

THE CALL TO FRATERNAL COMMUNION

By Mary Bittner, OFS

At the close of the Church's great Jubilee celebration, Pope St. John Paul II released his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. In it, he described "the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning," which we must accept "if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings." What did the Pope view as our "great challenge"? It is "to make the Church *the home and the school of communion*."

This call to communion has a special meaning for us as Franciscans. After all, our own General Constitutions remind us that "The vocation to the OFS is a vocation to live the Gospel *in fraternal communion*." (Article 3, General Constitutions) What does "fraternal communion" mean, exactly?

Let's step back and look at what the Pope had to say. He begins by warning us that our natural impulse to action is "not the right impulse to follow. Before making practical plans, we need *to promote a spirituality of communion*, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up." Rather than immediately springing into action, we need to get our foundation right, and this foundation is necessary throughout the entire Church.

John Paul II goes on to describe what he sees as the basis of such a spirituality. "A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of *the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us*, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us [emphasis mine]." So the communion we share by virtue of our Baptism is based on the Trinity and manifested in our brothers and sisters.

Lest this reference to 'brothers and sisters' be lost on us, the Pope proceeds to explain what he means more fully. He gives us a beautiful

vision of life within the Mystical Body, the same life that should be expressed in our fraternities. "A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as 'those who are a part of me'. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship.

"A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a 'gift for me.' A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to 'make room' for our brothers and sisters, bearing 'each other's burdens' (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy." He concludes with a solemn warning. "Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, 'masks' of communion rather than its means of expression and growth."

Where does the Pope see this leading? John Paul II envisions a natural progression: our union with Christ leads to our communion in the Mystical Body, and this union bears fruit in our sharing in Christ's mission. As members of the Franciscan family entrusted with Francis' mission to rebuild the Church, as Secular Franciscans, we are called in a special way to "fraternal communion" in order to support our brothers and sisters in living the Gospel and to become a sign of Christ's presence in the world.

Points to ponder:

- ❖ **Has the Church succeeded in following the spiritual path recommended by St. John Paul II?**
- ❖ **How is communion expressed in your fraternity?**
- ❖ **How might it be fostered?**

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