

## **“While we have time, let us do good”**

By Justin Biase, OFM Conv

“I have done my part; may the Lord teach you yours.”

*St. Francis of Assisi*

These words of St. Francis of Assisi capture the spirit of what many of his followers have sought to do over the span of many centuries: to do good and to discern what God is calling them to do in response to both their vowed commitment and to the changing ministerial needs of the church and God’s people. With Vatican II, the call went out to all religious that, in addition to the many ministries of service they undertake, they should first and foremost seek to offer their consecrated lives as a way to remind the whole church of the demands that the Gospel makes of all people

This task of approaching ministry within the church through the charism of our life as Franciscans has been the focus of much discussion for many years within the Immaculate Conception Province of the Conventual Franciscan Friars. We, like many others, sought to use our time well—to do good and to learn precisely what it is that we have to offer.

In order to move the discussion from the realm of theory to concrete reality, the Provincial Chapter of 1997 decided to implement a resolution of a prior chapter to establish a Center for Conventual Life and Ministry in some urban area within the geographical boundaries of the Province. The intent of the decision was to explore the possibility of approaching ministry, both presbyteral and otherwise, first and foremost through our identity as Conventual Franciscans, as men whose ministry would flow from our life as brothers one to another.

At the same time, the Bishop of Syracuse, New York invited the Conventual Franciscans to enhance our presence in this diocese, where we have served since our Province’s beginnings in the 1850s. After a number of meetings that involved friars, representatives from both the diocese and the Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse, with whom we have had a long history, the Friary of Francis, the Brother of Peace was established in October 1997.

Eight friars from various parts of the Province came together in Syracuse. Our goal as a community of both religious brothers and priests, was to offer others what is at the heart of the Franciscan life: the witness of our fraternal life as brothers who seek to proclaim the primacy of God, not only through what we do in ministry, but also by the quality of the our fraternal/communal life. With this in mind, we spent the first year without engaging in any full-time permanent ministries. Instead, we established our fraternal life, developed quality prayer, and bettered both our communication skills and our ability to share our faith with one another.

For all of us this was a radical departure. For the most part, ministry had always dictated assignments. Upon arrival at a new friary, ministry was the focus of energy. It occupied all or most of our time. The experience of the nitty-gritty work of learning how to minister to one another, was a blessing, but not an easy one to learn. Very quickly all of us, without exception, realized how much of our self worth, identification, and energy

accrued not from our life as brothers in community, but from the ministry. While others on the outside looking in were praising us for the effort that seemed to be so on target and consistent with who we claimed to be, we often felt that we were wasting time.

Thankfully, the efforts of an outside facilitator, together with some part-time, temporary ministries, helped us to keep our focus. The result was a slow transformation of this group of eight into a band of brothers. We became a prayerful, cohesive fraternity, whose relationships with each other were respectful, accepting, challenging, enjoyable and above all, life-giving. There was a sense of responsibility for each other and for the community that was surprisingly refreshing. More especially, we each had a sense that being brother to one another was the ministry from which our other ministries would flow.

That flow of ministries, both presbyteral and otherwise, evolved after an extensive discernment period that paralleled and complemented the time spent in building our life as brothers. If ministry is to flow from who we are as brothers, then the discernment of ministries becomes the responsibility not only of the individual, nor only of the Provincial and his council, but also of this particular band of brothers in this place at this time.

And so the entire community was involved in the selection of those ministries that would become our full-time commitments. In order to better understand the needs of the church and the local community, *together* we listened to local pastors, diocesan officials, other men and women religious, healthcare providers, social service personnel, civic leaders, as well as other responsible people in the community. *Together* we gathered the data and weighed the needs in light of our espoused goal to primarily serve the poor and respond to those needs that were not already being met. *Together* we discussed our own preferences vis-à-vis the stated needs. *Together* we discerned which ministries to undertake. The initial anxiety that some felt about losing control of their destiny as they forfeited it to the wisdom of the group was tempered by the prayerful and serious spirit in which everything was undertaken. The respect, sensitivity, honesty, and insightful challenges that pervaded the whole endeavor diminished the misgivings we had, reflected the viability of such an approach, and became another manifestation of true brotherhood in action.

This endeavor was all the more challenging as the initial discussion of establishing a Center of Conventual Life and Ministry involved the Diocese of Syracuse as well as the Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse.

