ‘Study’

## A Scoundrel-y Perspective

Many people that I know, myself included, aren’t always eager to talk about all the emergencies today: the pandemic and human health, climate, ecology, the economy, human rights, racial justice, food and water. They’re all interrelated; and on a soul level it’s so disturbing that we need to clear our heads now and again so we can refocus. Having already given up television years ago I’m now on a news diet that includes even less independent public radio. And having worked many years for the church at the UN and occasionally for the UN, I know the issues. Often I tell myself that we don’t have time only to talk about or study the problems. We must act, and act now, which is true. Yet, the Franciscan soul in me says it all depends on what we believe ‘talk’, ‘prayer’, ‘study’, ‘act’ and ‘work’ actually mean.

Here the focus is on Study, the second of our Franciscan Ways of Service. My purpose is to discern what ‘Study’ involves from a Franciscan point of view, taking into account St. Francis himself. But first let’s think of the bigger picture. The ultimate purpose of our Rule and Principles is to deepen our relationship with God and creation. The same can be said for all three forms of Service: Prayer, Study, and Work. And the same purpose is found in the three foundations of the Anglican tradition: Faith, Reason, and Tradition. In practice, all these are essential threads for weaving our lives together, inwardly and outwardly, so we can find our lives as part of the greater whole. *These threads are meant to be inseparable, all woven into one fabric of life that includes our bodies, souls, minds, families, communities, faiths, nations, ecosystems, and the whole biosphere.*

Our urgent spiritual challenge now is to discern the extent to which our *actual weaving* of these threads connects us within the sacred fabric of life. Are we truly weavers, or do we have that self-image, while letting ourselves become seemingly innocent bystanders? We must ask questions like that not only about ourselves but also about the world of which we are a part. Something must be wrong somewhere or we would not be facing such an ecological/climate emergency, economic injustice, racial prejudice and political disruption.

To enter into this depth of discernment depends on our asking a few crucial questions: *What in our lives is morally right and wrong? What is real and illusion or delusion?* Discernment of that kind sometimes takes us into necessary but unwelcome spiritual territory. For example, we all probably see ourselves as reasonable people. But on a large, even global, scale Reason – perhaps the counterpart to Study – is often

manipulated in the manufacture of distorted versions of ‘reasonable’ for political and financial gain. This colonizing strategy has intensified in much of the world. Without substantial resistance, racial and gender injustice, human trafficking and ecological destruction will become even more intense. The consequences are horrific. In myriad ways the whole colonizing process of exploitation disrupts and deforms our thought process more than we might realize. And that affects our understanding and practice of Faith and Tradition, just as it does our Prayer, Study, and Work.

There are many ways in which our seemingly reasonable thoughts and actions can become unreasonable and immoral. Setting recent disruptions aside, one tendency of the Western world has been to take things apart rather than preserve the integrity of the whole. This is rationalized by an attitude of moral exemption and entitlement, coupled with the economic exploitation that drives much of corporate culture. In the process a dominating world order is imposed, based supposedly on ‘reasonable exploitation’ and sometimes rationalized by versions of Christian theology which have occasionally included Franciscans.

Again our task is to discern the extent to which that we Franciscans are helping to weave the fabric of life in life-giving ways? A large temptation is to blame others without taking enough responsibility for our own actions. We all know that the temptations of self-centeredness and ego lure us into their grip. Our deeper challenge is with the Spirit’s help to free our discernment from temptation, so that our Study (and all the foundations of our spiritual lives) can genuinely express the will of God and the charism of our Order.

## **St. Francis and the Scoundrels**

With that in mind, let’s turn our attention to an early controversy in the Franciscan Order, which was brought to the surface by St. Francis himself in his *Letter to All the Friars*:

*Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, give us scoundrels your grace to do for you what we know you want from us, and always to do that which is pleasing to you.*

That quote comes from Jon Sweeny’s *Francis of Assisi, The Essential Writings: In His Own Words* (2018:97). It would be easy and unwise to overlook the word ‘scoundrels’. St. Francis was writing to the whole Order, as the letter’s title makes clear; and if you read the whole letter it’s readily apparent that he was displeased. Much of his intent relates to apparent laxity in the Order’s observance of the Rule, including those parts relating to Poverty. It’s also apparent that St. Francis uses the word ‘scoundrels’ in an inclusive, self-effacing way, referring also to himself. It is entirely possible that some humor is involved too. Given the letter’s purpose and Francis’s spiritual depth, it

seems likely that he was being deeply serious, funny, and loving at the same time – in a way that suggests the presence of the Spirit.

