

A CIRCLE, NOT A STAIRWAY

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How wonderful to get to meet some of you at The Quinquennial (The Q) and to do some extensive visiting about how things are going in the regional and local fraternities. I'm sorry the rest of you did not make the gathering this time. Perhaps we can meet at the "All Commissions Conference" in 2004. The common topic from so many of you was how busy everyone is and how hard it is to get to all the things we think we should do "to build a more fraternal and evangelical world." One continuing theme of the presenters was for us to be unified in our approach to life. It is essential for us to realize that our job here is to be God's hands, eyes, ears, mouth, and every other part of our bodies that function so we can do the work of making this a "more fraternal and evangelical world." For those of you in inquirer or candidate formation, once we SFOs are professed this is our assignment. When we choose to accept the TAU we promise to carry out this charge to the best of our ability. How to do that is the question we seek the answer for daily as we commune with God and go about our lives.

In the Baltimore Catechism (the formation manual for all Roman Catholic children before Vatican II) we learned that we were to concentrate on **knowing, loving, and serving God**. As I recall, this was presented to us as a stair step process. On the top step one comes to know God, on the second step we learn to love God, and on the bottom step we serve God. As my spirituality matured I came to realize I would never REALLY know God until I died. What all of us really know is that God is not a tangible being but a spiritual one, that we are loved unconditionally, and that the closest most of us come to "knowing God" is when we receive the body and blood of his son in the Eucharist. The closest we can get to knowing how God might be an example for the conduct of our daily lives is to study and imitate the life of the only through and through spiritual person that walked this earth, Christ.

What about loving God, step two? Well, it seems to me Jesus showed us the best way to do that also. When we truly love God we realize God made us to do the work that needs doing in the world, to be counter-cultural as a Catholic Christian. Christ loved God so much he followed the work God had deigned for him to do even to the point of dying for sins he didn't commit. Now that is loving God! As Franciscans, we also have the examples of Francis and how he lived his life. As one speaker said at The Q, "God has not called us to be Francis." As we follow Francis and are open to growth in knowing, loving, and serving God we can learn much about how to deal with situations by studying how Francis did things. Where did he get his direction? From reading scriptures, praying, and using these inspirations in his work.

Did Jesus sit on his hands and just spend time in prayer, communing with God while he was here waiting to die? NO! Jesus was a very active believer. He knew God had lots for him to do to build the kingdom here on earth all during the years of his earthly existence. Yes, scripture says Jesus went off to pray and speak with God. But if Christ was as active as those writing the bible remember him to be then he was one busy man.

He founded the Catholic Christian Church, no small undertaking in a culture that had never heard of Christ as he presented himself, and he touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who came to know him either directly, or indirectly through the disciples and apostles.

My point is he spent most of his time here in the “serving” part of our faith. He didn’t sit on the bottom step but picked it up and carried it away with him as he worked to “build a more fraternal and evangelical world.” He had talents none of us will have, the power to cure the sick and raise the dead. He used his talents as he went about God’s work here. Now that we’ve had Vatican II, and as I learn more about how Francis lived, to me the image is changed from stairs to a circle with knowing, loving and serving God being one continuous loop and people all in between those words because it is through people that we come to know, love and serve God.

There are so many needs in the world today it is hard for any of us to sort out where to begin. Many of you are already working in ministries as much as you are able. But some can be so overwhelmed by the problems that, aside from praying (which is only one part of the circle), their talents to try to make the world a better place are not used as much as possible. How to put all the neediness of the world into perspective so one can select something to use your God given talents? Take one Corporal Work of Mercy (Matt 25: 31-46) that you are interested in and begin within your local community. Nonprofits always need volunteers. If, after being involved somewhere for awhile you do not feel called to continue, no one cemented your feet to the floor. Let them wonder to a different Work of Mercy. The Seven Corporal Works of Mercy are: 1.Feed the hungry. 2.Give drink to the thirsty. 3.Welcome the stranger. 4.Clothe the naked. 5.Visit the sick. 6.Visit the prisoner. 7.Bury the dead (Tobit 1, 17-19). Judgment is not going to be about how many Liturgy of the Hours we said or who many Masses we went to. It is about how much we loved each other by doing works. You will get to know and love God through the people that you deal with daily and you will be serving by doing the work God put you here to do. God will work miracles in your life once you make yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually present to him to make his work happen.

- DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
1. How do you think of your life? Is it stairs or a circle?
 2. Could we help some other fraternity members get involved in a ministry by giving them a ride, introducing them to people, helping invalids start a telephone tree for other lonely invalids, etc.
 3. Do I mostly pick things to do that are comfortable for me or am I willing to step out of my comfort zone, like Francis did with the lepers?