

## Associate Retreat Homily

April 18, 2010

*By Sr. Carol Besch*

Welcome to all the associates who have gathered this weekend to celebrate the bonds that continue to deepen in our Franciscan family. We are especially grateful this weekend for the seven persons who will make their commitment to live as Franciscan associates. We give thanks for the generous service of Helen Nelson and Mona Wingert over these past many years. We welcome Gwen Nilles who will promote the Franciscan charism in associates and members.

I would like to begin my reflection with a few lines from a poem by Mary Oliver:

Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?      by Mary Oliver

It is wonderful to celebrate the associate gathering each year during the Easter season. Easter gives us time to reflect on this most essential question: What do we plan to do with this one wild and precious life? The liturgical season celebrates new life in music and poetry, lights and flowers. Our readings today speak to the incredible transformation that God calls forth in our lives. Not only does something special happen to Jesus at the resurrection, a wonderful change takes place in his followers. Before the death of Jesus his disciples are often filled with fear and confusion. When Jesus is taken into custody, they run, they deny knowing him, they hide. However after the resurrection they are changed into new people as we see in today's readings. They refuse to be intimidated by the same powers that brought Jesus to his death. They proclaim their allegiance to God and even rejoice that they have been found worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus.

This transformation is not a sudden victory. In the days after Jesus' death, the disciples go back to their fishing nets. Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, Zebedee's sons, and two others are together. When Peter says he is going fishing, the others follow. There is security in the old ways. All night they fish without any luck. Jesus appears in the morning on the shore and asks them if they have caught anything to eat. He directs them to cast their nets to the right side of the boat and in no time their nets are full. Then he invites them to bring some of the fish and have breakfast with him. It is during this breakfast gathering that we witness an intimate conversation between Peter and Jesus.

We don't hear any accusations concerning Peter's three denials. Jesus doesn't say, "Where were you when I really needed you? Didn't I tell you that you wouldn't have the guts to stand up for me?" He simply says, "Do you love me?" Peter replies, "Yes, you know that I love you." Then comes the interesting response, "Feed my lambs." If you love me, you will demonstrate that love by the way you treat those in need. Jesus then proceeds to repeat the same question two more times. Peter is visibly ruffled and distressed that he has to respond three times to the question. Maybe

Peter himself needs to hear his own voice saying he loves Jesus. This moment of intimacy between Jesus and Peter is a profound call that will take him out of himself. If he loves Jesus, he will show it in the way he cares for others. Not only that, but his life will no longer be the same. He used to decide where he would go; now someone else will lead him where he does not want to go. When we are drawn into intimacy with God, we are overwhelmed with an overpowering love that changes our lives. This love changes everything and we discover reserves of strength and generosity that we never knew existed.

As we look at the life of St. Francis we see God working in the same intimate manner. At the end of his life, when Francis is dying, he asks his friars to take him to the plains below the city of Assisi. He blesses the city for the last time from the very spot where his vocation began, where he had lived with and served the lepers. His ministry with the outcasts of his time is so central to his very being, that he begins his Last Testament with these words: "This is the way the Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance. When I was in sin, it seemed too bitter a thing even to look at lepers, and then the Lord himself led me among them, and I worked mercy together with them. And when I left them, that which had before seemed bitter was now changed for me into sweetness of soul and body."

When we open our hearts to God, we find ourselves surrounded by God's dearest friends. As I read through the statements completed by the candidates who will make their commitment today, it is clear to me that you see this moment as an opportunity to deepen your relationship with God. Just as Peter was called to live out his love for Jesus through his actions with God's little ones, you have found yourselves called to work with those who are often forgotten and pushed out of sight, the mentally and physically handicapped and the elderly. You minister as a Hospice volunteer accompanying those who are dying. You work with prisoners and those returning to their communities from incarceration and invite our Sisters to share in the work of mentoring and supporting the prisoners. You volunteer in the Common Venture programs. You minister in Haiti, returning year after year. As you serve persons who are poor in a physical sense, they tend to your spiritual growth. Is that not the sweetness of soul and body of which Francis speaks? The call, the vocation, to become an associate is to follow in the footprints of Jesus and Francis. It is to listen in the depths of our hearts as Jesus asks each one of you, Candice, Jane, Bill, Jo, Dolores, Darlene and Bill, do you love me? As you respond wholeheartedly to this question, be assured that you will hear Jesus saying, "Feed my sheep, embrace the leper in your midst, welcome the stranger and outcast."

Francis says in his rule, "Let the sisters and brothers be happy to live among the outcast and despised, among the poor, the weak, the sick, the unwanted, the oppressed, and the destitute." This is what we will do with our one wild and precious life. This is who we are; this is what the global community can expect of us.