

Conference of National Spiritual Assistants

Secular Franciscan Order

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A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF JUNE 2023.

SHARING IN THE SELF EMPYING OF GOD

Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. And for this God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names..... (Philippians 2:5-9)

Kenosis (κενωσις) – the act of emptying.

The Catholic understanding of *kenosis* of Christ is that the Eternal Word choose to enter creation as true man and God, uniting humanity and divinity in the one person. The Incarnate Word comes as a baby, to be cared for by Mary and Joseph: the son of a humble tradesman, not a king. With his disciples he shares all he has from a common purse. Jesus limits his display of divinity so he can be poor with the poor. Through much of the Gospel story Jesus' divinity is often hidden to allow them to express their faith. In following the Father's will, rather than his own, he did not resist being imprisoned and crucified by the powerful. On the Cross Jesus empties himself of his human life with blood and water pouring from his side. (John 19:34) The Gospel stories shows that Jesus comes in humility and poverty and empties himself into the world.

Our understanding is that the Son of God never lets go of his divinity, nor once he is humanly conceived, does Jesus ever let go of his humanity. God shows himself in humility, emptying himself. He is never empty because he is filled with boundless love.

Christ continues to humble himself every time we celebrate Eucharist. He comes under the simple elements of bread and wine. Christ humbles himself so that we may share in his divinity, as the priest says during mass quietly during the offertory: "*By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*"

God the Father's outflowing love, through the Word, brought about all of creation, making room for something other than God's self. Jesus' expression of love is the gift of his life: his service to others; his faithfulness to the Father's will; the sacrifice of his life on the cross for our sins. Jesus' emptying allows us, and all of creation, the possibility to be filled with God's divine love, so that *God maybe all in all.* (1 Cor 15:28) St Francis beautifully describes in his *Letter to the Whole Order* how Eucharist invites us into God's humility:

*O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!
The Lord of the universe,
God and the Son of God,
so humbles Himself
that for our salvation
He hides Himself
under an ordinary piece of bread!
Brothers, look at the humility of God,
and pour out your hearts before Him!
Humble yourselves
that you may be exalted by Him!
Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,
that He Who gives Himself totally to you
may receive you totally!*

Bonaventure identified Christ's emptying, in poverty, humility and obedience through acts of love, as the one aspect of his life that *all* can imitate. We cannot imitate Christ's divine power, his divine wisdom or knowledge, nor can everyone act in as a priest at the altar. All can practice self-emptying: the values of poverty, humility and obedience in imitation of Christ. This is the Franciscan path towards holiness! By emptying ourselves in faith we make room for God.

Secular Franciscans are called to live humbly and follow the evangelical virtue of poverty in *a special way*. They are called to follow Christ by humbling themselves and following God's will especially in times of *difficulties and persecution*. (Rule 11) They are to have a "*detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs*" and to see themselves as *stewards* rather than owners of property. (Rule 11) They are to follow the will of the Father through faithfully fulfilling their duties in life. (Rule 10) Nor are they to yearn for possessions and power. (Rule 11) They are to place themselves on an equal footing with all people, *especially with the lowly*. (Rule 13)

In the Constitutions Secular Franciscans are called to live the Beatitudes and "*in a special way, the spirit of poverty*" as a sign of faith and as means for experiencing an "*interior freedom*." (Art 15.1) They are called to "*reduce their own personal needs so as to be better able to share spiritual and material goods with their brothers and sisters, especially those most in need*" (Art 15.3) They are called to have "*love and have purity of heart*" (Art 15.4): seeking to please and honour God rather than themselves. They are to seek to do the will of the Father, becoming *brothers and sisters of Christ*, and be willing to accept help through the sacraments of the Church and from their *confreres* (Art 12.2), their fellow fraternity members. They are called to seek, in the "*spirit of minority*", relationships with "those on the fringe of society." (Art 19.2)

Franciscans are called to simplify their life to make room for God. A spirit of poverty opens people to see what is truly valued by God and it moves them to share what they can in service of others, especially the poor. By emptying themselves of a need to seek power and control over others, Secular Franciscans humbly seek to follow God's will: forming strong fraternities by seeking to become "one heart and one mind" (Acts 4:32) like the early Christian community.

In our Franciscan journey, we often run on empty. It is a life requiring *a strong personal commitment* and *the encouragement of the fraternity*. (Art 15.2) Secular Franciscans practice obedience and poverty by humbly serving God and neighbour *in the world*, through *religious, apostolic and charitable works* (Art 30.3), individually or together as a fraternity.

Attending the fraternity meeting is not the sole activity of the Secular Franciscan life! The fraternity meeting's role is to provide Secular Franciscans with prayerful support, formation and encouragement for *sustaining their witness in the world*. (Art 50.1) The meeting is a place where they can learn Gospel living from each other (Art 9.3): and support each other through *prayer, dialogue and review of life*. (Art 15.2) Franciscans are called to be sustained by faith, and the support and prayers of our fraternity. Fraternity meetings provide a prayerful place where Christ can be encountered to inspire individual Secular Franciscans to continue along their path of life.

By faithfully following the footsteps of the Christ Crucified, emptying themselves, Franciscans make room for the Holy Spirit in their life.

Lady holy Poverty, may the Lord protect You, with Your Sister, holy Humility!
(St Francis' *Salutations of the Virtues*)

Further Reading

Cronin, Kevin. *Kenosis: Emptying Self and the Path of Christian Service*. Continuum, New York 1994.

Delio, Ilia. *The Humility of God. A Franciscan Perspective*. St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio 2005

Delio, Ilia. *Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction into his Life, Thought and Writings*. New City Press, New York, 2001.

Hayes, Zachary. *The Hidden Centre: Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St Bonaventure*. Paulist Press, New York, 1981.

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PLEASE, DISTRIBUTE THIS MESSAGE TO YOUR FRATERNITY,
INCLUDING ISOLATED MEMBERS