



Homilía – Misa de Apertura

This meeting of friars who represent the five continents and the varied cultures of our world-, is, I believe, an extraordinary gift and a grace filled moment, because it offers us all the unique opportunity to review, evaluate and, -guided by the indications of the General Chapter of 2009-, orientate some of the directions that our form of life should take, with particular attention to the areas of Justice, Peace and Respect for Creation.

I pray that the Spirit will guide our steps (route) today, as he did 800 years ago when the Franciscan fraternity was founded. May the Holy Spirit, who constantly “renews the face of the earth”, -generating new answers to new questions-, be our guide during this meeting. For as Bishop Ignatius Lattiué (of the Russian Orthodox Church) says “Without the Holy Spirit, God is distant. Christ is just a memory; the Gospel, a dead letter; the Church, a simple organization. Without the breath of the Spirit, authority is domination; mission is propaganda; worship is nostalgia and Christian action, the morality of slavery. But when animated by presence of the Spirit, the entire cosmos is elevated and cries out for Kingdom of God; the risen Christ is present; the Gospel is a life giving force and the Church, a Trinitarian communion”.

As we celebrate the 8th centenary of the Order’s foundation, we remember impulses of the Spirit in the many Franciscan presences, initiatives and activities in Latin America. Every day historians have been making new discoveries concerning the uniqueness of the Franciscan missionary spirit in this continent; a spirit that was particularly outstanding in the rural missions and reductions of the past, where friars spent their lives evangelizing the native peoples. A noteworthy feature of this labour has been the respect with which our friars regarded the indigenous peoples. The native peoples responded in kind. They appreciated the friars, above all, for the simplicity of their life –they went among the people barefoot, ate what the people ate and valued their solidarity. The native peoples were fascinated by the friars’ benevolence, their gentleness, joviality, and their fraternal spirit. One can say that the Franciscan charism has penetrated the Latin American soul.

The constant concern of the friars was that of proclaiming the goodness of God- who always recognizes and preserves the dignity of each person, as one of his children. Groups that because of economic, racial or cultural conditions, or other factors, were marginalized and excluded from society received a special attention from the friars.

The great Mexican painter, José Clemente Orozco, was able to encapsulate an entire century- with all of its horrors and hopes- in a single mural or painting, managed to capture the Franciscan presence in a composition of only two figures. In one of his murals, a friar embraces a native: the respect, the tenderness, the solidarity and the clear and concrete option for “the littlest of the Lord’s brothers” is made manifest.

In this way the values of Justice and peace have always been present in the history of the lesser brothers in Latin America.

If St. Francis of Assisi were to come to Latin America today, he would speak not only of “lady Poverty” but also of “Lady Justice”. What would sadden him and what he would never countenance is the situation of misery that marks the life of 40% of Latin Americans. He could not possibly consider this situation to be that of a “Lady Misery”. One of the last century’s great prophets, Dom Helder Câmara, in his autobiography says, “When I dispense charity to the poor, the powerful call me a “saint”, but whenever I denounce the causes that produce that poverty, they call me the “red bishop”. The Fathers of the church, speaking of private property, denounce the fact that the unjust administration of the earth’s goods by a few powerful is one of the causes that has generated wealth for a few to the exclusion of the great majority. Today there are a few rich and powerful people because there are many poor people and vice-versa.

Francis read the Gospels from the viewpoint of the poor. His experience among the excluded, the rejected, the lepers of Assisi, opened his eyes to the poor and crucified Christ. We must not forget that before Christ spoke to him from the cross at St. Damiano, Francis had embraced the leper- and discovered Christ. Francis did not intend to organize another charitable work for the service of the poor. Instead he became one of them. He liberated the poor by living among them; touching their skin, sharing a meal with them; sharing Christ’s compassionate love with them. He realized that the worst poverty is to be excluded or marginalized from human society, to be robbed of human dignity. Francis chose to be the brother of the poor, and in this way, to restore to them that which is most essential to humanity, our dignity.

