

FRANCISCAN CENTER FOR SERVICE AND ADVOCACY – 10TH ANNIVERSARY

WHEN ST. FRANCIS BEGAN HIS LIFE OF PENANCE, AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF HIS SEARCH FOR GOD, THE DEFINING EVENT OF HIS EARLY YEARS WAS HIS ENCOUNTER WITH A LEPER. THE LEPERS OF ASSISI LIVED IN THE FIELDS BELOW THE CITY AND WERE FEARED AND SHUNNED BY ALL. FRANCIS HAD A PARTICULAR AVERSION TO THOSE SUFFERING THAT DREAD DESEASE. BUT HIS SEARCH FOR GOD WOULD CHANGE ALL THAT. ONE DAY, WHILE RIDING HIS HORSE THROUGH THE FIELDS, HE CAME UPON ONE OF THE LEPERS. IN HIS INNOCENCE HE KNEW HE HAD TO FACE HIS FEARS IF HE WAS TO GROW IN GRACE. HE GOT OFF HIS HORSE, TENTATIVELY APPROACHED THE LEPER AND, ON IMPULSE, EMBRACED HIM. IT CHANGED HIS LIFE. HE WOULD SAY LATER, “WHAT WAS BITTERNESS TO ME, BECAME SWEETNESS.” HE SAW THE TRUTH – WE ARE ALL CREATED IN THE IMAGE AND THE LIKENESS OF GOD.

THAT SINGLE EVENT HAS HELPED TO COLOR AND SHAPE THE LIFE OF FRANCISCANS FOR 800 YEARS. GENERATION AFTER GENERATION HAS SOUGHT TO EMBRACE THE LEPERS, THE OUTCASTS OF THEIR OWN DAY REINFORCING THE VISION OF ST FRANCIS - WE ARE ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS, ALL FORMED IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD, ALL CALLED TO EMBRACE AND CHERISH HUMAN LIFE, NO MATTER HOW BATTERED, BROKEN OR SCARRED WE MAY BE.

THE FRANCISCAN CENTER FOR SERVICE AND ADVOCACY WAS CREATED TO HELP FOSTER THIS VISION OF ST. FRANCIS IN OUR DAY AND AGE. IT WAS TAYLORED FOR THE ACCADEMIC COMMUNITY WHERE STUDENTS WOULD BE CHALLENGED TO EXPERIENCE BOTH DIRECT SERVICE AND ACCADEMIC REFLECTION ON THE SOCIAL PRINCIPLES OF OUR CHATHOLIC TRADITON. THE GOSPEL RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION, “AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?” HAS NOT CHANGED. WE LEARN TO MEET OTHERS WITHOUT JUDGEMENT OR BIAS FIRST OF ALL BY SIMPLY MEETING THEM. WE LEARN RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING,

COMPASSION AND A THIRST FOR JUSTICE BY EMBRACING OUR OWN COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE WITH ALL ITS HOPES AND DREAMS, FAILURES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS.

WHEN THE TIME COMES FOR YOU TO GET OFF YOUR HORSE AND EMBRACE THE LEPERS OF YOUR DAY BRING THREE PRINCIPLES WITH YOU. THEY ARE THE BEDROCK OF OUR CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

FIRST OF ALL: THE ABSOLUTE WORTH OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL, NO MATTER HOW BEATEN OR SCARRED, NO MATTER IF THE WOUNDS ARE SELF-INFLICTED OR SOCIETAL, NO MATTER HOW FAR GONE THE PERSON MAY APPEAR. THEY ARE CREATED IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD AND, AS MOTHER TERESA WOULD SAY, "GOD CAN TAKE ON SOME PRETTY STRANGE FACES."

SECOND: SOLIDARITY. WE ARE BROTHERS AND SISTERS TO ONE ANOTHER AND WE SHALL ALL ONE DAY STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER BEFORE THE FACE OF GOD. WE SHALL NOT BE JUDGED BY OUR ACHIEVEMENTS OR WEALTH OR HONORS. WE SHALL BE ASKED A SIMPLE QUESTION, "DID YOU UNDERSTAND, DID YOU TRY TO UNDERSTAND MY SIMPLE PLEA – AS OFTEN AS YOU DID THIS FOR ONE OF THESE LEAST OF MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, YOU DID IT FOR ME?"

AND THIRD: THE COMMON GOOD. IF THERE IS ONE VALUE THAT STANDS OUT BEFORE ALL THE OTHERS, ONE VISION THAT IS MOST NEEDED IN OUR CULTURE TODAY, IT IS THE HEARTFELT DESIRE FOR THE COMMON GOOD. IT IS NOT, IN THE END, JUST ABOUT ME, ABOUT MY NEEDS OR MY AMBITIONS. IT IS, IN THE END ABOUT US, ABOUT OUR COMMON HUMAN FAMILY WITH ALL ITS FAULTS AND ALL ITS GLORY. THIS IS THE ONE LOVING TRUTH THAT HAS BEEN ESPECIALLY ENTRUSTED TO US AS CHRISTIANS.

IF YOU TAKE THESE THREE VALUES WITH YOU I PROMISE YOU WILL FIND THE REAL SOURCE OF THE JOY OF ST. FRANCIS. WHEN HE EMBRACED THE LEPER,

THE LEPER EMBRACED HIM IN RETURN. AND IN AN INSTANT HE KNEW WHO REALLY NEED SAVING. IT WASN'T THE LEPER – IT WAS HIM. AND FOR 800 HUNDRED YEARS ST. FRANCIS HAS WANTED THOSE WHO WOULD LOOK TO HIM AS A MODEL FOR THEIR LIFE TO KNOW THIS SIMPLE TRUTH. THE WAY OF ST. FRANCIS CONTINUES TO TRANSFORM LIVES TO THIS VERY DAY.

ON A PERSONAL NOTE, WHEN I WANTED TO ESTABLISH THESE FRANCISCAN CENTERS FOR SOCIAL CONCERN BOTH HERE AND AT ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY I NEEDED THE PERMISSION OF OUR PROVINCIAL COUNSEL. A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF MONEY WOULD BE REQUIRED TO GET THEM STARTED AND THEIR APPROVAL WAS NECESSARY. I PARTICULARLY WANTED THE SUPPORT OF THE COUNSELOR RESPONSIBLE FOR OVERSEEING THE FINANCES OF OUR PROVINCE. WHEN I MADE THE FORMAL PRESENTATION OF THIS PROPOSAL THE FIRST HAND UP IN SUPPORT OF THESE CENTERS WAS THE DIRECTOR OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE. HIS NAME WAS FR. KEVIN MULLEN. I WAS DEEPLY APPRECIATIVE OF HIS SUPPORT THEN AND REMAIN GRATEFUL FOR HIS TIRELESS SUPPORT OF THE CENTER TODAY. I WANT TO THANK BRO. MICHAEL HARLAN WHO BEGAN THE CENTER AND GAVE IT HEART AND DIRECTION AND FR. MATHIAS DOYLE FOR HIS LEADERSHIP OF THE CENTER TODAY.

MAY GOD CONTINUE TO BLESS THE FRANCISCAN CENTER AND ALL WHO PARTICIPATE IN ITS ACTIVITIES AND MAY ALL OF YOU WHO MAKE UP THIS WONDERFUL SIENA COMMUNITY – STUDENTS, FACULTY AND STAFF – CONTINUE TO GROW IN THE SIMPLE, HUMBLE, JOYFUL WAY OF ST. FRANCIS.