

CIRCULAR LETTER 4

Dear brothers and sisters,

“If you speak of peace,
all the more so must you have it in your hearts ...
(Legend of the Three Companions, 58)

1. On 22 January 1995, two young Palestinian suicide bombers threw themselves into the midst of a crowd of equally young Israeli soldiers, killing themselves, 19 Israelis and wounding more than 60 others. Shortly afterwards, the brother of one of the young Palestinians spoke these words:

I cried a little at first, but later I stopped. When I saw the flesh and blood of Jews, I was happy.

Such a violent hatred causes the very humanity within us to wither. Such a violent hatred, all too common in our world, makes us feel somewhat like the brother who balked and even sulked at the suggestion of Brother Francis that he use the greeting “*God give you peace!*” (see *Legend of Perugia, 67*). This brother was ashamed to use such a greeting because he felt it would make him look ridiculous! We may not feel ridiculous, but we are certainly left with a sense of doomed futility as we confront our ministry of peace.

2. Yet, the ministry of peace and reconciliation is central to our Franciscan life and vocation. It is amazing how often Brother Francis spoke of this mission. I give but a few examples:

I counsel, admonish and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ, that ... they do not quarrel or fight with words or judge others; rather let them be meek, peaceful and unassuming, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone ...

(RB III, 10-11; see also RNB XVI, 6).

The under lined phrase gives some idea of the importance Francis attached to this admonition.

The Lord revealed to me a greeting, as we used to say “May the Lord give you peace” (Testament 23).

The true peacemakers are those who preserve peace of mind and body for love of our Lord Jesus Christ, despite what they suffer in this world (Adm XV). He always most devoutly announced peace to men and women, to all he met and overtook. For this reason many who had hated peace embraced peace (1 Cel X, 23).

3. This work of peace and reconciliation begins within ourselves, in our own hearts, within our own fraternities, in our own provinces. We will never have the ability to exorcise the demon of violence from human society unless we first address the violence present in our own lives. There is an anger and a violence which makes the whole world a desert. Our fraternities and our individual lives are not immune from this withering disease. Brother Francis had the courage to face the sources of violence in his own heart! There is a very revealing conversation between Francis and the Bishop of Assisi:

Bishop: It seems to me that it is very hard and difficult to possess nothing in the world.

Francis: My Lord, if we had any possessions we should also be forced to have arms to protect them, since possessions are a cause of disputes and strife, and in many ways we should be hindered from loving God and neighbor. Therefore, in this life we wish to have no temporal possessions (*Legend of the Three Companions*, 35).

Francis did not begin with a critique of his world. He began with a critique of his own heart. Francis found his personal “source of violence” in the desire to possess, to own, to control.

4. There is a call to conversion here: *“If you speak of peace, all the more so must you have it in your hearts!”* Before we can dismantle the armory of violence in our world, we must attend to our own hearts. We ask ourselves the question: What is my personal “source of violence”?

4.1 *Is it exaggerated individualism?* It is this that causes me to strike out in violence at any one or anything which threatens or challenges my right to personal fulfillment and personal control over my own destiny. It is the rationale which underlies the “right” to abortions and, perversely, the violent reaction against it! Particularly as a North American, I must personally recognize this as a cultural reality of sin which I inherit.

4.2 *Are we simply coarsened by violence?* So much of the content of modern entertainment is conditioned by violence. Often violence is the entertainment! With modern techniques of vision and sound, the most violent events can be simulated with startling realism. How often do we allow the mass media to entertain us with such ugly pornography? How does this “diet” of violence affect our levels of toleration, our values, our hope? Writing in the context of virginity and celibacy, Br. Raniero Cantalamessa warns us to beware of the formidable power of seduction exercised by image in our civilization:

The best way to overcome the seductive power of images is not to “fix our gaze” on them, not to become “enchanted” by futilities. If you look at them they have already won a victory over you. That, in fact, is all they want from you: that you would look at them. “Avert my eyes from pointless images,” we are taught to pray by one of the psalms (119:37).

These words apply with equal force to the efforts to master our anger and violence. And the remedy is also valid: *“Healthy fasting from images has become more important than fasting from food.”*

4.3 *Do we subscribe to institutional violence?* Can a Franciscan truly believe in militarism, ever more repressive forms of incarceration and even capital punishment? Or are these simply signs of our fears and our sense of futility?

5. *“If you speak of peace, all the more so must you have it in your hearts.”* If we would bring peace to our world, Francis teaches us the necessity to face with honesty the sources of violence which infect us. He also teaches us the reward of such honesty:

... May they be drawn to peace and good will, to benignity and concord through your gentleness. WE HAVE BEEN CALLED TO HEAL WOUNDS, TO UNITE WHAT HAS FALLEN APART AND TO BRING HOME THOSE WHO HAVE LOST THEIR WAY (*Legend of the Three Companions*, 58).

We need to acknowledge the sources of violence in our hearts. That is the first step. The second step is to dismantle the armory of violence that has been grafted onto our makeup, creating that “false self” which wars against the Spirit of Christ. This is necessary if, like Francis, we will love the world with “disarmed hearts.” This is often a slow and pain staking work, requiring much reflection and patience. It is a work that can only be completed by the grace of God, for which we humbly pray. It is in this spirit of confidence in God that I say to each and every one of you: God give you peace! And in the secure possession of that gift, we will be empowered by the Spirit to make that other well-known prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace!

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