The expressed desire of Bishop James Moynihan, his associate Bishop Thomas Costello, and their advisors was that the friars “increase the Franciscan presence in the Diocese.” There were no pre-determined expectations or parameters regarding ministries to be undertaken. The trust of the local church and its willingness to allow us to discern ministries and to undertake them according to our model and approach was indispensable. Our desire not to fill slots was deeply respected both on the part of the local church and of our own community as well. Often this meant much sacrifice and adjustments on the part of both entities.

Guided by the conviction that Franciscan life and ministry is heightened and more effective when men and women work together in the building of the kingdom, from the beginning the Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse were invited to enter into the discernment process and to begin a new collaborative, ministerial relationship, one in which they were equal partners with the friars. The formation of a new corporation, *Franciscans in Collaborative Ministry (FCM)* resulted. FCM defines collaboration as “working together in joint ministerial ventures that address the needs of the Church and the community of Syracuse. We envision this process as shared: creation, planning, personnel, decision-making, resources/funding, implementation and evaluation.”

Translating that into practice meant that only those ministries would be accepted that had the potential to allow both sisters and friars to minister together. Imperative also was inclusion of dedicated laypersons in all undertakings. In the end, it allowed for a wide panorama that addressed real needs and satisfied the diverse talents and gifts of the friars and sisters. It also afforded those friars in priestly ministry opportunities to exercise their priesthood in creative ways that did not duplicate, but rather complemented, ministries of diocesan clergy. This was, after all, the reason the bishop invited us to increase our presence within the diocese.

The following ministries came under the umbrella of the *Franciscans in Collaborative Ministries*. The first three were started by the FCM; the last two were already in existence:

#### ***The Franciscan Place***

Located in Syracuse’s Carousel Center—the area’s largest shopping mall—*The Franciscan Place* brings the Franciscan presence of peace and reconciliation to the marketplace with an on-site chapel and space that provide opportunities for prayer and reflection, confession and the celebration of daily Eucharist. The quiet, prayerful atmosphere of the place promotes dialogue and the fostering of personal, life-giving relationships between the friars and sisters and visitors.

#### ***The Franciscan Northside Ministries***

Within the changing face of Syracuse’s Northside, this ministry is an attempt to involve friars, sisters and committed lay people to meet the many needs of the new immigrants to this part of the city—Africans, Asians, Bosnians, and more. A free medical clinic, staffed by volunteer doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners, optometrists, chiropractors, is available to anyone without medical insurance. Those who need legal advice avail themselves of the Legal Assistance Clinic that is staffed by volunteer lawyers from the community. All of these direct services are complemented by numerous activities that address the spiritual and social needs of the clients as well.

#### ***FrancisCorps Volunteer Program***

This program offers young people who have recently graduated from college the opportunity to share their gifts and talents in a year-long, faith based community in the spirit of Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi. They share their talents and gifts with each

other and with those they serve in a variety of direct service programs that meet the needs of the marginalized and under-served throughout the city.

### ***Campus Ministry at Syracuse University***

Opportunities abound here to offer the Franciscan values of peace, justice, and reconciliation to young people who are actively involved both in the pursuit of learning and in the building of a more just world. A concerted effort is made to integrate academics, spirituality, faith and commitment to others and to creation, all within the context of Franciscan spirituality.

### ***Henninger and Fowler Faith Centers***

Adjacent to two public high schools within the city of Syracuse, these centers are unique places that serve as an oasis for many students whose lives are often turbulent. Students are able to express their faith in a friendly and welcoming environment, pray each day and discuss current faith and moral issues that impact their lives.

All of the ministers meet on a regular basis throughout the year. There are times for shared prayer and reflection and times for professional development. Of major concern is the ongoing development and articulation of the shared vision and theology that provides the underpinning of all that is being done by each ministry in its respective locale. This consistent effort has resulted not only in a more cohesive group of ministers but also in five distinct ministries that share resources and personnel.

All of these ministries continue to flourish and grow. Many adjustments have been made along the way: personnel have changed, programs have been refocused, more lay people have become involved, long-term planning and development has been initiated, financial concerns continue to be addressed. New initiatives have also been undertaken. One is the transformation of a parish church to a Conventual Church whose focus is the fostering of peace and reconciliation within a campus known as “Assisi in Syracuse.” A second is the acquisition and renovation of buildings to provide adequate and safe housing together with educational and spiritual services for new immigrants to Syracuse.

These developments, together with the practical concerns that are part and parcel of proper stewardship and the exercise of ministry all come under the umbrella of the Franciscans in Collaborative Ministry. It’s executive board, comprised of representatives of the friars, sisters and diocese, oversees the implementation of the vision as well as the on-going faithfulness to the mission. It meets annually with the bishop to apprise him of current developments. It is assisted by a very competent and active lay advisory council that, together with a development director, promotes the mission of the FCM and raises funds to keep the ministries going well into the future.

