

FRANCISCAN LIVING

AM I LIVING WHAT I PROFESS?

By Francine Gikow, OFS

Coming home from the Quinquennial, I pondered my response to Fr. Dan Horan's challenge to truly live as we profess to be as Secular Franciscans. I re-studied the Rule and meditated on specific sections during my prayer time. In a way, it was an examination of conscience with the Rule. It has forced me to identify how I fall short in following the Rule I profess. The following are some fruits of this self-examination.

"...let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ... (Rule 7). How did Christ act in his lifetime, and how have I acted contrary to His model? Am I judgmental? (Jesus neither judged nor condemned, since He left it to the Father at the end of time.) Do I show mercy? (Jesus showed mercy to all, and no person was beyond His mercy.) Do I act with violence toward others either by deed or the spoken word? (I was convicted that I do violence—sometimes by my own fear overcoming my good intentions, or by anger over some past injury expressing itself toward others.)

"Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment..." (Rule 11). Although this Rule focuses on the spirit of detachment from temporal goods, any Secular Franciscan is aware that this is only half the battle. A Secular Franciscan is called to be detached at an even deeper spiritual level: detachment from self-absorption, self-interest and his or her own desires. For if we are attached to something, even if it is toward our own "issues," then we are not truly free. Instead, "victimhood" owns me.

Rule 12 continues this theme with: *"They should set themselves free to love God and their brothers and sisters."* Am I truly detached (free) from my own fears, which can separate me from others? Do I fear those different from me, i.e., Muslims, Jews, immigrants, the poor, drug addicted, homeless? How am I attached to my own self-concerns, which prevent me from being truly free to love my brothers and sisters?

"Let them be mindful that according to the gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God's children" (Rule 11). Have I hoarded goods that have been lent to me by the Father? Have I been stingy with the time God has given me? Do I cut people off when they are sharing something important to them? Do I refuse to donate to others if they don't meet my criteria of being "deserving" or if they make choices that are different from mine? Do I donate with "conditions" or with strings attached?

"Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives" (Rule 15.) I don't think justice is only equality but instead a fairness for each person's needs but not necessarily their wants. Can you have mercy without justice, or justice without mercy, or are they two sides of the same coin? Maybe it isn't an "either/or" (exclusive) but a "both/and" (inclusive) concept. Surely living justice takes courage as we are called to stand for the poor, the disliked, the unpopular, and the misaligned. Have I caved in under others' pressure and given favors? Do I have the courage and trust in God to be the "voice crying out in the desert"?

"Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly..." Rule 19. When I read this Rule, I realized that I am to bring peace to others without reserve. As Fr. Horan said, it is not just a "feel good" effort. Our Rule does not qualify in what circumstances I am to bring peace or even whether a conflict measures up to the "just" war definition. Do I condone violence or war when it suits my views or do I stand for nonviolence without reservation? Our Rule demands peacemaking without excuses or qualification. We are to act as peacemaking people unceasingly—always and everywhere, no matter the circumstances. That is our tradition stemming from our first Rule when Secular Franciscans were prohibited from bearing arms and going to war. It is who we are. It is who we are meant to be—because we "trust in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the power of love and pardon" (Rule 19).

Finally, Rule 18 grabbed my attention: *"...they should strive to move from exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship."* Do I take creation for granted, accepting the world's ideal of use, abuse and depletion of God's creation? I know I have been guilty of neglect if not abuse. I have been a mindless consumer of energy, food, plants and animals instead of a lover and a friend. How can I change this?

As you can see, our Rule continues to challenge us. It makes me uneasy—which is a good thing in the spiritual life because it is an impetus for change. As the words of our own Rule direct: *"...let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls 'conversion'" (Rule 7).*