

CIRCULAR LETTER 1

“The only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the World”

(Gal 6:14, Liturgy for the Feast of St. Francis).

Dear brothers and sisters,

The approaching feast of our father Francis offers me an opportunity to greet you in his name. The feast of Francis is a personal reminder to each of us to live the Rule and Testament of St. Francis and the Constitutions of our Order with utmost fidelity and whole hearted enthusiasm.

I wish to begin this reflection by touching upon a theme I already developed when the general chapter delegates celebrated eucharist at the Basilica of St. Clare in Assisi. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ was central to the conversion experience of Francis. Francis had personal experiences of the Crucified in the cross of San Damiano and in the leper. Both were deeply contemplative experiences, one experience completing the other. The cross of San Damiano symbolizes Francis' life long search for unity with Christ in prayer – a search which caused him to withdraw to caves and deserted places for weeks and months at a time. The leper gave Francis a personal experience of the sufferings of the Crucified. Christ crucified in the cross of San Damiano, Christ crucified in the leper stand at the very heart of the Franciscan experience. Without San Damiano – without the long periods of prayer – Francis would have been a social worker. Without the leper, Francis would never have experienced Monte Alverna.

“We proclaim a crucified Christ ... a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God”

(1 Cor 1:23-25).

Totally identified with the Crucified, Francis learned the wisdom of the cross. V PCO described this wisdom:

*Francis passed on to us a special charism for peace, justice and respect for nature. The **point of view of the poor** is the privileged position from which we, his sons, consider and proclaim these values. **Reconciliation and respect for creation** are the means Francis gives us in order to reach true peace and harmony (V PCO 86).*

That Francis viewed the world from the “privileged position” of the poor is very clearly indicated in the *Regula non Bullata*:

And when it may be necessary, let them go for alms ... And should people shame them ... let them know that such shame is credited not to those who suffer it but to those who cause it.

And alms are a legacy and a just right due to the poor, which our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us (Rnb IX, 3, 6-8).

Francis also learned from the cross the wisdom revealed to us in Ephesians:

Peace and reconciliation were fundamental to the ministry of Francis. In his Testament, Francis claims that it was the Lord himself who revealed to him his trademark greeting: *"May the Lord give you peace!"* In his Canticle he sang: *"Praised be you my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love ... Blessed are those who endure in peace for by you, Most High, they shall be crowned."*

Brothers and sisters, Francis and our Francis can heritage speak very prophetically to our world today. The global economy views reality only from the viewpoint of balance of payments, economic realignments, rationalization of the means of production. The global economy has little time for those thousands of lives which lie broken by its sudden shifts and its thirst for profit. The world has urgent need for voices speaking with the clarity and the power of the gospel and viewing that same reality from the perspective of the poor. A Franciscan learns to interpret reality, not only from television news and the editorial pages of newspapers, but especially from the gospels and the lived experience of God's little ones.

Francis gained his passion for peace and reconciliation experiencing the familial, social and civic divisions and violence of Assisi and 13th century Italy. The cross revealed to him another way. In Francis, vendetta gave way to reconciliation. The numbing, random violence which touches in differing fashion every corner of our world must awaken in us the same passion for peace and reconciliation. Christ is our peace! Christ has destroyed the enmity dividing Hutu and Tutsi, shopkeeper and drug addict, Serb, Croat and Muslim, economic refugee and unemployed citizen, Jew and Palestinian, husband and wife, father and child!

Brothers and sisters, as Franciscans, we have always been conscious of our special call to be united with the poor and to see the world through their eyes. In modern times, God has gifted our Order in anew and special way. We have become one of the very few truly international brotherhoods embracing all continents and almost 100 nations. This gives us a special responsibility to be bearers of peace.

Francis contemplated Christ crucified in his neighbour, Francis contemplated Christ crucified in the cross of San Damiano, from this font of wisdom Francis inspired reconciling love in Arezzo, Damietta, Assisi, Borgo San Sepolcro. The disarmed heart of Francis inspired creative, reconciling peace in his world. Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, recognizes this gift in Francis. May the world come to recognize this gift in us, his sons! May a world burdened by enmity and numbed by violence find in us "disarmed hearts".

As we celebrate the Feast of Francis, we take to heart in a new and hopeful manner the wisdom of the cross which is our heritage: **the point of view of the poor... reconciliation and respect for creation.**

May the Lord give you peace!

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