

Several years ago, the CNSA friars convened a gathering of Spiritual Assistants so that the bond that holds us and molds us as Franciscans would be strengthened and maintained, spiritually assisting and accompanying the brothers and sisters in living the Secular Franciscan Rule.

At that gathering, I referred to the speech RFK gave in Indianapolis upon hearing of the assassination of MLK Jr., speaking in the words of Kennedy, “what kind of a nation are we and what direction do we want to move in. We can as a nation be filled with bitterness, and with hatred, and a desire for revenge and move in the direction of greater polarization, or we can make an effort, as MLK did, to understand and to comprehend, and replace that violence with an effort to understand with compassion and love. What we need is not division, not hatred, not violence, but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country.”

“...but the Spirit Himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings.”
“We know that all things work for good for those who love God.”

These two Scriptural sentences contain a desire for a movement toward God. The events of these last 19 months have thrown us, on many fronts, into a heightened state of volatility. Our behaviors toward this reality shifted almost daily between consolation and desolation. And in the midst of it all, there is hope—our hope that *“all things work for good for those who love God.”*

This is the focus of this reflection as we begin our time together—to examine our Franciscan identity, to embrace courageous initiatives in the cause of justice and human dignity, and to recall our baptismal consecration, offering the sacrifice of self, the sacrifice of loving service, and the sacrifice that comes with a spirituality that is prophetic. One cannot be ignorant of or removed from the needs, aspirations, movements, and accomplishments of society. It is within this reality that God is revealed.

It is within this reality that prophetic creativity is fashioned, a spirit enlivened by the “signs of the times.” Attuned to the Word of God, it encourages people to embrace whatever within society can serve to deepen their commitment to life and to God. This spirituality demonstrates a compassionate understanding of society, an unselfish dedication to others, and a fervent devotion to the Secular Franciscan Rule.

Blessed Solanus Casey was quoted recently, who once said, “*We must be faithful to the present moment or we will frustrate the plan of God for us.*”

We are often told, that in the critical periods of history, it is the national soul which counts—that “*where there is no vision, the people perish.*” No nation is truly defeated which retains its spiritual identity. No nation is truly victorious which does not emerge with soul unstained. Choices have to be made. Are Franciscans the ones to lead?

If this is to be so, it becomes a part of true patriotism to keep the spiritual life—both of citizen and society—active and vigorous—its vision of realities unsullied by the entangled interests and passions of our day. This is a task in which we can all do our part.

The spiritual life is not a special career—it is a part of every person’s life. Jesus must be brought back into the mix, enthroned in the center of our hearts, reigning in the midst of our deliberations. Until each person realizes this, our national value must be connected and centered in a divine-human relationship—prayer. All of our intensely practical energies, then, are born of this life of prayer and contemplation.

Through prayer and the Spirit’s gift of grace, wisdom and steadfastness are given to help us enter, more completely, into the life of society to which we belong. Wisdom will teach us to see the world in a truer fashion, discerning eternal truth and goodness beyond apparent ruthlessness.

Contemplation is that penetrating gaze of the other, that deepening love of the other—that gets at the heart of reality—that looks into the depth of things, and seeing them in their true relation to God. This is our Franciscan path. It will confer on us—hope—assuring us, that even in our greatest desolation, we might learn to see and love the presence of God’s overflowing goodness, hidden, yet revealed, in the marvelous diversity of creation.

What I’m saying is: *“don’t go left; don’t go right; go deeper.”* Let us engage one another, mindfully, all the while being Christocentric in thought, word, and deed. Society needs to be reminded that we all are children of God, which makes us all sisters and brothers. We are witnessing a brutal assault on the image of God. The foundation of all human rights, equality, and dignity, *is that we are all image-bearers of God.* Transformation is a matter of prophetic urgency, finding the courage to use our prophetic voice when the image of God is at stake.

Guided by the continuing work of the Holy Spirit—Scripture, Tradition, and human experience need to be applied to the issues of the day. Society needs to return to how to show respect, to act with civility, to dialogue on opposing views, and to discern in a deeper engagement with one another.

Prayer and contemplation seek union, solidarity with all creation—all consolations and desolations are shared in love; all tears are wiped away in mercy; all pain healed by the balm of forgiveness. We are called to see deeply, so that we may love greatly.

In St Francis’ encounter with Christ, his subsequent relationship with Christ moved him to being a person-in-relationship with all creatures. Francis began to see the world differently, to see people in a new way, to see their goodness. And he loved in a new way.

For the penitent, St Angela of Foligno, she is “no self” without God. She’s remembered by saying, *“the more you pray, the more you are enlightened; the more enlightened, the more you see; the deeper and more perfect your vision, the more you love; and the more you love, the more you will delight in what you see.”*

Our Franciscan path is prayer and contemplation, that we may know by fraternal friendship something of the greater life in which we are immersed, and witness to society what they so longed for—those re-adjustments—to a progressive growth towards the Real, the Good, the Beautiful, in a profound harmonization of one's life caught up in the ebb and flow of everyday living, moving with it, suffering with it, partaking of it.

God is with us. Let us not be frightened to respond to what He is asking of us. Let grace have its way—the life-giving resource of living this reality. Proclaim Christ by your life and words. Prayer and contemplation seek union, solidarity, with all creation. Use the power of a prophetic voice—a hopeful voice. All consolations and desolations are shared in love. All tears, wiped away in mercy. All pain, healed by the balm of forgiveness. We are called to see deeply, so that we may love greatly. It is priestly. It is prophetic. It is divinely oriented.