

to bring fuller life to others



*Congregation of the Sisters
of the Sorrowful Mother*

Third Order Regular of Saint Francis of Assisi

June 2014 #5

Dear Readers,

Number 5 of the Newsletter “... *Bring the fullness of life to others*” continues to develop the theme of **FRANCISCAN WITNESS FOR EVANGELIZATION**, offering a reflection on *justice* and *peace* as essential elements of the Kingdom of God.

In the letter to the Romans Paul says that “*the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*” (Rm 14:17). We know that these experiences can be lived and enjoyed in our world because the Kingdom of God is in our midst through Christ Jesus. The Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, is ever more aware of the need to promote and defend these values, considering them as an integral part of evangelization.

In the reflections of this Newsletter, let us be enlightened by some witnesses reflecting on how Francis of Assisi understood, sang and lived justice and peace, just as Dorothy Stang, a woman of our times, pursued these values to martyrdom and how Mother Frances Streitel promoted and carried them out in her life. Their witness has certainly contributed to the growing longing for the Kingdom of God which will come; it also shows that the Kingdom of God is incarnate in our history, in society, and in the various cultures of the world. They have continued the mission of Jesus in their lives, influencing the lives of others.

We also are asked to work for justice and peace, first of all in the circumstances in which we live. We know that it is not easy, but we are called each day to the concrete work of denouncing those structures of evil and death that work against justice and peace and every value of good. The awareness and the ability to call evil by name are fundamental steps for healing. And this is evangelization. It is also Pope Francis’ strong exhortation in number 263 of the Apostolic Exhortation **Evangelii Gaudium**:

We do well to keep in mind the early Christians and our many brothers and sisters throughout history who were filled with joy, unflagging courage and zeal in proclaiming the Gospel. Some people nowadays console themselves by saying that things are not as easy as they used to be, yet we know that the Roman empire was not conducive to the Gospel message, the struggle for justice, or the defence of human dignity. ... These things are ever present under one guise or another; they are due to human limits rather than particular situations. ... But let us learn also from the saints who have gone before us, who confronted the difficulties of their own day.

All of us need to raise our consciousness about justice and peace, that of our communities and that of politicians in all countries. Let us learn from the saints who believed that salvation will find its final fulfilment in Christ and that already here and now we can experience *a new heaven and a new earth* if we take care of creation and all the creatures.

*Sr. M. Teresina Marra, SSM
General Superior*

Justice and Peace

Reflection

Justice and peace are two significant signs of the kingdom of God. They are not only gestures but a way of being.

Faithful Witness of Yesterday

Justice and peace are precious goods that were very dear to St. Francis of Assisi. They are visible expressions of our faith.

Faithful Witness of Today

The life of Sr. Dorothy Stang was an outpouring of God’s love and the message of Jesus to others.

M. Frances Streitel

Mother Frances gave her life in prayer and in service to the poor, beginning a journey that was shared by many other people.

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Reflection

Justice and Peace, a way of being

Since the 21st General Assembly, we have been working with the theme of evangelization in a special way. Both of the directives express two points very clearly: *“We are called to revitalize our community life in ways that give Franciscan witness for evangelization and to evangelize the people of our times and diverse cultures”*. Pope Francis gives a clear definition of this term: *“to evangelize is to make the Kingdom of God present in our world”* (Evangelii Gaudium, #176).

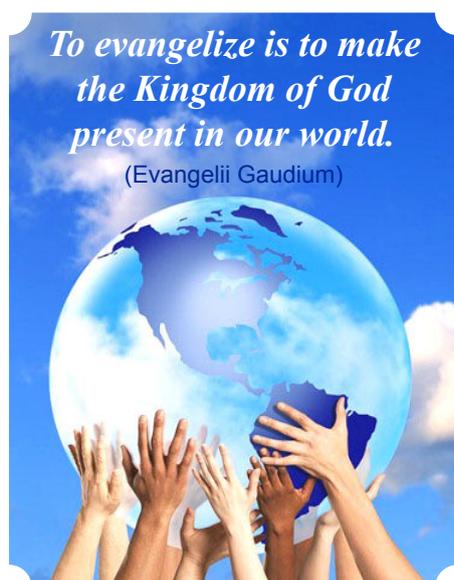


The content of evangelization is clearly given by Jesus. All people shall be able to personally experience the love of God. To profess the Holy Trinity means that God has given each person an infinite dignity, that redemption through Jesus Christ refers not only to a single person but also to the social relations between people and that the Holy Spirit wants to find room in each human situation. (See Evangelii Gaudium, #178) Jesus urges us to seek his kingdom of justice first. Everything else will then be given to us (See Mt 6:33).

The Christians in religious communities have always been involved with the issues of justice and peace. Our vows challenge us to live in such a way that we promote justice, peace and reverence for all of creation. Our community was also founded in order to alleviate the significant needs of that time, which were frequently due to injustice.

When we talk about justice and peace, we do not merely mean the absence of violence, a time of armistice, or a balance of power and of hollow compromise. Justice and peace are in essence a matter of lifestyle, a way of being. It is not about doing (even though small gestures of love to neighbors should not be forgotten); it is about being.