Before moving ahead, we need to consider carefully where we're going with this in order to avoid the very trap that Francis was warning the Friars about. My purpose is actually not to 'Study' his letter didactically as a 'text' under examination, which would contradict everything that I believe Francis was saying. Rather we need to enter into its purpose and spirit, believing that St. Francis was writing not only to the Order back then but also to us now. I say this not because of any controversies around the observance of the Rule then or now or because of the emergencies that we face today, although the consequences are obvious enough on both counts.

What Francis is getting at goes deeper. He was writing from that place within and without where the Spirit is revealed, and he was asking us to join him there. In that moment when the nature of 'the world' is revealed too, the experience can be at the very least unsettling. Both light and darkness come into proximity in our awareness, revealing an eclipse of the soul and a joyfully rude awakening.

## **A Franciscan View of Study**

This path requires us to discern better the meaning and practice of words like 'Study'. I'll turn again to Sweeney (2018:4) who summarizes St. Francis's views on this:

*... Francis was not a man of many words. He was not a scholarly saint like Augustine or Thomas Aquinas. He was never a famous orator-saint like John Chrysostom. In fact, it is impossible to imagine Francis sitting in a library or with a pen in his hand. Francis wasn't even what you might call intellectually curious, like the saints Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila, both of whom wrote a great deal, studied and pondered ideas, and as a result of their writings left us with many biographical details about their lives. Some have even accused Francis of being anti-intellectual, and for good reasons: he often warned his brothers against owning books and excessive reading. He counseled his brothers again and again to study only if they could do so without it ruining their spiritual lives. And yet he wrote.*

Following Sweeney (and others) my purpose is not even remotely to diminish the contributions and spiritual integrity of the great scholarly Franciscans. My professional training as a cultural anthropologist focused on the writing and analysis of texts of many kinds. The heart of the issue is always found not only in the written texts that we may read, write or ponder, but also in those many other often invisible mental and cultural 'texts' that we etch constantly into every part of our lives: through our upbringing, political affiliations, television, newspapers, the internet, social and news media, everyday conversations, speeches and prayers, and especially

in our nearly incessant inner talking to ourselves. All these texts enter into the 'worlds' that we create.

Here's a personal example of what I mean. It is so basic that it could have been easy to dismiss or overlook, scoundrel that I am. For most of my adult life I've tried in different ways to weave together Prayer, Study and Work. Nevertheless, this is what happened to me a few years ago in that transitional state between dreaming and waking, when our waking self becomes a participant in the dream. I heard a dream voice say, *do you know where you live?* I hear myself answer, partly in the dream, partly awake, *Bee Hive Road*, which is my home address. Then the other voice answers in a no-nonsense way, *I know how to find you ... I'm asking you if you know where you live?*

Whatever the source of it might have been that early morning, it was quite literally a rude awakening in the spiritual sense. I laughed after it happened. I suppose I take a lot of pride in knowing where I live, working with farmers, local civic and government groups, interfaith and interracial groups and many others on a number of issues. That's what I do – it's my Work. Yet, when asked the question in a dream – *do you know where you live?* – the answer I gave was the official version I would give when asked by the Internal Revenue Service or a traffic cop. It wasn't wrong, and it seems like a simple thing but not really. I immediately thought of Genesis, at the very beginning, where the text says that our Work is to care for where we live. God is giving us something like the primordial prelude, prologue and precondition on which all the later Commandments are based. But, in fact, scoundrel that I am, when the dream voice asked that primordial question of me, my mind turned to what amounts to my driver's license, tax forms, property and other official very worldly political and financial texts. That's the 'world' in you and me – the 'principalities and powers'. That 'world' has little sensory, lived or prayerful relationship with the sacred fabric of our living planet, Indigenous Peoples, ecojustice, racial and gender justice, Brother Sun, Sister Moon, the Wolf of Gubbio, or Francis and Clare.

