



Who is my Neighbor?

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Note: Guest Writer contributor **Fr. Robert Barbato, OFM Cap.** (newly appointed Rector of the National Shrine of St. Francis of Assisi located in San Francisco Ca.), is writing for Fr. John DeLaRiva, OFM Cap. (newly appointed National Spiritual Assistant to the OFS).

A scribe asked Jesus, after being told to love his neighbor, “And just who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, as we know, with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus turned the question around, “Who was neighbor to the man in trouble?” The answer, of course, was the Samaritan, who treated the man with true love and concern. Jesus said, “Go, and do likewise.” He challenged the scribe (and all of us) not to think of how other people are neighbors to us, but how we can become neighbors by the way we treat them, even our enemies.

When Francis of Assisi started calling himself “Brother Francis,” he wasn’t just picking a title. He was expressing the relationship he wanted to have with the world. In his youth, Francis would never have thought of lepers as “neighbors,” let alone brothers and sisters. He loathed them and avoided them. It was the Lord who led him among them, as he himself tells us, and turned what was bitter into sweetness of soul and body. In other words, Francis learned to see not “lepers,” but Christian brothers and sisters, not a repugnant disease, but a person created in the image of God.

Francis tried to live out what it meant to call himself “brother,” even when it was difficult. To consider those who ridiculed him, belittled him, and called him a fool as brother, was not easy. It took Francis much prayer and patience to learn how to be brother. This was true even when Francis found himself living with some of his friars who disagreed with him or who were simply difficult to live with. As he struggled to learn to be brother to other people, he also came to the insight that he was a brother to all creatures, since every being is made by the same Creator. This, of course, led Francis to compose the “Canticle of the

Creatures,” praising God in, through, and for all God’s creatures, like Brother Sun and Sister Moon.

As followers of Francis, we emphasize the importance of fraternity, of being brothers and sisters to one another and to the world. It is true that God calls us into fraternity to support one another and find strength in our brothers and sisters. But frankly, God also calls us into fraternity to learn to put up with one another, to be patient with one another, to learn to thank God for that brother or sister who is the most annoying. Fraternity begins with our prayer for one another and our openness to the idea that each person is made in the image and likeness of God, no matter how hard that may be to imagine in real life! Like Francis, if we call ourselves “brother” or “sister” and try to live out what that title means, we will be led by the Spirit into deep solidarity with all creation and find true joy, for the Lord can turn what is bitter into sweetness of soul and body. Is it easy? No. Is it worth it? Definitely.

May the Lord bless and keep you always!

