

2017 SUMMER SEMINAR

'Who's my neighbor?'



The Secular Franciscan Summer Seminar took place in the Disepio Institute at St. Francis University, Loretto, PA.

By BOB STRONACH, OFS

Small containers of colored sand helped set the tone for the 8th Summer Seminar for Secular Franciscans, held July 6-9 at St. Francis University in Loretto, PA. The topic: "Multiculturalism and Diversity: Who Is My Neighbor?"

"This sand represents you," noted Mary Stronach, OFS, co-presenter with Carolyn Townes, OFS. "Pray on it. Breathe your essence into it."

Then she had each participant pour his/her sand into a glass vase, creating layers of color.

The vase of sand, with the colors seeping and mixing, now represents "all of us here," Mary said. "We're part of one



another." And at the conclusion of the seminar, "I challenge you to take your sand back. It won't be just you anymore. You'll take some of us with you."

As National Spiritual Assistant Christopher Panagoplos, TOR, was about to pour his container of sand, he quipped: "You've made this a sacramental. Wonderful!"

The blending of the sand helps visualize the heart of what multiculturalism and diversity is all about; that is, allowing and accepting, even celebrating, differences.

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Friar Christopher pours his container of sand into the mix.



Co-presenter Carolyn Townes, OFS.

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A “circle of diversity” session, with participants rotating and pairing off one-on-one, allowed each person to talk about him/herself and his/her experiences without being interrupted.

“I felt a sense of freedom in opening up...,” participant Bill told the group afterwards. “A profound sense of freedom.”

Participant Julie noted that at first she felt frustrated, unable to ask questions that she thought would spur on the conversation, but then realized the value of just listening

longer. It kept her from trying to control the conversation with questions that would “direct the conversation where I wanted to lead it” instead of really listening.

A friar who ended up listening to a couple of people he knew from the local fraternity “learned something new” about them. “There’s a depth I didn’t realize.”

Such listening, presenter Mary noted, leads to empathy and understanding and acceptance. “It’s a good start to talking about diversity.”

Co-presenters Carolyn and Mary explored the topics of multicultural-

ism, assimilation, culture, culture shock, diversity and unconscious bias.

They concluded that in a healthy multicultural society, “you allow and accept differences.”

“Not just accept,” but “celebrate” differences, quipped participant Rosemarie.

Furthermore, added participant Don, “when I accept something, it becomes part of me.”

Presenter Mary noted that cultural competence “is the ability to interact with and accept cultural differences,” and, the reality is that it’s a gradual, on-going process.

Presenter Carolyn put some emphasis on “unconscious bias”, proclaiming that “we all have it.”

“Unconscious bias is reflected in automatic thoughts we have and associations we make...”

“The trick is not to act on those thoughts,” and instead, (pointing to Duns Scotus’ concept of “haecceitas”) be aware of “our this-ness” and “their this-ness,” allowing us to “move into oneness.”

Automatic negative thoughts are natural and human. “We don’t beat ourselves up about it, but we’re aware of it.”

The group reflected on the story of Francis and the Sultan, with a friar



Mary Stronach gives instructions for the “circle of diversity” session.

spiritual assistant saying that Francis went out “to be in relationship” with Muslims, “to live among them”. It was another logical step for Francis, just as he had lived among and cared for lepers. It reflected his kinship with all of creation. Francis sets the tone for Franciscans of all stripes today -- “to be with your brothers and sisters in the world.”

In other words, “we’re called to live among them even when they’re different than ourselves.”

It’s about “oneness”, about “being present with others,” Carolyn noted. “... We must break the barriers if we call ourselves children of God.”

The presenters referred to a number of sections of the OFS Rule that point to relationship with others and the world – such as Article 13 that prods Secular Franciscans to accept all people as a gift of God and to place themselves on an equal basis with all people; or Article 14, which calls for building a more fraternal and evangelical world; or Article 15, to be in the forefront of promoting justice; or Article 18, respecting all of creation; or Article 19, to seek unity and harmony through dialogue, and to bring joy and hope to others.

“Mindful awareness” is how Carolyn summed it up, coupled with “purity of heart.”

She encouraged everyone to read an article of the Rule every day. “It’s absolutely glorious!”

Quoting Pope Francis, she said “diversity is a beautiful thing” in that “differences can unify us instead of divide.”

Remember, Carolyn added, “God created us in his image and likeness. All of us.”

As Franciscans, “you don’t want our diverse-ness to divide us.” Even



Co-presenters Mary Stronach, OFS, sporting a Star Trek t-shirt, and Carolyn Townes, OFS.

so, “we have problems. Conflict is inevitable. Destructive conflict is not.”

To that end, “we must agree to disagree agreeably. It’s okay if you don’t agree with me.”

“And that, my brothers and sisters, is very counter-cultural.”

When listening to someone you think you don’t agree with, be open. Ask for more information, such as: “That’s interesting. Tell me more about that.”

The important thing to remember is to have dialogue, not two monologues. “*Speak to one another, not at.*” It’s important to have empathy. “Step into the shoes of your brother or sister. It’s being present.”

She emphasized: “Being mindful means you suspend the judgement and are present, right now, right here.”

Don’t be afraid to share stories. “Our stories allow us to embrace our differences... Stories can break down conflict.”

People open to meeting others who are different can appreciate the beauty of diversity, Mary said; or, as

Mark Twain put it: “Travel is fatal to prejudice and bigotry and narrow-mindedness...”

Mary illustrated the conflict of being different by showing a brief segment of an original Star Trek episode, where two aliens were fighting aboard the Starship USS Enterprise. Both were literally colored half black and half white – except that one was black on the left side and the other, black on the right. That difference was the basis of their hatred for one another, along with how one was viewed as oppressor and the other as second-class citizen.

Star Trek wasn’t afraid to tackle social issues of the day, Mary said, and reflected Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry’s vision of IDIC – infinite diversity in infinite combinations.

The seminar covered reasons why people migrate – such as fleeing war or political conflict, or seeking a better life for their families – and explored the Vatican’s concern for and action on behalf of migrant people. As church leaders in a Vaticano video pointed out, the church is promoting “protection and integration

of migrants... to reduce suffering... and allow them to live happily and productively.”

Group discussion sprinkled the seminar, delving into such issues as the roles of government, church and OFS in immigration, “middle class” and other socio-economic stereotypes, and “who has the power?”

They shared tips and tools for understanding diversity in community and fraternity, and for better com-

munication, for “mindful communication.”

“In this world of diversity we cannot be apathetic,” National Minister Jan Parker, OFS, noted in summing up what to her was at the heart of the conference. “We cannot be lukewarm. There is too much at stake. We must be prophets of unity, bearers of truth and proclaim an unlimited Christ. As our Holy Father Pope Francis says, ‘Go to the peripheries!’”

The presenters asked everyone to develop a simple personal “action plan for a more sensitive fraternity or community.” One personal plan (by Beth Price, OFS, of Our Mother of Sorrows Fraternity, Grand Rapid, MI) drew cheers and applause:

“As a Secular Franciscan encountering an individual uniquely different from myself, I intend to rejoice in a new encounter with the Divine.”

SEMINAR CANDIDS



Beth Price, OFS:
“...a new encounter with the divine.”

Pat Serotkin, OFS, and Fr. Joe Lehman, OFM Conv., co-chaired the summer seminar.