If Francis of Assisi were to visit Latin America today, he would sing the Canticle of the creatures, but, he would add a few more stanzas, addressing himself to the two thirds majority of the continent, "You are a (God's) creature, man and woman of the "third world". You are not a sub-creature. You are a son or a daughter of God and precious in His sight. You are the brother/sister of all on this earth and you are one of God's co-creators."

The Church, in its option for the poor, says that it must imitate the poor Christ and become more and more poor each day; must become in fact, the church of the poor, the church born of the poor. Pope Benedict, in his inaugural conference to Aparecida said: "the option for the poor has an Christological dimension, because Christ and the poor are inseparable".

To opt for the poor is to opt for their cause, to choose for and from their perspective, for their interests and their needs; it is a commitment to opt for and identify with sociological place (situation) of the poor and to view life, society, history and liberty from their perspective. It is to struggle for those changes necessary in order to engender a new society, not one that is at the service of maintaining a system that protects the privileged at all costs. Today's challenge is not that of evangelizing the poor but of everyone's being evangelized by the poor.

Bishop Manuel often says, "Where we tried to put peace, let's provide bread. A simple "grammatical error" that can "move mountains". Let no one know whether they are eating peace or bread, let all eat their bread in peace. The child brings his five loaves and two fish, let's multiply them! "What does it matter, friend, that you loose your weapon if without it you can gain the whole world?" These are a few of the sayings of our Brother, Manuel Eguiguren.

Another important aspect of our meeting and program, is the effort to protect creation, the environment.

If St. Francis were to visit Latin America, he would condemn the trans-national companies and the chemical or radio active products they employ which are destroying our rain forests and rivers and are contaminating our soil and air.

Assisi was a luminously human city: a panorama of light, scenic views, stone and spirit. In his last moments, Francis blessed his city; he loved and cherished it as one cherishes a mother's womb. To save "Mother Earth"; the sister waters of her rivers and lakes, the ancient rain forests, her air and breezes, the world which surrounds us; to preserve her plants in all their variety, the animals (some in danger extinction) is, when all is said and done, to save the most endangered species of all, the human race! This is a formidable task that faces us all; those involved in questions of Justice and Peace, our small fraternities and for all the members of the Franciscan "family".

In our missionary Province of St. Anthony here in Bolivia, we can attest to the fact that there exists a general sensitivity with regard to Justice, Peace and Respect for Creation; it is more evident in some than in others, naturally, however we have always insisted that this concern be a **transversal option** for every friar. Not everyone can work directly on the Justice and Peace commission, but certainly we all can identify with the concerns of the commission. Being transversal values, the concern for justice and peace should figure as a "benchmark" (backdrop) against which to evaluate our efforts, whatever form they may take, and wherever we live and work. These values are basic criteria that must be present in our minds and hearts. The friar, be he a pastor, a formator, an educator, a student, the cook or the guardian, must always, always, transverse (**integrate**) the Franciscan values of justice and peace; of fraternity and minority; the missionary spirit, contemplation; the option for the poor and enculturation. Great ideals demand ever increasing "willingness" and permanent conversion. Our greatest danger is always that of contenting ourselves with being identified with "common of confessors" (= stereotyped and routine ministers/functionaries.)

(I believe that) This anonymous poem captures beautifully the absolute integrity of the Franciscan charism. It describes the encounter between the Pope and St Francis.

The Pope, gazing steadily on Francis says to him:

"I am infallible. You seem to be courting heresy.

I am the Pope. You are the poor one.

I am the law, the Canon, the rubric. You are liberty, spirit and prayer.

I am authority, power, Dominion. You are obedience, poverty, impotence.

I am the trunk. You are a tender branch

I am the Hierarchy. You are charism

I am the cup, you are the water. Without me you would simply spill out all over; without you I would be an empty container. I maintain the Church, but it lives thanks to you, thanks to all who in spirit are like you. You and I, together, we are the Church.

I am not going to give you any document of approbation in writing (Papal bull). I want poverty to be your only shield. Pray to God that I too may be, despite my authority, one of the Lord's poor ones, just as you and all Christians should be. God forgive you /You'll be sorry) if you don't remember me, and God forgive me (I'll be sorry) if ever I forget you.

Now, go in peace. I bless you."

