

## Santa Chiara Church/Poor Clare Monastery

Tuesday, June 16, 2009

Three words come to mind when I hear the reading from the Regula Non Bulata of Francis, chapter 16. These same words comes to mind when I hear the text from I Celano 9, 22 on 'Listening to the Gospel' and the Major Legend 12, which focuses on 'Discernment'. These words are "Gospel of Encounter."

We are reminded of one of the most fundamental meanings of 'gospel' in John's third chapter of the Gospel where he states in a bold and unequivocal manner: *For God so loved the world*. Benedict XVI surprised many people by choosing to make this the central theme of his first pastoral letter. There is little doubt that this same theme was central in the life of Francis who expanded his experience of the love of God beyond the deeply personal, interior *itinerarium*, to include the embrace of *and by a leper*. This revolutionary experience in the life of Francis enabled him to recognize ever more clearly that in the Incarnation God does not 'toy' with humanity as if to play a game in order to trick us into accepting God's reign and authority over our lives. Rather, God has made the same movement, God embraces in a total act of freedom and self-giving each and every human being, each and every creature.

If we were to look at this movement of God through the eyes of St. Paul or Francis, we might have the courage to admit that God casts God's 'tent' with us, God stakes God's own being and future on us. Perhaps the dangerous part of admitting this 'gospel' movement within God is that it requires a movement within us, a movement towards the same world that God loves and embraces. This movement does not occur as some superfluous or accidental spiritual exercise after which we return to the shelter of an alienated and alienating life of prayer and fraternity. Listening to the Word of God and discerning the specific locations to which we are invited to go as beloved and reconciled children – brothers and sisters of penance - requires that we recognize the voice of God ringing out from within the world: the cries of millions of mothers whose children die from the injustice of hunger and preventable deaths; the tears of children left to bury their mothers and fathers who have died of AIDS; the blood of those wounded through political and ethnic conflicts and the uncontrolled sale of arms; the storms, fires, earthquakes (Aquila) and flooding that give voice to a deeply wounded and threatened environment. The Second Vatican Council document on the Church in the World, *Gaudium et Spes*, affirms this same movement where it states: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." In this our Chapter of 2009, we as 'brothers of penance' must ask ourselves how far from our vocation to the world we have strayed.

If we have the ears to hear and hearts to feel and understand the Gospel of Spirit in the world, we also will be led to an encounter with brothers and sisters numbering in the billions who seek the face and heart of God and humanity through authentic forms of spiritual and religious experience. They like us seek to know and love the One who knows and loves us, the same One who quenches our deep longings for freedom, truth, justice and peace. Our initial direction might be to seek to *bring others* to the experience of Jesus Christ, alive and dynamic in our own lives – and of this we must be

certain, that our experience of Jesus, the beloved of God, and our practice of love and justice in our own hearts, our fraternities, our apostolates, everywhere in our lives is more than spiritual rhetoric. We like Francis will come to know through honest and open exchange that just as we have 'good news about our living friendship with Jesus Christ' to share (our embrace of others), we also are recipients of 'good news' present and operative in the lives of those we meet on the journey (allowing ourselves to be embraced). It is this double movement – embracing and allowing ourselves to be embraced - that Francis seeks to impart to his brothers in Chapter 16 of the Regula Non Bulata where we are called both to 'proclaim' and also to be 'subject to' all of humanity, created in and destined for God.

Francis' invitation to listen to the Word of God and discern directions for expressing the love and goodness of God apply not only to those who explicitly ask to go among the 'Saracens and Infidels'. It serves as marching orders for all who follow the poor Christ where the poor Christ dwells. To be a member of the body of Christ, a member of the Order of Penitents - Friars, Poor Clares, and Secular Franciscans - requires us to live our lives in such a manner that we embrace the same world that God embraces in Jesus and the Spirit. Through God's embrace of us, the echo of the primordial Word of God present in each and every human person and in all of creation, and through a process of discovering the meaning and thrust of God's primordial Word through the living out of our encounter with Jesus in community and fraternity, we are 'compelled by Christ' to embrace all who come into our lives in an act of reconciliation and hope and to allow their lives to serve as leaven and a transformative power for our lives, our fraternities, our provinces and our Order. This is the gospel life to which we are called and from which we dare not shrink, a Gospel of Encounter with the world, through which the power and mercy of God are made most manifest in us.