

# FRANCISCAN LIVING

## POPE FRANCIS' MESSAGE: RECOVER TRUST

By Francine Gikow, OFS

**“Your religious family is called to express this concrete fraternity, through a recovery of mutual trust—and I underscore this: recovery of trust—in inter-personal relations, so that the world sees, believes, recognizing that the love of Christ heals wounds.”<sup>1</sup>**

This was Pope Francis' message to the Order of Friars Minor at their General Chapter on May 26, 2015. Here he speaks about the importance of a “recovery of mutual trust in interpersonal relations” within fraternities. This recovery of trust is *essential* for evangelical witness so that the world can be exposed to the love of Christ. Without this rebuilding, fraternities are doomed to reflect division rather than unity; anger instead of love; pettiness rather than charity.

Henri Nouwen saw “the primary purpose of living in community is to learn together about the life of the Spirit of God within and among us through prayer, support and accountability. Rational analysis, interpersonal dynamics, intellectual discussion and debate, while helpful in overcoming temporary obstacles, are not the primary spiritual tasks of a community of faith.”<sup>2</sup>

It is expected that those living a life in community, will experience interpersonal conflict at some point in time. When dissention occurs, and if mutual care, affection and love are missing, fraternity life suffers. We no longer witness to the love of Christ.

However when there is interpersonal conflict in fraternity, I view it, not as an issue with or about others but rather as an opportunity of growing in *my* spiritual journey. Since we profess to go “from gospel to life and life to the gospel” all of our life should be seen through the lens of being part of a spiritual journey. Seeing conflict as a part of my spiritual journey changed my understanding and approach to what was happening interpersonally.

Secondly, I also know that it is about *me* (rather than *them!*) I have to work on myself first. God has given *me* this experience of conflict for a purpose, and I have to be chiefly concerned about my response to it. I was once assigned an exercise that made me re-examine how I listen and respond to people.<sup>3</sup> I was to listen to someone I didn't like or with whom I disagreed, for one half hour, and afterward answer the questions: “What did I hear? What did I experience? What did I notice about the person?” My answers to those questions revealed my very judgmental, critical attitude toward

that person...not very Christ-like at all! Jesus was consistently open to those who sincerely sought God. Can I not say the same about the other person, or am I just so angry that I cannot see *any* good in others? Who really has a poor “attitude” now? My honest response was, “ME!”

I have also gone back to scripture. Meditating on Mark 14: 17-21 (the Last Supper) is invaluable. Jesus already knew Judas would betray him, but Jesus still counted him as a friend and disciple and invited him to eat the last meal with him. Jesus included him in all his teachings, all his healings, all His Presence... all the while knowing that Judas would betray Him. This love for the person of Judas was what Christ was about! He loved Judas even though it would lead to betrayal, suffering and death. The challenge is: can I try to love the same?

Fraternity life is always about forgiveness too — both forgiving others and asking forgiveness for myself. We are challenged by the words of the Our Father: “...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us!” Do we blithely say these words or do we act upon them? This is not to say that I find forgiveness easy or quick however. Authentic forgiveness means that we have to acknowledge our own wounds and stay with them for a while to do justice to ourselves and then move on. Forgiveness takes time, prayer and eventually a willingness to let go of our own “issues” so God can take over the healing. Forgiveness is a *decision* to actually forgive, trusting in God that He will give us the grace to behave accordingly in a loving, compassionate way. Initially we may not *feel* like we are forgiving others, but where the will goes, grace follows. Ultimately, forgiveness is the way of peace and of God.

Shared spiritual experience too is a great unifier of spiritual groups. Fraternity members might want to spend time together in meditation, prayer, contemplation and adoration. In this way, the Holy Spirit, who is the animator of religious life, takes over the leadership and membership of the fraternity and leads us to the peace of God.

For every member of a fraternity, recovery of trust after conflict has to go through a process of forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. There are no easy answers but each member has to do the “work” of reconciliation. Only when we are reconciled, loved and healed in fraternity can we become bearers of God's mercy, reconciliation and peace. Pax et bonum!

<sup>1</sup> Vatican City State: Pope Francis' Address to the General Chapter of the Order of Friars Minor, May 26, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk.* Harper-Collins Publishers: New York, 2006. p.126.

<sup>3</sup> Many thanks to Sr. Linda Greenwood, OSF, and the Spiritual Direction Training program through Cardinal Stritch University offered at San Damiano House of Prayer, Lowell MA for permission to describe this exercise.