

WHAT SHALL WE DO?

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

A few weeks ago I took my harp in for a new set of 47 strings and its annual regulation; the concert grand harp has over 2,000 parts and they all have to work in perfect unison to guarantee accuracy in pitch and movement. I have to save for a long time because the process is labor intensive and costly but the technicians at Lyon & Healy do marvelous work. Knowing that this 26-year-old instrument is strong as ever helps me play with confidence and joy. It's a great feeling.

If only more parts of life could be so easy to deal with and instill confidence in us. We citizens of the U.S. are now in our every-four-years period of transition. We've been through the process many times and yet there's something about this 2017 transition that is very, very different. I remember election results that brought surprise, chagrin and disappointment. 2016, however, brought a new low in the political scene in our country. Vitriolic language, accusations that shocked the public, vile attitudes and obscene male behavior were embarrassing. I will not politicize in this article but I have the responsibility of being a good citizen while also doing what God asks of me as ordained servant in the Franciscan fraternity.

So I ask myself and you: how do we, as Catholics, respond to the new government taking shape as this article is being written? How do we live as faithful members of the Body of Christ while living in what seems to be a radical shift in government direction, in international relations? The horrid days (in my opinion) of Campaign 2015-16 were interminable and brought some of the ugliest and most divisive public rhetoric I've ever experienced. The racial division in our Land of the Free is no longer just under the surface as explosions of hatred and violence compound the already volatile atmosphere of fear, pain and the lived reality of a vast economic divide.

My great grandparents immigrated from



Rhineland-Pfalz in Germany and the Irish counties of Cork and Dublin. A cursory survey of Chicago and U.S. history will show that the Irish (and other ethnic groups) were at one time considered low

and worthless; but after a relatively short time, it was Irish Catholics who ruled this city for years.

Ethnocentrism and twisted religiosity are blatantly present as civil war, religious bias and superior attitudes force millions to flee their own lands for some semblance of human dignity. In April 2016 Pope Francis brought three Muslim families from Syria to Rome where the community of Sant' Egidio helped them resettle and find work. The pope made it clear that it took great effort with three governments but that they were "bound by our common humanity" to help these people escape. I have good friends who live in the exact area of western Germany where my great grandparents came from and they tell me that most of the thousands of recent immigrants from the Middle East are welcomed to their country. Bishop Edward Burns was appointed ordinary of Dallas on December 13. Immediately he wrote about immigration in his see: "As the shepherd of



the Diocese of Dallas, I want to assure immigrants that we will do everything we can to assist them. Regardless of the circumstances of how they entered this country, we will seek to serve their needs," he said. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has formed a working group to provide support and assistance to immigrants and refugees. Our own Blase Cardinal Cupich met with President Obama on Nov. 29 to discuss how the federal government can reform immigration policy.

Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' [Mt.25: 34-36]

Our founder, Francis of Assisi, clearly came to understand that ALL of creation comes from the heart of God's love and therefore deserves complete respect and care. We all see and breathe and even eat the disastrous effects of our selfish consumerism. The new administration

may be challenging to those who cherish a certain care for creation. The EPA may be threatened, apparently some future leaders believe climate change is a lie or, at least, ridiculous, oil barons again rule the roost and public schools are not highly valued. After all the charitable work done by the Catholic Church in so many areas around the world it seems that business may guide this country and leave the little ones behind. Certain international relationships are scoffed at while real or imagined threats because of immigration may just eradicate the distinguishing characteristic of why this country was founded. Remember who lived on this land before the great waves of 18th and 19th century immigration and that most of us have ‘foreign’ blood in our veins. What shall we do?

One of the difficulties of talking about this whole matter of a new administration and what it may change is that it’s possible to offend someone, or be accused of partisan politics or being a sore loser. I must speak honestly here as one who believes in the dignity of all people and our Franciscan stance that all God’s people are good and holy. I’m not speaking from a political perspective but from the Gospel.



Whenever prospective leaders criticize an individual or a whole group or ridicule solutions to social problems, there’s a part of me that cringes. Christian life demands that we view the world through the mind of God and heart of Jesus. It is one thing to

disagree with one another person but to insult people, disregard the common good and completely write off an entire religion – that is not leadership. What shall we do?

St. Francis spent twenty years after his conversion preaching peace and penance. His concept of penance was not what most Catholics think: those little things the priest gives you to do or pray after confessing sins. The entire message and mission of Francis of Assisi (and his world wide followers today) is rooted in his experience of kissing a leper. From that moment he learned that



what he formerly loathed could bring the presence of Christ to his heart. It took some time but Francis came to see that all people come from the heart of God and **without exception** are brothers and sisters. He could see God in the beauty of nature, yes, but also in the human fraternity. The moment with the leper and his visit to the land of Islam in 1219 expanded his concept of God, radically transformed his world view and his three days with the Sultan of Egypt changed how he prayed. This man Francis is a marvelous example for us today as to how we let God transform our hearts!