To whom did Jesus speak when he was on the way between the cities and villages? He talked to the poor, the blind, the paralyzed, the handicapped, the sick, the hungry, the sinners, the prostitutes and the customs officers. When he talked to the rich and educated people it was often in order to make them aware of their hypocritical manners and spiritual blindness.



The most attentive listeners were the fringe groups of his time, and they experienced his love for them. Jesus through His lifestyle identified himself with the poor, the suffering and the rejected. Jesus knew about human heartache and the meaning of lived solidarity,

“Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programs of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other in a certain sense as one with ourselves” (Evangelii Gaudium, #199).

A saying from a Jesuit who has worked a great deal with the poor has deeply affected me. He said: *“If you do not have at least a real friend among the poor then you have not understood much about the Gospel”*.

Do I just visit the poor and needy, or have they become my friends?

Sr. Gudrun Maria Schellner, SSM

Faithful Witness
of Yesterday

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182 - 1226)

“May the Lord give you peace ...”

The words justice and peace bring many things to mind: solidarity and commitment, sharing of goods and resources, the absence of war and overcoming conflicts, social equity, righteousness and reconciliation. Justice and peace are extremely precious, and when they are missing, life becomes very difficult.



Justice and peace were also very dear to Francis of Assisi. In fact, the terms justice and peace are recurrent in Franciscan texts and in the prayers attributed to the Saint. In the well-known *Blessing to Brother Leo* we read: *“May the Lord bless you and keep you, may he show his face to you and give you peace. May he turn his countenance to you and give you peace”*. Francis loved to greet anyone he met with the same words: *“May the Lord give you peace”*.

In another beautiful prayer, the *Praises of Almighty God*, Francis addresses God with the invocation *“You are justice”*. With these words the Saint of Assisi emphasizes that God is justice because He is mercy and forgiveness. We heard this same message in the Sunday Angelus message on September 15th when Pope Francis affirmed that the justice of God is His mercy; it is the gift of His life for us.

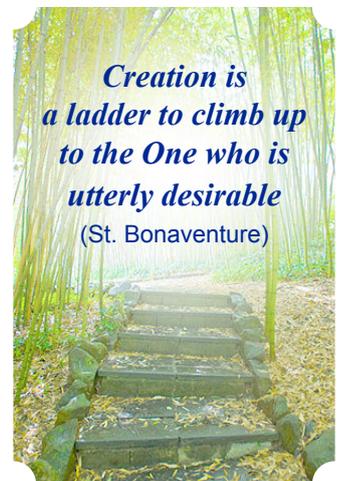
We can thus understand how for the Saint of Assisi justice and peace are much more than working for life ethics and solidarity, of a lifestyle of moral behaviour: they are intimately connected with our lives as believers and followers of Christ; they flow from faith in God, from our relationship of friendship with Him and become gestures and concrete signs that make our Christian life visible and credible.

For Francis peace is manifested in respect for people and things. For him creation is *“a ladder to climb up to the One who is utterly desirable”* (St. Bonaventure, Major Legend 9:1). He always saw creation as an immense symphony of love that reveals Christ, *“the firstborn of every creature”*. We can then understand why he calls all creatures with the name brother and sister. Francis never considered creatures as objects of pleasure, something to dominate, but as a gift from God to love and enjoy. Creation, creatures come from God as His gift and lead us to Him.

He was very familiar with the Word of God and with the meaning that is attributed to the terms justice and peace, which are profoundly rooted in the Bible. In fact, the biblical term *shalom*, which is commonly translated as peace, in its root means completeness, integrity, that is, the condition of a man, of a community that is in harmony with nature, with himself/herself, with God, with other men and women. In the Bible the word justice has many meanings. For example, of Abraham it is said that his faith and trust in God is considered as justice, that is, justice means walking with God, being with Him: so, the just person is he/she who searches for and does the will of God. Justice is connected with charity and solidarity, with healthy relationships and respect within community. We see in this way how justice and peace are intimately connected to one another, as John Paul II said in his Message for Peace in 2002: *“There is no peace without justice, there is no justice without forgiveness”*.

These considerations help us understand how to live in peace and in justice. They ask of us the courage and humility to know how to question our lifestyle and the way in which we live our relationships with others so that what we are and do can reveal the charity and love of God. If we are men and women of peace and justice then we are committed to promoting non-violent ways of relating; we try to dialogue to address problems in our families and in our communities; we assume responsible and ethical behaviour in our work and activities; we respect the environment and nature; we are concretely in solidarity with those who suffer due to the many forms of poverty.

But to be men and women of peace and justice we must first and continuously let God come to us and transform us with His pardon and renew us in His mercy.



Sr. Samuela Maria Rigon, SSM

Faithful Witness
of Today

Sister Dorothy Stang, Angel of the Amazon

Sister Dorothy Stang (1931-2005) was a true missionary, willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of the mission. She can be compared to the biblical Ruth, *“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay... Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried”* (Ruth 1:16). She left her homeland, spent nearly forty years serving the poorest of the poor in the Amazon. She defended the rain-forest long before anyone ever thought of protecting and saving the environment. Dorothy was deeply committed to doing God’s work of defending basic human rights, promoting justice and respect for the environment.

