

EMBRACE THE DIFFERENCES

Friar Bob Hutmacher, o.f.m.

The summer of 1967 was exciting for my brother Pat, me and three of his friends. We were all students at Quincy University and were invited by our parents to participate in a student exchange program in Luxembourg. We'd all studied German, so Pat and I signed up to work in a hotel, hoping that we'd end up in some extravagant Swiss hotel in the Alps. That didn't happen! The night before we were to travel to our work sites the two of us were told we would be living in Waldhiltersheim, Germany near Bingen. Our job was to live with and work for a family in their large vineyards. We had no work clothes but off we went for one great adventure!

The Metz family was Ernst, Kreda and her mother, Oma (Grandma), who was 84. I



was 19, Pat 20 so you can imagine the surprise when we met. Ernst owned over 40 acres of vineyards, the largest Weingutkellerei (winery) around Bingen. We were to care for Metz's thousands of grape plants throughout the summer and prepare other crops for harvest. We were SO green that we had no idea what it was like to work a plow much less guide the horse pulling it! We put up hay, slaughtered a pig for daily food, tended the vineyards and dug potatoes. 11 hours of hard work five days a week was only slightly different from a few hours in psychology classes and biology labs.

Kreda welcomed us with a snack of homemade bread and her own canned blood sausage. When it slid out of the can it looked

just like dark Alpo; nothing says "willkommen" like slick blood sausage on crusty bread!

The vineyards were up and down steep hills along the Rhine valley. We kept rows of grapevines weed free with a small plow that we rode up and down the hills on a cable connected to an auxiliary motor on the tractor. Horses and pigs lived right across the yard from our 3rd floor bedroom. Potato and hay fields were three blocks west of the house and we conversed only in German with Ernst, Kreda, Oma and one Turkish and two Italian employees.

I learned a great deal that summer of 1967. The Beatles released *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, a milestone in rock and great influence on my own musicality. We traveled through as many countries as we could on either side of our job commitment. Our minds were expanded by people, architecture, arts, languages, social mores, foods, history and the warmth of human beings.

Pat and I went to the village church for

Sunday Mass and were just about the only two men who went to Communion; men sat on the left side and ladies sat on the right. That was all new to us, yet the miracle of the Eucharist was the same as in Quincy. We learned so many things and I would say that the best thing I brought back to life in the States was an appreciation for different ways of living life. We had one marvelous opportunity to experience the FACT that differences are good and to be welcomed into our lives; they help us understand more of God's gift of life and can make us much more compassionate and respectful of others. My Midwestern life expanded exponentially and from 1967 on I

have tried my best to honor, respect and love differences.

Jesus gave us an example at many meals by including all sorts of people at the table, saints and sinners, Pharisees and women. He



revealed that God invites all of his children to the Banquet, and that all who believe are welcome.

There are no differences in the ocean of God's love, only our union with Christ and each other.

Francis of Assisi also experienced and learned from the differences around him. I venture to say that 1219 was a pivotal year in his life. He set out on a monumental adventure to visit the Sultan of Egypt, Malek Al-Kamil Muhammad. In his book *The Early Franciscan Movement (1205-1239)* Michael Cusato, ofm, wrote: "Francis is telling the brothers that he is going to the Holy Land in order to show by the actions of his own life that the one whom the Church calls the enemy *par excellence* is, in fact, a brother, part of the human family, a member of the human fraternity. Francis is going to preach by his words and by his own deeds the message of penance: namely, that no one, not even those most despised by the Church and considered an enemy of Christ, not even those who may have perpetrated heinous deeds against another exists outside the human fraternity."

Cusato and other scholars have concluded that this event was significant for both the Sultan and for Francis. Rather than see each other as enemies, they spent days in prayerful discussions about the nature of God. They learned from each other and never forgot one another. They respected one another's search for God to such an extent that Francis is remembered on the sarcophagus of the Sultan. And Francis never forgot what he learned from the Islamic leader; it shows up in his later writings like *The Praises of God* in which he offers numerous names for God that are similar

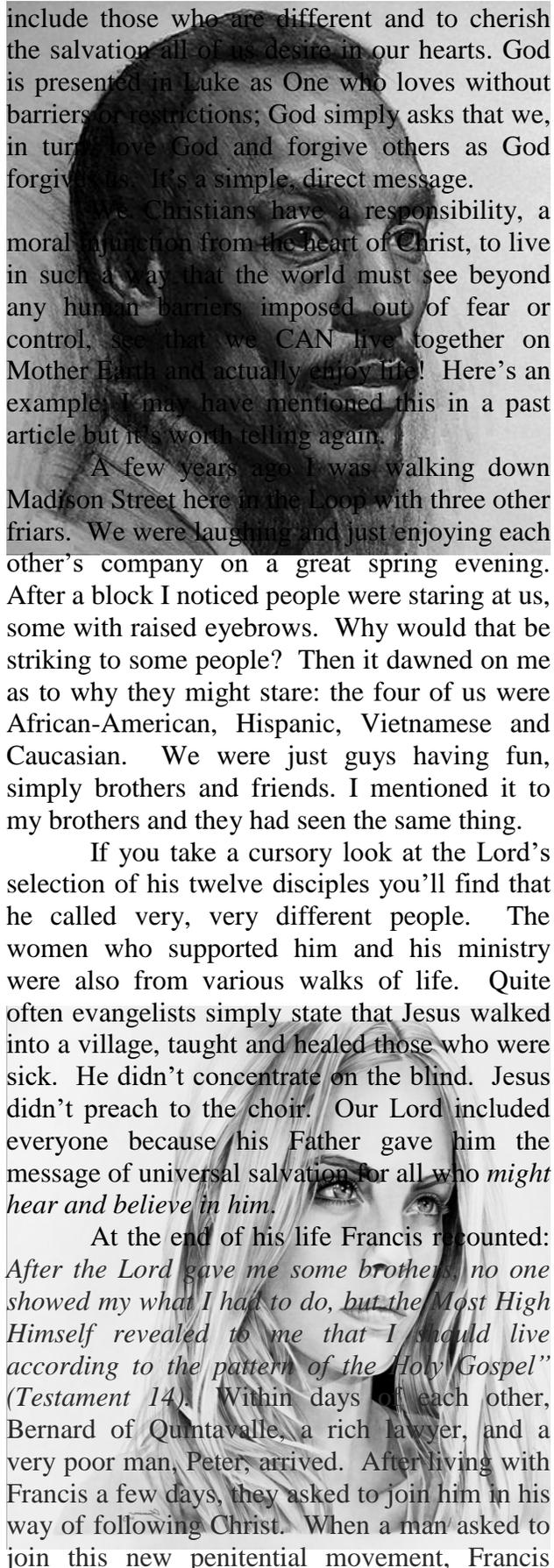
to the nearly 99 names of God in a hadith of Islam. The friars at Sacro Convento in Assisi have a decorative horn purportedly given to Francis by the Sultan. One of the last manuscripts of Francis (in fact, *The Praises of God*) has a mysterious image on it that Cusato believes may be a memory of Malek Al-Kamil Muhammad and an acknowledgement of their relationship. Franciscan friars have been involved in the Muslim-Christian dialogue ever since our founder made his way to Egypt in 1219.