A few weeks later, I began to incorporate that insight into my global work at some Episcopal and Anglican environmental meetings on several continents. I sometimes asked for maps of their regions to be placed on the wall. When I asked the participants to find 'where they live' on the map and identify major ecological features that they shared in common, they could do that easily when the maps included country, state, or local governmental boundaries, along with major roads. They had a much more difficult time locating 'where they live' on topographic maps that included only geographical features like rivers, mountains, and forests, with none of the political boundaries or roadways.

What does all this tell us about the purpose of Study for Franciscans? Think of maps. Maps are visual texts, and to become aware of how we create, read and use them is a step towards the deeper forms of discernment we need. In that sense maps can serve as a kind of doorway into discerning how much our cultural worlds mold us – human representations that we learn and then impose on the actual living fabric of life. As Alfred Korzybski (1994) the great general semanticist once said, *the map is not the territory*. In effect centuries ago St. Francis was implicitly warning us about the dangers of confusing the two. From a spiritual point of view we can get lost when ‘reading’ even the best, most beautiful, accurate maps. Let me explain that. I know from first-hand experience that Indigenous Peoples who have never seen ‘our maps’ of ‘their land’, and would not know how to ‘read’ them, still know hugely more, first-hand and intimately about their land than we and our mapmakers ever dreamed of knowing.



The texts that are immediately apparent in our prayerful discernment are the ones we constantly produce in our own heads. Ultimately the purpose of Study is to help us discern the difference between the maps in our heads and the actual places where we live so we can learn to be good neighbors within the living, sacred fabric of life. This is where Prayer, especially through inner silence, prepares us for Study and Work. It helps us break free from the veils, the ego-armor, that we absorb from dominating cultural texts, wrapping them around our selves and each other. That wrapping is definitely not the kind of weaving God wants us to do. What we need is to unwrap from those texts so that we can liberate our attention and truly weave again, learning first to listen, even to ourselves, and to witness the world as it actually is. A rude awakening it might be at first, quickly followed by a joy that passes all understanding.

Along the way, we will find wounds in our selves, our neighbors, friends and strangers and in God’s green earth, that need to be healed. God knows how to find us. The question is whether we know how to find God – and home. Our teachings say that we can know by remembering in a deep, soulful way. The primordial assumption behind those teachings is that we must learn to know where we live. *Do we know? Are we willing to learn?* If we bury that knowledge or let it remain buried, then we’re in the deepest trouble of scoundrels. It’s time for some healing and resurrection.



# **‘Rebuild My Church’, Weaving our Life Together**

## **Reflections on the Service of Work**

*... for you reap whatever you sow ... So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up.*

(Galatians 6:7-9)

In these few words – *for you reap whatever you sow* – St. Paul plainly states one of life’s most basic, practical and deeply moral teachings. Different cultures find many different forms of cause and effect in their lives and explain it in diverse ways. But we all recognize it in ourselves, in others, and in the larger fabric of life. And as history tragically demonstrates, that basic principle is easy to overlook, rationalize out of our awareness or grossly distort for whatever reason – and we suffer the consequences. It’s a form of spiritual amnesia that happens when we become the center of our own worlds. That’s how we lose our way on the path of Christ and lose sight of his teaching: *my yoke is easy, my burden is light* (Matthew 11:30).

Paul immediately provides encouragement: *let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time if we do not give up.* Ongoing ecological, economic and political peril is definitely not a reason to resign ourselves to the way things are, either giving up or giving in. As Franciscans we must Pray deeply, Study with discernment and Work in new and old ways, including some that we may have known but forgotten.

Of the three reflections on our Forms of Service, this is the most challenging. The first and main reason arises from the truth about God’s creation on earth – it is the living, sacred fabric of life. It’s not separate from or exterior to us – as the meaning of the Western word ‘environment’ implicitly suggests. Rather, our lives are part of and interwoven with the fabric of life, and our principal role as defined at the primordial ‘beginning’ is to ‘care for’. In our modern awareness, the sacred fabric has become object-like, exploited, commodified, and so have we. If present trends continue without serious, prompt intervention, the fabric could be heated and torn so much that countless more species will become extinct, habitats destroyed, and the possibility of life for a majority of humankind could be threatened. It should be obvious that we have a lot of Work to do and a sacred journey to make; in effect, a holy pilgrimage also in the primordial sense. The pilgrimage is from where we are now to a sustainable, resilient, respectful relationship with God’s creation. This pilgrimage, in some ways like crossing the proverbial Red Sea, has already begun and some powerful worldly forces – mainly economic and political – are trying to thwart our passage. The Promised Land isn’t just ‘out there’ waiting for us to arrive; and everyone, all

of humanity, must make the passage. We need inspiration and guidance from Jesus, Moses, Elijah and all the prophets to join with Buddha, Mohammad, Confucius, Vedic sages, and Indigenous seers and shamans to help us come together in the here and now so that we can embody our genuine life together. They would remind us that arriving at our destination means that we must find it within ourselves and live it one step at a time.