*Her whole life was an
outpouring of God’s love*



She expressed her vision in a letter to her sister Maggie:

“If we keep working, helping our people to grow through education, they will have the ability to speak up, organize, and create within themselves a spirit—guided by The Spirit - and a new people ...’ Her defense of the poor was fearless. She confronted the illegal loggers, and corrupt ranchers, the class who stole land from the poor; kept them in misery, bought off the police, the military and the government. She was even arrested for passing out The United Nation’s Declaration of Human rights because it was considered to be ‘subversive material’” (On The Road to Peace, John Dear, NCR, 2006).

Nothing prevented Dorothy from continuing to work for what she believed that she was called to do by both God and her religious community. She was feisty, outspoken, determined to help the poor farmers to understand their rights, reclaim their dignity against centuries of oppression from wealthy landowners. She gave her life, her talents, her spirituality, her very being — her whole life was an outpouring of God’s love and the message of Jesus to others. *“She wrote to her family, ‘I might not see this day but with the help of all of you, our people will grow in their understanding and caring for others. I have to be with these people. If it means my life, I want to give my life’”* (Vision editors, 2006, in a tribute to Sister Dorothy Stang).

She responded wholeheartedly to Jesus’ invitation to follow Him even to the point of death. Sister Regina Reinhart, a Medical Missionary, wrote: *“Dorothy had met her assassins the night before she died, and had advised them not to do what they were planning to do, but to be good fathers to their children, to look after their land and to sow the seeds of justice”*. Sister Dorothy was shot to death by these assassins in the middle of the Brazilian jungle walking on her way to discuss a recent wave of house burnings by ranchers who were trying to intimidate poor farmers into abandoning their land. In a situation where there is no conception of justice and authority feels threatened, they will have a life destroyed to preserve their power. *“‘You men are armed’, she said. ‘I am not. The only defense I carry is the Word of God’. She was gunned down as she read the scripture. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Vision editors, 2006, in a tribute to Sister Dorothy Stang).

We all can read the Beatitudes but I am not sure we could if we were faced with being shot to death. Sister Dorothy not only read the Beatitudes. She made them her way of life even though they led her to martyrdom. This is evidenced by her unconditional readiness to change her life and place everything in God’s hands. We might ask ourselves if there is any way small or large, we can emulate the legacy Sister Dorothy has given us.

Sr. Catherine Marie Hanegan, SSM



M. Frances
Streitel

“What did you go out to the wasteland to see – a reed swaying in the wind?” (Mt 11:7). As an Associate looking through the window of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother’s history and ministry and having known Mother Frances through the Community’s books and letters, I know that by no means is Mother Frances a reed swaying in the wind.

In her letter of Feb. 18, 1883, Mother Frances writes, *“God chooses the weak to confound the strong”. The Lord gave this woman a strong faith, confident hope, and glowing love. He guided her on unexpected and unusual ways to strengthen her fidelity in His chosen service*” (Mary Frances of the Cross Amalia Streitel, Letters to Father John Francis Jordan, 2,2). Mother Frances’ vision of the two mountains bending together was the foundation upon which the entire ministry of the Sisters was built. So often, Mother Frances found herself in a *wasteland*, a place where she THOUGHT she should be. The contemplative and active lives which she faithfully tried were merely stepping stones necessary for building the future ministries of the Sisters. Her devotion to prayer, her love of the Eucharist, her em-

bracing of poverty, her practice of humility was the soil which anchored the roots of the Community and from which all the work of the Sisters sprang.

For years, the defined ministries of the Sisters serviced the poor, the uneducated and the sick. What I saw as the Sisters worked obediently in their assigned positions, was their undefined ministry in Justice and Peace as they worked among those in their schools and hospitals. I don’t believe that Mother Frances, whose only concern was to be doing God’s will, had the slightest inkling as to where her work would lead. If you had told the Sisters of sixty years ago that in the 21st Century they’d be involved in human trafficking, counseling, drug rehab, shelters, food pantries, Central America’s poorest of poor, investing with a conscience, disaster relief, life after prison, they would not have been able to comprehend the possibility.

The Sisters, Associates and all who work with the Sisters form a living, breathing, evolving community, richly blessed and brought forward with the grace of the Holy Spirit. The issues of social justice and peace are so much more in the forefront of the world today. From the time of Mother Frances until the present day, the Sisters have always responded to the needs of the suffering, whether near or far. While addressing Justice in the hospitals and schools in the frontier towns of the Midwest in the 1800s, or during today’s sporting events in the cities of America, or in the poverty stricken towns of the Dominican Republic not so far from the wealthy

tourists, Mother Frances’ vision for a deep contemplative life, expressed in meaningful active ministries, continues to be realized. As Associates, we partner with the Sisters. We, like the two mountains, lean toward each other, hands and purpose entwined as we go forward seeking Justice and Peace in *“unexpected and unusual ways”*.

Louise Ulan, SSM Associate
Denville, NJ

*May the poor always enjoy
the friendship of our Sisters*

(Mother Frances Streitel)

