

THE INTER-FRANCISCAN MESSAGE

Mattli, Switzerland 1982

"Peace and all that is Good" to ail people in the world who rejoice in the Lord, to all men and women who seek the Lord, and to ail who long for justice and peace!

True peace from God and genuine love in Jesus Christ to all the poor and abandoned, and to all who take seriously their responsibilities within the human family!

For the first time in 800 years of Franciscan history, we Franciscan sisters and brothers of our various branches - have gathered in the name of Christ in Mattli, Morschach, in Switzerland, to consider the challenge of Francis from the perspective of the Third World. We have shared our experiences. We have truly felt the joy of being one family.

We have also sensed a joyful and hopeful youthfulness among us followers of Francis who live in the Third World. We are a part of the hopes and fears of the people we serve. Open to each other and to the Gospel, we have discovered once again new life through the Charism of Francis who is both "Brother of the Universe," and a living symbol of true humanity among the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America. We have sought a genuine Franciscan Vision for the Third World in the following areas.

1. In Favor of the Poor - Against Poverty

We are dismayed by the fact that the majority of the populations in the Third World are extremely poor. Poverty has many faces: Humankind crying from hunger, suffering from endemic diseases, not knowing how to read and write, submerged in the filth of slums. This poverty is a reality caused neither by nature nor decreed by fate. It is caused by internal exploitation and by unjust international relations. In faith we denounce this rapidly increasing impoverishment as the social sin of our time.

This situation has led many of the Third World Churches to act in solidarity by making a preferential option for the poor and against poverty. In these churches the Poverello of Assisi stands out as the Patron of the Church of the poor. From his youth Francis acted in "generous mercy for the poor" (Dona. Leg. Maj. 1:1). His conversion was first of all a conversion towards the poorest of the poor: "living with the lepers" (Cel. 1:17).

In this process he became ever more aware of the Man of the Cross turning to him and inviting him to live as the poor. Thus we see in Francis a process from being *FOR* to being *WITH* the poor and finally to living *AS* the poor. In so doing Francis option for the poor is an expression of the following of Christ. Evangelical poverty does not have meaning in itself, but rather is directed toward fraternity, toward new and life-giving relationships among persons.

Therefore poverty and misery in the Third World in a very special way represent a challenge to the Franciscan Family. We have to confess that we often live far from the poor and we rarely experience their insecurity and fears.

We are convinced that evangelical poverty (openness toward God and disponibility for others) is an essential element of the following of Christ, and a basic attitude for all Christians. We are convinced that no one can be truly in solidarity with the poor if he or she is not prepared to eliminate the subhuman conditions in which they live.

If as Franciscans, faced with world-wide poverty, we want to actualize our option for the poor, it will imply three things:

1. We should see history and reality from the point of view of the poor. Only then can we see clearly that each of us and society as a whole must be transformed, because society does not rightly meet the basic needs of the poor.
2. Faced with the consumer-society, which is fundamentally unjust, we should give a prophetic protest, and refuse all goods which glaringly conflict with the criteria of justice, health and environment.
3. Together with the poor we should stand up for social justice. The goal of the Christian-Franciscan project is neither a poor nor a rich society, but a just community of brothers and sisters.

2. For the Woman - Against Discrimination

We are dismayed by the situation of the woman in the Third World. She is the poorest of the poor. She is sometimes looked down upon because she is a woman. She is treated as an object or as merchandise, often exploited sexually (sex tourism, prostitution, new kinds of slavery in pleasure centers, especially in the First World), used as cheap labor and kept illiterate.

As Franciscans, concerned about discrimination against women, we are reminded that St. Francis discovered and highly esteemed the Feminine in creation. He had a special love and devotion for the Mother of God who gave Christ to the world. He saw himself as a mother conceiving life and protecting it (II Cel. 16). He also tried to interpret inter-human relations in terms of motherhood. In his wider love of God, friendship flowered with St. Clare of Assisi and Jacoba of Rome. In his Canticle of Brother Sun he called everything "sister" and "brother," thus bringing them into a harmonious unity.

Therefore we, brothers and sisters in the Franciscan Family, believe that we must make a special option for the oppressed woman within our option for the poor. We are convinced that only in mutual giving and receiving will we are able to realize our Franciscan vocation. In a special way the sisters of our Franciscan Family can prove their solidarity by efforts against the discrimination against women. Thus they will be a sign of St. Francis' liberating stance within their

various cultures. St. Francis' example stimulates us to assure women their rightful place, participating in the decision-making processes of Church and society.

3. The Rights of the Poor as the Rights of God

We are ashamed of the continued violation of human rights through institutionalized violence of both right and leftist governments, e.g., kidnapping, torturing, disappearance of people, mock trials, etc.

In recent years the Church has understood herself as the advocate of the oppressed. We are pleased to see that bishops and cardinals and also many simple brothers and sisters of our Franciscan Family are engaged in the struggle for human rights. All human rights must be asserted and defended (basic individual rights, personal rights, social rights and international rights), but the rights of the poor must come first, since they comprise the majority of the world's population.

In the Bible the rights of the poor are understood as the rights of God. God, as a living God, is engaged in a very special way in favor of those whose lives are threatened (Lk. 4:16-21). Francis had a special esteem for the poor: he lived together with them; he respected them as brothers and sisters. He did not allow anyone to speak evil of them, nor to do evil to them. Francis spoke of "an inheritance and the right which is due to the poor because our Lord Jesus Christ acquired this inheritance and right for us" (Reg. non bullata IX 8). Because of this we Franciscans are committed to continue struggling for human rights. In this context we want to emphasize especially the right to life, access to food, employment, housing, health, education and recreation.

4. Striving for Justice and Peace

We find it disheartening that the largest physical and financial investment of humankind (in science, technology and production) is directed towards its possible annihilation. We are concerned because an increasing amount of the arms produced are destined for the Third World. The use of money for arms is robbery of the poor.

Due to the injustices of the existing international economic system the poor countries grow continually poorer. They witness the exploitation of their irreplaceable natural resources. The value of the raw materials they produce does not increase at the same rate as the value of the industrialized products they import. The products of their few industries are often highly taxed in the first World. Their efforts to industrialize are often blocked. Therefore, we urgently recommend the approval of the "New International Economic Order" as requested by 130 of the 150 countries of the United Nations.

In the face of these realities we recall the peace mission of St. Francis, his greeting "Peace and all Good"; his total commitment to peace, his constant readiness for reconciliation, and his confidence in the power of the Cross. Therefore we desire to work together so that every human being and every creature receive his/her just share, and can live in peace with all creation. From

this Mission Congress we addressed a letter to various governments asking them to make greater efforts to disarmament and for the abolition of all weapons of war, especially nuclear arms. We plead that no weapons be exported to Third World countries: through them military dictatorships are strengthened and the rights of the poor are despised. We urge that arms production be stopped also in the Third World. It is an assault on life, a manipulation of the sufferings and fears of humankind. As Franciscans we believe that we must learn once again to trust "not in chariots and horses, but in the name of the Lord" (Psalm 19:8). Without violence, but with enduring inner strength, we want to be committed to the cause of justice and peace.

5. Instruments of Reconciliation

We are conscious of conflicts and tensions all over the world — in the Church and among ourselves.

St. Francis lived intensely the mystery of reconciliation between God and man brought about by the Cross of Jesus Christ. That is why he prayed and taught his brothers to pray: "We bow in adoration before you, Lord Jesus Christ, and before all your churches in the whole world because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world" (Cf. The Testament). Full of conviction and strength he tried to make himself an instrument of reconciliation. We remember how he reconciled the feuding civil and ecclesiastical authorities of Assisi. He often pacified his own friars in conflict. And, in the Canticle of the Sun, he sang "All praise be yours my Lord, through those who grant pardon for love of you."

As his professed followers, we Franciscans shall consider it our unique privilege to be the instruments of reconciliation. We shall strive to be worthy of this legacy of his and remain faithful to it. In our determination to serve the poor and to live poor, we make ourselves totally free to promote understanding and mutual acceptance among men which will bring about full reconciliation. We need to do this in our midst, in the society and in the great family of the children of God.

6. A Liberating Solidarity

We are encouraged by the fact that the poor in certain countries are organizing themselves for full liberation. They develop a critical consciousness of the historical causes of their misery and mobilize themselves in peoples' organizations, free labor unions, and workers' parties. The Church itself is becoming more involved in human promotion by means of Bible groups, base communities and various social programs.

We confess that due to the service-station model and large institutions that we have not been sufficiently engaged in the liberation of people. However the number of those among us who are committed to changing society in favor of the poor has reached a significant level in many parts of the world. In other sectors of the world this consciousness is just beginning to emerge.

We are reminded of the Testament of St. Francis, in which he defines his conversion as a change of positions: he left the social and economic structure of the rich and powerful and accepted that of the poor and the little ones. Living with them freed both him and them from the consequences of misery, scorn, and isolation and laid the foundation for an alternative society. In the struggle with the powerful he saw the good in them and believed that they could be converted.

Thus in our commitment for liberation together with the oppressed we want to trust more in humankind's innate values and sincerity rather than the illusion that violence can effect change.

7. Dialogue with Other Religions

We believe that religions are a great source of enrichment for the understanding of the dignity of man in his relationship to God. The Asian and African scenes in particular are also characterized by the presence of major religions. We should therefore, treasure their wisdom and accept their existence with gratitude and joy.

Francis' contact with these religions was limited to Islam. But, while Christianity at that time was at war with Islam, Francis, following Jesus in his poverty and humility, did not go to the Muslims as "Crusader", as part of a power structure with all its might, but as a real "minor," poor and defenseless. Francis entered a learning process in which he discovered God's presence and work in the life and religion of the Muslims. After dialogue with Islam Francis' appreciation of the transcendence and majesty of God was truly deepened and he found a common ground where he and the Muslims could meet in peace, i.e. faith in a transcendental God. As a result he could write in his Rule 1221 "that those going among the Saracens should be subject to every human creature for God's sake" (Regula non Bullata, 16).

This positive appreciation should also characterize the followers of Francis today. We should not act as *majores* with regard to other religions, but as *minores*: we should not judge them, but "be subject to them for God's sake." This is a dialogue in the spirit of Francis.

8. The Word must become Flesh: inculturation

We observe a growing awareness among all peoples of the desire and the right to express their faith in their own way. After centuries of European Colonial Christianity an African, Asian and Latin American Church is springing up, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit. In their own theology, liturgy, spirituality, art, architecture, pastoral ministry and Christian style of life we see the Word of God becoming flesh today!

As an African Franciscan sister expressed it: "The Gospel challenges are the same for all cultures. Please let me be an African in all aspects of life except those which are in conflict with the Gospel and the ideals of Francis and Clare."

Though the whole movement of inculturation as such did not exist at the time of St. Francis, we are reminded of St. Francis as a man who was fully open to the goodness and positive values

existing in the whole of creation. He did want that we take delight in and be pleased with the world because it was the place where the creating, the redeeming and life saving work of God is being accomplished (Cf. Regula non Bullata 23:9-11).

Hence, inspired by this great freedom of St. Francis, we want to root ourselves in the culture of the peoples in every land. We wish to develop the local churches and thereby bring about a genuine enrichment of the whole Church of Christ,

9. Overcoming Clericalism through Fraternity

We observe that in many instances where the activities and initiatives within the Christian community are centered around the priest or substitute, the people of God do not grow in responsibility for their life and action. There are also living communities without priests, which have demonstrated an emergence of many ministries and charisms, and an awakening of fraternity. There are churches with priests who have taken care to develop this new sense of fraternity among their people.

This makes us remember St. Francis who was experienced by his Companions as *the brother* (il fratello). He would not establish his community on a hierarchical basis. Neither should power, domination and privileges have any place in it. His brothers should mutually respect serve each other. They should listen to one another and seek the good of all. Francis wanted his brothers to remain on the level of the people, and not to strive for higher positions.

We have a special task to fulfill within the Church, namely, to build a living community of brothers and sisters on their way together toward making God's goodness a reality for all humankind. Therefore, we want to seek out the people and love them, living not only for the people, but also with the people. To live up to this vocation it would be necessary to distinguish clearly between formation for priesthood and preparation for life in the Franciscan fraternal community, which should be given a clear priority both in the initial and in on-going formation.

10. To Learn by Living and Doing: Formation

We observe the Church and world change at an ever faster rate. There is a danger that traditional ideas and models will be inadequate for a continual process of learning and on-going formation.

We remember Francis of Assisi who was always open to the signs of the times. He did not confront situations with preconceived notions. Up to the very end of his life he was prepared to learn from the youngest novice. He wished that formation to be done first, not at Universities, but in lepers' homes (Comp. Assisiensis 9), He was convinced that a friar could not understand what he had not experienced. The theological formation should serve primarily the conversion of friar and only then the proclamation of the Gospel.

Therefore, we brothers and sisters should learn from each other sharing experiences, by reading the Gospel, by praying together, breaking the Bread together and by evaluating our real life

situations. Fraternal correction is an important part of this process. We Franciscans should take seriously the words of Gregory the Great: "The poor are our teachers, the humble our learned."

11. Reaching out to the Transcendent Prayer and Contemplation

We observe with joy that in the Third World God is a reality who is experienced; in Asia we learn that meditation and silent prayer before God are interwoven in the life of the people; in Africa the presence and experience of the living God is exteriorized and celebrated in song, rhythm and dance; in Latin America popular religion and veneration of the saints are meaningful realities which also general life.

We remember Francis of Assisi who wanted to adore God everywhere, at every moment, and wanted to love him in his entire creature. He sought the silence of caves, forests and churches. He translated own experience of God into pictures, gestures and play. He plays the mysteries of Jesus (Christmas, Easter, Eucharist). He identified himself with the needs of the people, seeing with their eyes and feeling with their hands. In the world, in all his action, he was totally with God: before God he was filled with the concerns of the world.

For that reason we want to give back to prayer, liturgy and silence the place they deserve. Without fear we want to encounter the burst of the people's faith, and we want to participate creatively on it. When we stand before God with our people, all of our conflicts and sufferings, our expectations and hopes take on a dimension which transcends all and, at the same time fulfills all.

12. Conclusion

We observe that Francis gives direction and support to the life of men and women for a new humanity. In Francis we have a living witness that such a renewed humanity is possible today. We believe that all who follow him and put these things into practice "filled in heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father, and on earth with that of his beloved Son, together with the Holy Spirit, the Comforter." (Test).