As Franciscans our way of ‘finding it within ourselves’ is the Way of Christ as exemplified by the lives of Francis and Clare, enshrined in our Rule and Principles. And here in this very moment we happen to be reflecting on the Service of Work, which is an opportune way to move ahead. We all know that the Franciscan meaning of ‘Work’ does not reflect widely shared economic and political assumptions related to ‘job’ and ‘money’. In the early days of our Order, Franciscans made similar statements with *much emphasis*, and we have for the most part done the same through the centuries. One terrible exception was Franciscan complicity in the colonization and genocide of Indigenous Peoples and the propagandized rationalizations for it. Part of our Work now is to pursue reconciliation and reparations for that tragic crime, which is necessary if we want to create a respectful, just, and ecologically sustainable world. To accomplish this we all need to be more familiar with the workings and critiques of the globalized corporate economic system (a modern form of post-colonial colonization) and to resist its force wherever and whenever possible. To pursue our Franciscan Work without taking all this into account is to ignore an increasingly dominant force in our life together.

In making this pilgrimage our attention needs to be firmly grounded in the spiritual foundation of our Order. We began as a Penitential Order for the *conversion of life*, and we’re living in a time that needs penance and transformation. Turning to the matter before us now, the heart of our Work is so obvious that it’s easy to overlook, which is exactly what the worldly principalities and powers would like us to do. The core meanings of Franciscan Work emerge in our awareness that they are not separate from Prayer and Study – or from our Rule and Principles – but from their interwoven unity. This requires weaving all three together mindfully in a world that predisposes us to dissect and separate, dividing one part of experience from another for the purpose of self-serving interests. Members of our Order have taken up this challenge by weaving the Rule together with the Principles and carrying those insights into everyday life. In doing so we all realize that our minds, intellect and Reason cannot accomplish this alone. A depth of soul work is required that might be new or unfamiliar, followed by putting it all into practice during a time of profound change and disruption. This means placing our selves in God’s hands so we can put our hearts, minds, and bodies to good use.

## Rebuilding and Weaving

According to Franciscan history this all began for Francis and Clare with the rebuilding of a church. Francis's life had been turned inside out. We can only imagine what their soul Work was like, but it must have included finding a way through the shadowy confusion that the worldly powers wrap around all our hearts and minds. A stone removed, another laid, then another and another. Spending time with and caring for outcasts. Removing his wealthy clothes in the town square of Assisi. A story told, a song sung, meetings with strangers and friends who became friends with each another, then another and another. A journey made to Rome, and then to the Middle East to visit Sultan al-Kamil. The Spirit weaves us together as threads in the fabric of life when we unwrap ourselves enough from the world to hear the call.

It was profoundly personal for them, as it is for us today. Like the word 'rebuilding' it's easy to interpret 'weaving' too literally, which means we're not taking it deeply or seriously enough. To be too literal often petrifies the meaning of words, surrounding them with purposes for which they weren't intended. Think of 'weaving' and the 'fabric of life'. We are already weaving our lives, for better or worse, because we are part of the sacred fabric. The Holy Spirit is asking us to join her in the weaving of God's creative Work, rather than weaving webs of self-importance around ourselves. The question is whether we will respond as true pilgrims.

Like St. Paul's use of the words 'sowing and reaping', 'weaving' arises from a universal perception about life that is ancient. The heart of it has roots in the lives and cultures of Indigenous Peoples. As the principle of weaving is lived, rather than objectified in our minds, Oren Lyons (1999:450) – Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Council of Chiefs, Haudenosaunee – describes this traditional Indigenous teaching very simply. With the Lakota as an example, Chief Lyons explains that the whole fabric of life means 'all my relations'. His and their words evoke living sacred relationships, based on the wisdom that a humane life requires us to live respectfully, soulfully and mindfully – individually and together. The Work of skillful weavers resonates with the living fabric of life which hears its echo as the voice of friendship. Similarly, Indigenous seers often perceive the fabric of life as interwoven filaments of spiritual light which are signs of the Spirit of God weaving creation in the here and now. Saints and mystics in many religious traditions have experienced it as 'living light' and the 'voice of the living light'.

In the modern history of the Church and society-at-large, weaving has been a frequent theme across many different parts of the political spectrum. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, resister of the Nazis, martyr and theologian wrote with a similar vision in his book *Life Together* after experiencing the threads of life being ripped apart.

Liberation theologians like Paulo Freire, who emphasized community building and organizing, understood all these spiritual philosophies as forms of 'praxis'. The women's movement, especially eco-feminism, has drawn upon the metaphor of weaving as a form of empowerment in the face of patriarchal dominance and exploitation. A widely read Protestant journal of The Upper Room called *Weavings* (1986–2017) described its mission as *the Christian's response to God's work of weaving together the torn fabric of life*.

The lives of Francis and Clare are two of the best examples of how spiritual weaving can emerge and transform our lives in creative ways. For them it involved gradually unwrapping themselves from the world and then weaving a renewed spiritual vision and way of life as it emerged in their awareness. This began with the story about Francis and the Cross of St. Damiano where he heard 'rebuild my church'. His Work there laid the penitential foundation and vision of the Franciscan Order. Charlie McCarron TSSF reminded me recently that a widespread movement of rebuilding churches was already underway before Francis heard those words. What the Spirit did with Francis and Clare was to weave the meaning of the existing movement deeper into their souls and the fabric of life, which takes our Work to a spiritually deeper and more radical level.

The spiritual implications of 'rebuild my church' have been discussed many times before. One reason of course is that it has a direct bearing on the meaning of 'Work' as a Form of Service at the heart of our Order. Cowan (2001:59), a modern day biographer of St. Francis, commented on the diligence and determination that Francis showed in the physical rebuilding of San Damiano. And he goes on to say that *he was committed to rebuilding more than a church; what he wanted to do was renovate a whole way of thinking. For him, San Damiano was an 'omphalos', a world center no different from Delphi in ancient Greece or Benares in India*.

When I worked at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan, we understood the meaning of 'rebuild my church' in a similar way: *the Church in its greater meaning and its deeper mystery is ultimately God's creation in the process of renewal* (Gollither and Logan 1996:96). People today hear the word 'church' and they often think of buildings. Of course, church buildings are sacred – as places where we go to remember in the deep sense of *anamnesis*; that is, remembering (unwrapping ourselves spiritually) who God is, what God's Creation is, and who we are. This happens when we take into our hearts the words of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, *Do this in remembrance of me*. The Body of Christ lives in a sacramental relationship with the great Body of Life that God placed in our care. 'Rebuilding' weaves together our human hearts, minds, eyes and hands with the Holy Trinity – the Holy Mystery of life itself.

In his recent meditations on seven principal teachings of Francis, Bodo (2018:69) describes the sixth teaching as ‘God’s house is all of Creation’ and reflects on it in this way: *Further meditation convinced Francis that God indwells everything God has created; therefore, nothing is evil in itself, and everything is worthy of reverence and respect because of its Creator. And further, every creature is made holy in the mystery of God’s presence among us in Jesus. Jesus sanctified all of creation by becoming, though he was God, one with creatures and among creatures, animate and inanimate.*

The underlying message of all these commentaries is that our lives are continuously woven into a single, hugely diverse, sacred fabric of all life which is our common home and life together. Ultimately all justice issues – racial, social, political, economic, or ecological – are confronted and healed here, and so are all prayerful contemplative struggles with the worldly powers. That is why simplicity is so important: every dimension of life is lived in the flow of everyday experience, in every breath. The Holy Spirit is already weaving our lives, and she’s asking us to join, rather than to hinder her Work. She’s asking us to understand that everything really does hold together in God, and that Christ is the center of our diverse worlds, rather than us. When we pick up our crosses and follow Him with faith, determination and patience, the Cross transforms into the Tree.

