

FRANCISCAN LIVING

HUMILITY

By Francine Gikow, OFS

As I was praying about the shooting of the politicians at the baseball field, I considered why there is such animosity, incivility, and malicious hatred in politics in our country. I believe the answer lies in humility – or the lack thereof. Why? Because when we listen with an “agenda,” ready to pounce on the other to assert the righteousness of our beliefs, then we are filled with our own pride. As Father Lester Bach, OFM, states: “If I presume I am infallible, I do not need dialogue – I act with arrogance.”¹ That is pride.

Pope St. Gregory the Great expands on this idea when he says: “They regard [whom they are teaching] as inferiors, to whom they do not deign to listen as they talk; indeed they scarcely deign to talk to them at all – they simply lay down the law.” He goes on to say, “Yet the reason for all disturbance, if we look to its roots, is that no one finds fault with himself.”² This is pride, and not humility, which attributes everything as gifts from God. Francis believed that the only “things” we actually own are our sins; everything else is gift.

St. Francis outlines how we are to relate to one another in his *Early Rule*: “Let them revile no one. Let them not grumble or detract from others, for it is written: “Gossips and detractors are detestable to God (cf. Romans 1:29), Let them be modest by showing graciousness toward everyone. Let them not judge or condemn.”³ Sound familiar?

With roots in pride, gossip can also be deadly and malicious in its intent. It was only recently that I was confronted with the serious realization of the sins of detraction and calumny in my own life. Although both are considered sins against truth, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

“He becomes guilty...of detraction who, without objectively valid reason discloses another’s faults and failings to persons who did not know them, [and]...of calumny who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them.”⁴

I was convicted! I had not considered the harm I was doing by gossiping about a politician and tearing apart his or her reputation – whether it was true or not. I realized that by using gossip with calumny and detraction, I was sinning because of pride. I put down

other people to make myself feel important, for I knew “what was right!” I judged and declared them guilty... although now I realize that *I* was the guilty one.

Gossip, detraction and calumny are sins against truth and humility. In his *Salutation of the Virtues*, Francis extols humility by saying, “Holy Humility confounds pride.”⁵ Let’s take a closer look at this statement. Humility “confounds” pride. Hmm. To “confound” means to cause confusion in someone or something that goes against their expectations. Humility actively works against pride by its element of surprise; humility exhibited by someone is not something that we have come to expect. It is counter-cultural. It surprises. It makes people question. It offers a different way of acting and being. It is God’s way of teaching.

Pope Gregory understood this when he went on to say, “For true doctrine tries both to teach by words and to demonstrate by living example – humility, which is the mother and mistress of virtues. Its goal is to express humility among the disciples of truth more by deeds than by words.”⁶ Again, sound familiar? Francis taught more by his deeds rather than by his words. He confounded people! His radical lifestyle attracted others and convicted them. He attracted others to the credibility of his message by his actions.

There is a story where Francis once said to his companion, “Suppose,.. I go to the chapter, preach and admonish the brothers, and, at the end, they speak against me.... So, in the end, I am thrown out in disgrace, looked down upon by everyone. I tell you, unless I hear these words with the same expression on my face, with the same joy, and with the same resolution for holiness, I am in no sense a Lesser Brother!”⁷

That’s a tall order, but it is our challenge. To be “lesser” is what we professed. In the words of Francis:

“We must never desire to be above others, but, instead, we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God’s sake.”⁸ Humility confounds. It can convert. In any event, it is the path of Christ in our world today.

“Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before Him! Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by Him!”⁹

¹ Lester Bach, OFM *The Franciscan Journey*. Lindsborg KS: Smoky Valley Printing. 2010. p.150.

² St Gregory the Great, “The Moral Reflections on Job” as quoted in *The Liturgy of the Hours, III, (LofH)* New York,

³ Armstrong, Hellman and Short. Francis of Assisi: Early Documents: The Saint I. (FA:ED) Hyde Park, NY: New City Press. 1999. p. 72.

⁴ CCC, 2477.

⁵ SalV (FA:ED I.) p.165.

⁶ LofH, 304.

⁷ LMj (FA:ED II.) p.572.

⁸ 2LrF (FA:ED I.) P.48.

⁹ LtOrd in FA:ED I, p.118.