The Franciscan perspective of sin, then, is anything that harms the union of creation. Or as Michael Cusato, ofm, writes in **The Early Franciscan Movement**: “...everything that threatens to rupture the bonds of this sacred fraternity, placing one human being over another or against another, is what Francis means by ‘sin’ – through greed and violence, through oppression and aggression, through indifference and neglect...[for Francis] To do penance for those sins is to choose to distance oneself from every action, behavior and attitude that would divide and destroy the bonds of the human community and violate the sacred character of human life.” (p.108-109) What shall we do?

Aleppo, Syria. The U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, recently delivered a fierce message to the Security Council. She said in part: “We have learned nothing.



We ought to be ashamed. Every single western leader, from Obama to Cameron to May to Miliband to Corbyn to Holland to Merkel ought to be ashamed. One day I hope to have children and I will tell them about the Holocaust. I will tell them how the allied forces knew what was happening and let it happen. I will tell them how we said “never again”, but I will have to explain that meant absolutely nothing. Our failure in Syria represents a stain on our collective humanity.” [Guardian UK] She received strong responses from the Middle East, Russia and other nations. All point fingers, all state reasons for the scandal

of Aleppo's horror. As of this writing (December), that horror continues with minimal intercession. I do not judge, but I do see specific, observable behaviors that are appalling. Through a Franciscan lens, this whole situation is an international human sin. What shall we do?

The Great Pacific garbage patch. Know of it? Barely visible to the naked eye, this is an area in the Pacific [the Atlantic] that's been estimated to be anywhere from 270,000 sq. miles to nearly 6,000,000 sq. miles. I'll keep the science of it very simple. The debris consists of discarded plastic items that disintegrate to nearly a molecular level so it is eventually ingested by sea creatures and then dispersed into the food chain. In some places the plastic concentration is greater than that of zooplankton. Ingestion effects everything from jellyfish to albatrosses to us who consume seafood. What shall we do?

Racism in the U.S. I've written about this and have received a few strong letters that "it's not for you to discuss." Frankly, it IS my – our – moral responsibility to speak about it and to eradicate it in all the institutionalized forms it has taken during our 240 year history. I recently saw the musical *Hamilton* and, among many things, this contemporary work of art splays open the issue of slavery and how it impacted the formation of our country's government. Slavery was legal not just because of misguided mind sets about race but it was also an economic issue. The founders of this country institutionalized the ownership of human beings and accepted it for the first quarter of our history. The Civil War and its aftermath left a trail of hidden attitudes that still plague us and are evident in so many forms in the entire country.

In Chicago there are grass root groups working to solve our urban problems with hands-on attention and education. Police reforms have helped somewhat. Yet we still have incidents like the 19 year old in Charleston who plotted and carried out his vile plan to murder 9 African-Americans during Bible study. And then he had the audacity to laugh during his confession! He may have had mental problems but this case also shows the depth of anger, fear and hate just below the surface in our country. Guns are problematic, yes, but so also are our attitudes toward mental health care, education, race relations and even how the Church responds to these sins. We have lots

of work to do, my friends. I mention these things because, as a friar, it is painful to watch how we've cheapened human life to such an extent that (for some) it's okay to take a life to get a free pair of Air Jordans. We allow students to bully others so badly that suicide looks attractive to the one being abused. We foster dangerous attitudes toward the care of our planet and allow massive oil companies to reward themselves with financial spoils of wars that have destroyed ancient civilizations. These are all sins of great magnitude, and as long as they exist, we bear the responsibility to bring about change. Once again I ask – what shall we do?

Francis of Assisi left us a legacy of love and respect for every member of the human family and love and respect for "our mother, Sister Earth" (his words). Michael Perry, ofm, our General Minister wrote a letter on the Solemnity of Francis Oct. 4, 2016, that addressed Syria head on and offers great words of advice, among them: *Led by the example and teaching of our seraphic Holy Founder, Francis of Assisi, prophet of peace, we want to make our own the appeal made by Pope Francis, committing ourselves with all our might to his call: 'Putting an end to the conflict [in Syria] is also in the hands of men and women: each of us can and must become a peacemaker because every situation of violence and injustice is a wound to the body of the whole human family.'* What shall we do?

Become a peacemaker. We may not have the power to take on multi-national corporations and seats of government. We can, individually and corporately (as the Body of Christ) welcome every woman, man and child to the Table of Reconciliation. We can offer one lonely person a ray of hope. We can read about ecology and make lifestyle changes. We can rediscover everyday manners and the impact 'please' and 'thank you' have on anyone. We can speak respectfully of other religions and cultures. Paul VI wrote in his encyclical *Evangelization in the Modern World* (1975), peace begins in our own hearts. What shall we do? *...with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.* (Phil. 4:7) Together we can and will change the world! May 2017 be a year of peace and all good things!!

~ Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm