

Never has the Franciscan charism been so needed [as] today in order to offer the total Christ to a disintegrating world which fears a brotherhood of solidarity among all human beings without exclusion.

It is the total Christ, all of Christ, every aspect of Christ, which we Franciscans must, like Francis, bear within us and offer to the world.

The areas of service to which we are called are, therefore, unlimited and demanding. (Roger Cardinal Etchegary, "Great Franciscan Jubilee." 9 April 2000)

It is easy to think that the situation that the Cardinal described – indeed for all of us to think that each of our situations, our times and places – are unique. But as a historian, and a story-teller, one great challenge of my craft is to help people see the common bonds of their stories with the stories of others, what connects them with others, rather than what divides them, to help people learn from stories and history. How do we see ourselves in the stories of others? How do we learn from their stories?

I want to share with you a story, not of Francis and the friars of the 13th century, like Sr. Agnes Marie shared yesterday, but something of our more recent story, something that I learned from reading William Wickes – though I admit to you I have not read all that he has written of the history of the Secular Franciscans. But what I have read includes these very prescient words from 1936:

One of the chief tasks of Catholics and Tertiaries . . . is to get rid of the notion, both in themselves and in others, that Christianity is not concerned with material and temporal well-being ... To deny or neglect the importance, the religious importance, of food and clothing and shelter and lovemaking and recreation [, to deny or neglect their importance] is to cast creation back into the face of the Creator, it is to deny the resurrection of Christ's body and ours.

To me those words speak of a disintegrating world and the absolute need for a presentation of the total Christ. Their author also said:

Here are the basic principles . . . (4) The moral law, the law of right and wrong, the law of conscience, not the law of force or advantage, must govern business, industry, enterprise and labor, as it must govern the private life of man ... (5) The [worker] has a right to a living wage ... (6) Capitalists, proprietors, employers and masters must remember that wealth is a sacred trust ... [They must be] conscientious, fair-minded, just, kindhearted, and charitable to the [worker]: they must not be fraudulent, contemptuous, hardhearted, unjust, or tyrannical. (7) Man should not consider his outward possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without difficulty when others are in need¹

All of these things were said by Bede Hesse, the Minister General of the Conventual friars, at the 4th Quinquennial Congress of US Tertiaries in 1936. It was a time when Communism and Fascism were on the rise in Europe and greatly feared here in the United States.

The concern of everyone at that moment was how to deal with the problems of the Great Depression, which were by no means over, and would not really be over until the total national commitment to creating a war machine for World War II brought the American economy back to life and has continued in many ways to dominate the economy ever since. It was a time of worry

¹ Quotation taken from William Wicks, SFO, *A History of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States, Volume I, 1917-1942*, pages 224-225.

and fear and the impending disintegration of everything that was good in the social, economic, political, and cultural order. History does not really repeat itself, but it echoes a lot, so all of that sounds very familiar.

The Cardinal spoke of a disintegrating world of fear, because forces of division between nations and political parties and ideologies prevent people from seeing each other as equals, as sisters and brothers, and as connected to one another in a common home – on our Mother Earth. We worry that the divisions are too great to be overcome, and society seems to see only an economy of scarcity which proclaims that for anyone to win, someone else must lose. But the Gospel is about God's abundance. Only the Gospel can lead us from hoarding in fear to sharing in trust. That is why Christ, the total Christ, the Christ of flesh and blood, the Christ of birth and struggle, the Christ of life and death and resurrection, the total Christ, is so needed. Like Francis we must bear the total Christ within us and offer the total Christ to the world.

Bede Hesse spoke to a world in 1936 that was turning to an incomplete and inadequate brotherhood of nationalism and racism and ideology, because it did not know Christ. I think that we are caught up in a world like that which has somehow turned that 1936 ignorance of Christ into the overwhelming fear of which the Cardinal spoke.

So what are we to do?

I honestly don't know.

But I do believe this, if as the Cardinal said, "*The areas of service to which we are called are, therefore, unlimited and demanding.*" We are not to be paralyzed by those unlimited demands, but we are to be set free.

The only words of advice that I remember from my priestly ordination are these: "Make the greatest leap of faith of all, believe that you make a difference."

Our areas of service are unlimited and demanding. We are not going to solve all of the world's problems. We are not even going to solve all of the problems of each of our fraternities. But when we step out in faith, to share the total Christ whom we have come to know, through Faith, through Sacrament, through Scripture and especially through our shared Franciscan charism and community, God will work through us, and the world will be closer to God because we have been here. We will have made a difference.