Doing ministry in this way: within the context of our Franciscan identity of being brothers one to another, within the framework of a collaborative corporation of men and women religious, and within the espousal of a shared vision, has been and continues to be an attempt to provide an alternative model of ministry within the church. It is truly a work in progress.

In the midst of trying to approach ministry from the perspective of our Franciscan identity a number of realizations became rather evident:

- ❑ While it is easy to say that our primary ministry as Franciscans is the witness of our fraternal life, keeping that focus is easier said than done in the practical order. Once things begin to escalate, there is a constant tug of war; the heart is often understandably divided; legitimate demands compete with time and energy. For us, “doing our part” has meant that we continually affirm that this is a healthy tension and are willing to continually work at maintaining an appropriate balance. The willingness to engage in ongoing dialogue and reflection on what makes the ministry of a Franciscan priest and friar different from that of our diocesan brothers has helped us realize that our being brothers to one another very much affects our style of ministry, the quality of our relationships with others, and the manner in which both leadership and responsibility is exercised and shared.
- ❑ At first, there was the feeling, sometimes expressed, but often hovering below the surface, that saying that fraternal life was first, somehow made ministry to others second best in the order of things. After a very short while everyone realized that the mission of being brothers to one another was not conflictual with ministering to others, but rather complementary. Each is legitimate. Each is healthy and energizing in its own right. The diversity of ministries together with the variety of experiences and relationships that flow from these enrich the life of the individual friar as well as the fraternity. In turn, the lived positive experience of the fraternity fosters emotional, spiritual and human health of the individual; this translates into healthy ministers of the Gospel.
- ❑ The commitment to minister from the perspective of our identity as Conventual Franciscans had concrete ramifications on the way we did ministry. Being faithful to common prayer, meals, community activities, household maintenance, monthly days of recollection, and regular faith-sharing, necessitated a commitment of significant amount of time on the part of the friars, time which otherwise would be given to priestly ministry outside of the community. Being available for the common activities and programs of the *Franciscans in Collaborative Ministry* also competed for time and attention. The guilt on our part of not being available to minister to others 24/7 quickly dissipated. Those with whom and for whom we ministered did not see this as curtailing services or presence, but rather as a proper balance: “this is what members of a family should do and need to do.” The response of others reinforced for us the reality that ministry that is Franciscan comes in a different package, not necessarily better than any one else’s, but different both in ideology and in practice.
- ❑ The development of a new way to do ministry within the framework of religious life continues to be a work in progress. It has brought a new meaning to the term *itinerant*. Living and ministering in ways that are new does not bring with it the clear and precise definition that many are accustomed to. Not having every ‘t’ crossed and ‘i’ dotted all along the way has been challenging for all, for some much more than others. While it has been difficult and frustrating at times, it has certainly engendered

a trust in God's grace that is manifested through the wisdom, goodwill and goodness of both the individual and the group. It also became evident that this is a small price to pay in order to be effective ministers of the Gospel.

- Embarking on a new endeavor that is a radical change from the normal order of things, brings with it the need for some rootedness. For us, it took many forms. First, the support of the larger community of the Province. The fact that we were implementing a Chapter decision and not doing our own thing made all the difference. This is not to say that some members of the Province did not have misgivings. But there was the felt and real sense that we had the blessing of our brothers in this endeavor. Second, the endorsement of the local church. There was support and encouragement every step of the way—even if at times there was no a complete comprehension of all that was developing. But it never faulted. Third, a sense of stability came from the widespread enthusiasm of those we served in ministry. All of this was as new to them as it was to us. Their willingness to go along with the program not begrudgingly but wholeheartedly was a true blessing to all of us. Fourth, the increasing bonds that developed between all the ministers provided a set of relationships that were constant and certain in a sea of change.

The response to Francis of Assisi's admonitions: "While we have time, let us do good," and "I have done my part; may the Lord teach you yours," can take many forms. The friars of the Immaculate Conception Province of the Conventual Franciscans sought to respond by offering to the church a way of doing ministry that is grounded both in fraternal living and in a style that is truly collaborative. It has been, and continues to be, a challenge and a blessing.

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*Editor's note: For more information on the Franciscan Collaborative Ministries you can visit the website <http://www.assisiinsyracuse.org/ficm.htm>.*