Sometimes it seems that as individuals our weaving is done alone; but ultimately, we’re always weaving together, because when we’re truly weaving the Spirit guides us. This is the case whether we’re weaving estranged or broken relationships back together, confronting racial prejudice in our families, communities or churches, or healing torn watersheds or forests. Artisans and artists say that actual weaving has little relation to manufacturing or management, and the same can be said for our Franciscan Work – in other words, it does not lend itself to mass production.



Yet skillful, spiritually attuned people who work in industry will find ways to do their work in the spirit of weaving. Regardless of the place or context, the Spirit knows much better than us that weaving can happen in small ways or large. It happens in ordinary (Is anything really ordinary?) conversations, community organizing, through letters written to newspapers, during the sharing of food, in the look in our eyes, through a simple word spoken and in silence – anywhere, and everywhere we can imagine. Both activists and solitaries can be adept weavers. To weave can be the giving of a gift, the receiving of one, or both – heartfelt receiving can be a form of giving too. Weaving does not divide, exclude, or segregate. Weaving is actively non-violent; it is dedicated, faithful, and loving.

## ***The Witness of Life is More Eloquent Than That of Words***

The fact that our Order has early roots in India offers another testimony to the importance of weaving; and in this case of the deep spiritual ties that we share with the world's major religions. For example, the Anglican Society of St Francis traces its guiding Principles to the Christian Ashram, Christa Seva Sangha, which was founded in India in 1922. From within the Christian tradition, the authors of our original Principles identified Prayer, Study and Work, respectively as Bhakti, Dnyana and Karma. The meaning of 'Karma' points directly to the universal teaching about cause and effect that St. Paul encouraged: 'for you reap whatever you sow'. This is what the original TSSF Principles (1934) say about Work (Karma):

*Jesus the Master took on him the form of a servant. He came not to be ministered unto but to minister. He went about doing good, healing the sick, preaching good tidings to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted. Those who would claim to be his servants and follow him must be diligent in ministry to others ... They must remember that, in this task of showing Christ to others the witness of life is more eloquent than that of words.*  
(Sister Joyce CSF, 2003:38).

Most of us read or hear this – *the witness of life is more eloquent than that of words* – and know that it comes from the heart of Francis. A modern irony is that contentious, politically charged debates frequently coalesce around the words of that very teaching. Usually, the question is whether Francis actually wrote or uttered the more commonly heard version, '*preach the gospel always; use words if necessary*'. According to Sweeney in his *Francis of Assisi, The Essential Writings: In His Own Words*, there is no evidence that Francis put it exactly that way. Instead, this is what Francis wrote:

*We are to go throughout the world encouraging everyone, more by deed than with words, to do penance for our sins and to live with the commandments of God in our minds.*  
(From 'The Legend of the Three Companions' in Sweeney, 2018, p. 19, First Printing, Second Edition).

Unfortunately, controversies about this revolve around the outward form of the words, which undermines the heart of Francis's meaning. I can imagine that the Spirit might have put Francis's words – *more by deed than with words* – or his underlying intent into the heart of a devotee who then put it this way: *preach the gospel always; use words if necessary*. Who knows? Or back in the 1200's Francis may have put it many other ways too, not in a letter, but in lively speeches. Either way I find it difficult to believe that he would want to us to fall into deceptive arguments about the exact words, while losing the meaning behind them.

This demonstrates why the interwoven nature of Prayer, Study and Work must be engaged deeply in our life together – deeply in the sense of Jesus who said, *Do this in*

remembrance of me. For example, members of the Christian Ashram in India would have known these poetic words attributed to Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a spiritual leader and Nobel Prize Laureate in Bengal who was their contemporary:

*I slept and dreamt that life was joy.  
I awoke and saw that life was service.  
I acted and behold, service was joy.*

From within his tradition, Tagore weaves together sleeping, dreaming and action with Service and Joy in a way that resonates with the Franciscan life. His encouraging words – like those of St. Paul and St. Francis – echo as the sound of friendship within the sacred fabric of life. For Francis, Clare and many, many other pilgrims on the path, the eloquence of the witness of life, rather than that of words, has always been at the heart of our Work and of our Order.



### **The witness of life rather than words**

Francis giving his cloak to a poor man

Giotto di Bondone, Fresco in the upper church of St. Francis in Assisi, 1305-1306

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