A few years ago I teamed up with musician friends who are both Christian and Muslim. Along with another close friend who's a wonderful actress and storyteller, we mixed medieval music from the Middle East and Western Europe and relayed the story of Francis and the Sultan. Just one artistic event gave everyone a chance to see that differences are good and holy. There are friars now living and giving witness to our way of life in Turkey, South Sudan, Syria and other Muslim countries. Pray for them and all who cherish that union we all have with one God.



Last month I wrote extensively about racism and white privilege in our country and the present malaise in the political arena. We priests are not allowed to endorse any candidates in any public forum, particularly a pulpit. I will not do that here but I am free to make observations about the ugliness I see all around us these days. It is quite clear that racism has not gone away. It is beyond clear that some of us cherish differences while others fear and hate anyone or anything that is different from one's familiar zone. May we all learn from Jesus and Francis!

This summer our Sunday gospels have been from St. Luke, often called the "evangelist for the poor." Luke's Jesus sits with the unwanted, invites all who believe in him to



include those who are different and to cherish the salvation all of us desire in our hearts. God is presented in Luke as One who loves without barriers or restrictions; God simply asks that we, in turn, love God and forgive others as God forgives us. It's a simple, direct message.

We Christians have a responsibility, a moral injunction from the heart of Christ, to live in such a way that the world must see beyond any human barriers imposed out of fear or control, see that we CAN live together on Mother Earth and actually enjoy life! Here's an example. I may have mentioned this in a past article but it's worth telling again.

A few years ago I was walking down Madison Street here in the Loop with three other friars. We were laughing and just enjoying each other's company on a great spring evening. After a block I noticed people were staring at us, some with raised eyebrows. Why would that be striking to some people? Then it dawned on me as to why they might stare: the four of us were African-American, Hispanic, Vietnamese and Caucasian. We were just guys having fun, simply brothers and friends. I mentioned it to my brothers and they had seen the same thing.

If you take a cursory look at the Lord's selection of his twelve disciples you'll find that he called very, very different people. The women who supported him and his ministry were also from various walks of life. Quite often evangelists simply state that Jesus walked into a village, taught and healed those who were sick. He didn't concentrate on the blind. Jesus didn't preach to the choir. Our Lord included everyone because his Father gave him the message of universal salvation for all who *might hear and believe in him*.

At the end of his life Francis recounted: *After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel" (Testament 14).* Within days of each other, Bernard of Quintavalle, a rich lawyer, and a very poor man, Peter, arrived. After living with Francis a few days, they asked to join him in his way of following Christ. When a man asked to join this new penitential movement, Francis

gave thanks for the gift(s) that brother brought to the fraternity and welcomed him graciously. If he was a stone mason, great, a theologian, oh terrific, if a jokester, add some joy to our life. He reveled in the variety of brothers and the unlimited gifts they brought to the Order. Take a look at who's in our Order today and you'll find a wide variety of backgrounds from CPA's to fiber artists, woodworkers to nurses, teachers, guitarists, powerful preachers, scientists, some mighty fine cooks and men in love with God.

We all share the universal mission of Jesus by virtue of our common Baptism into the life, death and resurrection of Christ. After every single person, infant or adult, is baptized the presider performs three beautiful gestures. One is to touch the person's ears and mouth while saying: *The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.* You and I bear that great mission to the world and are called by God to bring it to anyone and everyone. The shared priesthood of Jesus Christ is ours. *"Go out to the world and tell the good news."* And like Jesus, like Francis – relish and take delight in the variety that God surrounds us within so many spheres of existence. Every star is different, as are honeybees that appear to be the same. Every human being is unique; even identical twins have tiny variants. A world of "the same" would be so boring! See how God provides us with an endless variety of flowers? Cultivate a bouquet of different kinds of people around yourself. Embrace the differences as wonders, as gifts from God's infinite creativity and revel in the Mystery of it all! I find that a variety of people enriches, challenges and beautifies my life and calls me to appreciate and love God more and more. When all of us can see more of God through the infinitesimal variety of people, our world will become much more peaceful and delightful. That happens at each of the 41 Masses we celebrate here at St. Peter's every week. Thank you for supporting the Lord's work given to us friars. May God fill you with love, patience and everlasting peace.

Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm