

# FRANCISCAN LIVING

## Suffering

By Francine Gikow, SFO

My darkest hour was when I just turned 22 years old after both my parents had died from long illnesses leaving me homeless and bereft. My only sister was an 8-hour plane ride away and my boyfriend (later husband) had been sent to Europe indefinitely. I was completely alone and feeling abandoned, but, boy, was I angry with God for leaving me in this situation!

Later, I revisited suffering when my husband and I experienced infertility. It reawakened all those old feelings of abandonment, as well as new ones of grief. In my suffering, I asked God why was He “doing this to me? Didn’t I suffer enough?”<sup>1</sup>

Eventually, I came to understand through prayer that I was to unite myself with God in His passion. Because of His sharing in my “passion” and my sharing in His, I felt his deep love for me, and I no longer felt alone. This sharing and “oneness” gave me great peace and healing during this time of sorrow. Like Francis, I fell in love with my great and compassionate God!

As a Franciscan, however, I admit discounting stories of St. Francis actually *welcoming* suffering with joy as an idealized image (hagiography) of a saint, which I felt was meaningless in the real world of today. Isn’t it hard enough to *accept* the suffering we are given without asking for more?

Bonaventure described Francis calling his agonizing pain and his cruel sufferings “his sisters”... who he bore joyfully and praised God, thanking Him for everything.<sup>2</sup> How could Francis get to that place where he no longer only accepted suffering but actually welcomed it?

I believe the jump from accepting to welcoming suffering was not an overnight process for Francis. It must have taken long nights in prayer, wrestling with his soul, and finally surrender. I realized that Francis was able to grow from merely accepting suffering toward welcoming it because he experienced God’s overwhelming love. When Francis could no longer contain the overflowing Love he experienced, he was compelled to share it with others. For as scripture says:

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.”<sup>3</sup>*

In other words, we as Franciscans are not to hoard the experience of God’s love and consolation for ourselves but are to share this consolation with others when we see their woundedness and suffering. By sharing, we open the door for others to experience God’s love during a time when they are most open to hearing His Word. This companionship on the spiritual journey is indeed a privileged place in healing as we build up the Body of Christ.

However, it doesn’t just stop there. Like any sharing, we are changed in the process as we accept another’s burdens. For if we can look beyond our own pain to touch others who are suffering, our own love expands and is enriched by others, and ultimately we find ourselves as the Beloved of God. The Love we gave comes back to us, outpouring and overflowing.

It no longer seems to me that Francis took pleasure in suffering at all. In fact, I believe he was not welcoming suffering so much as actually welcoming Love Incarnate. He also welcomed the shared companionship and opportunity to live in a community embraced by God. It is Love Itself surrounding us—a wonderful place to be! Actually, it is a little bit of heaven here on earth!

<sup>1</sup> For a complete description of my spiritual journey during this time, please see “Who Is In Control? Infertility: and The Mystery of Suffering” in *The Word Among Us*, Sept. 2005, 57-59 or online at: [http://wau.org/archives/article/who\\_is\\_in\\_control/](http://wau.org/archives/article/who_is_in_control/)

<sup>2</sup> Bonaventure, *Minor Life of St. Francis*, Ch. 7,2.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.