

Reflection – Feast of St. Francis, 2011

By Sr. Marge Staudt, OSF

Happy Feast day! It is our joy to gather in celebration on this special day. We welcome our associates and the secular Franciscans who have joined us this evening, and claim the gift it is to follow Francis and Clare with the unique perspective that you bring to us.

In the Scriptures placed before us today, when Sirach was read we couldn't miss the phrase, "the house of God was renovated... the temple was reinforced." This speaks to our lived experience of the past months. To focus on the last phrase, "the temple was reinforced" - I don't know about you, but until I observed the tedious process of deconstructing Colette, I had no idea how much steel reinforced the structure of a building. Watching that took me to the question – what is reinforcing our common Franciscan life?

The past months have held many examples. Might the strongest reinforcement be our shared "sisterhood" – our effort to grow in true community? Fr. Beck, several weeks ago you challenged us with the reminder that community means that each person is responsible for and to all; that each of us owns the community that is our family, our home. This way of life means sharing tasks – ranging from the menial to the magnificent. We are to address wrongs or misunderstandings humbly and in a spirit of non-violent love. (Thank you for these words. They are certainly worth re-visiting.)

Our Franciscan brother, Thomas of Celano extols our shared life in these words: "For above everything else there flourishes among them that excelling virtue of mutual and continual charity, which so binds their wills into one that, though forty or fifty of them dwell together in one place, agreement in likes and dislikes molds one spirit in them out of many." If Thomas saw the possibility of forty or fifty brothers molding one spirit out of many – I know how you seventy or eighty are embracing the challenge. Thank you for the beautiful witness.

One image of the common spirit reinforcing community is a statue at Rivo Torto near Assisi. That statue is of Francis feeding a hungry brother. We are quite aware of Francis' focus on discipline and his extremely harsh treatment of his body. His followers would have aspired to imitate his fasting and ascetical practices – in fact they were probably expected to do so.

This story is from the Major Legend:

“One night, when one of the brothers was tormented with hunger because of his excessive fasting, he was unable to get any rest. Francis heard the brother’s cry, went to him, put some bread before the brother, and, to take away his embarrassment, Francis started eating first and gently invited the brother to join him in eating. When morning came, after the man of God had called the brothers together and recounted what had happened during the night, he added this reminder: “Brothers, in this incident let charity, not fasting from food be an example for you.”

True, you probably have not been awakened by your Sister crying out in hunger – but just imagine how many hours of the past month you have offered one another the charity of presence and physical help as the move to Clare House happened. The “bread” many of you offered was the gift of sorting and packing - then moving and unpacking. Throughout all of this, you gently listened and loved. Indeed, you reinforced community!

From the message of Paul to the Galatians, let’s consider the line – “All that matters is that one is created anew.” To be created anew in the ways our daily lives ask, we need to set aside the comfortable and familiar. What comes to mind is the image of the grasping hand relaxing into the freedom of being open to the new. Haven’t we had opportunities to practice that recently – and aren’t there more to come? Consider two years ago when we let go of trees that graced our hill for years – and now we welcome the lovely landscaping that promises natural beauty anew. We would like to hold on to certain aspects of our buildings, but what is being created anew asks for that letting go, too. Then there are all the little every day ways we are faced with letting go of our plans, preferences, and the like. You could name many invitations to open our hands, let go and be created anew.

This stance of openness takes us into the gospel message. The childlike and the humble can be open to Jesus’ preaching and actions – whereas some of the wise, the learned, the powerful find this more difficult. We, followers of the “little poor man” do try to be a voice challenging power – advocating for the voiceless. We do not do this alone, but stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters. May I remind you of some of our activities of yesterday – and it was a busy day:

- Sisters held prayerful vigil for peace before the gates of STRATCOM in Omaha. We stood in the face of unimaginable nuclear power, asking an end to war and remembering the Interreligious Peace Gathering in Assisi – the gathering 25 years ago and the anniversary gathering that will be convened in Assisi on Oct. 27.
- Sisters did the Crop Walk seeking the eradication of hunger everywhere in the world – certainly in this land that has the potential to feed the world.
- Sisters demonstrated for the Right to Life to promote respect for every aspect of life – the seamless garment enfolding all life from conception to natural death.
- Sisters stayed home and prayerfully supported all of these causes.

This is a wonderful and happy feast, but I think Francis would want us to be true to the reality of our world today....so I close with this Franciscan Benediction:

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half truths
and superficial relationships,
so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression
and exploitation of people,
so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those
who suffer from illness, rejection, starvation and war,
so that we may reach out our hands in comfort and help turn their pain into joy.

And, may God bless us with enough foolishness
to believe that we can make a difference in this world,
by doing what others claim cannot be done.

Francis, continue to show us what is ours to do!