



SECULAR FRANCISCANS: COMMITTED TO PEACE AND JUSTICE

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St. Francis and the issue of war—What if we did what we say?

As followers of the little poor man of Assisi, we profess to try, with God's grace, to live our lives according to our Rule and the Gospel. To follow Christ, as Francis did, to the best of our ability, according to our state in life. I might ask myself when was the last time I examined the life of Francis to see how he followed Christ? When was the last time I read the original intent Francis had for his Third Order (Secular Franciscan) members to live out their profession?

Did Francis approve of war? We know that before his conversion he wanted to be a great knight and win glory for himself and his beloved Assisi. He tried war twice. Failing the first time, he tried again and was told by God in a dream to return home and wait for instructions. Afterward Francis wandered into the ruined church of San Damiano and Jesus spoke to his heart from the icon of the Crucified, "Go rebuild my Church which as you see is falling into ruin."

Later on we know that Francis preached to the birds, but more importantly, he went to Damietta, Egypt and talked and preached to the Christian Crusaders about peace. Even he, who was familiar with wars in Perugia and elsewhere, was appalled at the degree of butchery the Christian soldiers exhibited. His appeal for peace went unheeded, and his warning to the Crusaders that their assault on the wall of the Muslim stronghold would end in failure was ignored.

Failing that, he decided to go to the Muslim camp and preach to the Sultan Malik al Kamil to try and convert him to the Christian faith. As we know, he arrived safely in the camp of the Sultan where he was expecting a bloodthirsty infidel. Instead what he found was a refined educated man who was a pious and faithful Muslim. Malik had a curiosity about intellectual activity and medicine and was very fond of religious poetry. He had grown tired of war as being a useless way for men to settle their differences.

After preaching on scripture and his faith in Jesus Christ, al Kamil saw in Francis a kindred soul and, against the advice of his learned advisers to behead Francis and Illuminato, invited them to stay a few days and share their faith. It has been reported that al Kamil said to Francis that he would convert to the Christian faith, but that would mean they would both be massacred. Instead, he gave Francis and Illuminato safe passage back to Christian lines, but he also granted that Franciscans can preach in Jerusalem, if they didn't upset the faithful Muslims.

Francis continued to the end of his life to seek peace between individuals and peoples. He forbade the members of the Third Order to bear arms and take oaths of allegiance to warring monarchs. Although this requirement is no longer in our rule, I think the spirit of that prohibition is still present in Article 19 of our present Rule.

Another question that comes to mind is, "Why have Secular Franciscans not made a bigger impact for peace in our society?" Are we in danger of becoming more American than Christian/Franciscan?

REFLECTION

Perhaps for the first and only time in history a Christian, Francis, and a Muslim, Malik, both bright lights of their two religions and civilizations, seemingly always at odds with each other, were face to face, and each found the other appealing. Through dialogue and sincere listening to the other they each came away from their encounter changed forever and more firmly resolved to seek peace, to be peacemakers. They learned from each other that the Koran and the New Testament say almost the same thing about killing, enemies and war. We are familiar with the sayings of Jesus about “all who take up the sword will die by the sword.” and “You have heard it said ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those that persecute you.....” But are we familiar with the Koran where in 5:32 it says “.....whosoever kills a human being, except as punishment for murder or for spreading corruption in the land, it shall be like killing all humanity; and whosoever saves a life, saves the entire human race?”

ACTION

Many young men and women have volunteered to risk their lives in service to our country in the Armed Forces. What is needed is for men and women to volunteer to risk their lives in the Unarmed Forces for peace, nonviolent peace. What is needed is for Secular Franciscans to “be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives.” (Art. 15) “Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in EVERYONE and in the transforming power of love and pardon. Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others.” (Art. 19) Let us resolve to try and live those two articles to the best of our graced ability. Thereby letting the love and peace that emanates from us move out into the world in concentric circles, like a pebble thrown into a lake.

Prayer—Secular Franciscan Creed

Inspired by the vision of St. Francis, we commit ourselves to the Gospel as our way of life. Our world-view is centered in Christ; we see Jesus Christ as the beginning, the way and the goal of all creation. This world vision reveals to us a God who is Father and a life, which is love. This demands of us a life as brothers and sisters of all people and creation.

We are on pilgrimage, trying to reach our Father, trying to live a life of love. We have not yet arrived; we are sinners, but called to be saints. As sinners, weak human beings, we must undergo a continuing conversion, returning always to the Father as prodigal sons and daughters.

Christ was poor and Christ was crucified; we seek to share in his poorness and in his suffering. We further commit ourselves to the service of the poor. In making our way through life, we are guided more by simplicity, humility and littleness, rather than by power, prestige and status. Like Christ, like Francis, we seek to become instruments of peace, peacemakers.

Acknowledging the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit, we declare our loyalty to the Church in a spirit of dialogue and cooperation with her ministers and shepherds. We are conscious of our obligation to share in the life and mission of the Church. We are lay apostles called by Christ to continue his work on earth. Our life and spirituality, however, is characteristically secular, in the world and for the world. Joy sustains our lives, fulfills our living; we seek the same for others.

To achieve all this is difficult; hence we declare our need for Christ’s Eucharist, for personal, communal and liturgical prayer. Amen.

(Approved 1969 at the Third Order Congress in Assisi)

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