

FRANCIS, DIVINE PROVIDENCE & OUR SECULAR LIFE

Presentation in Honor of the National Quinquennial
The National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order-USA
Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, July 2007

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INTRODUCTION

I want to begin with a word of *Gracias* to each of you for being here today. Not just here in this presentation, but with one another in this Quinquennial. I feel very blessed to be here with you and to share a few words. Thank you for your presence. Also, I want to give a heart-felt gratitude to the organizers who, no doubt, have worked endless hours to make this wonderful gathering come alive; thank you for inviting me. Finally, thank you Theresa, as my wife you teach me how to make faith, love and fidelity real.

I once had the opportunity to hear Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the leading spiritual masters of Tibetan Buddhism, speak. In his introductory comments, he said: Call me by name, I like it, it makes me happy. I have never forgotten this introduction. As a way of introducing my comments today, and as a prayerful gesture, I invite you to turn to someone next to you and say your name to them.

Now that we have a name or two, let me tell you what to expect in the next hour or so. I remind you that as Franciscans we are encouraged to preach with our actions,

and only use words when necessary. Well, today, words are necessary; however, in trying to be a good Franciscan, I have limited my words to the bare necessity.

The topic of my presentation is Francis, Divine Providence and our Secular Life. To this end, I will divide my presentation into three sections. First I will speak of Francis in terms of images; second, I will address Divine Providence in relationship to the images I will have covered for us in the first part; and lastly, I will conclude with some reflective comments on how I see both the life of Francis and Divine Providence guiding our understanding of secularity.

I should note that the initial idea for this topic stems from my own desire to better understand our own secularity in light of Francis and Divine Providence. So my thoughts are a preliminary reflection. I hope that you will find some common ground in it. So bare with me as we walk together for this hour.

IMAGES OF FRANCIS

For many of us the story of Francis is all too common, most us have read at least one book and seen one movie...for some of you, this familiarity goes even further; perhaps you have even authored some words on Francis: an article, a poem, a book, a novel a prayer. My own intimacy with Br. Francis is not that different than the ones I

have described, while I have not written a book on Francis, my own fascination and attraction to Francis would certainly be enough to fill a couple of volumes...

Let me than ask, *what is it about Francis life that appeals to you and me today?* The title of this session, in a sense, already reveals to you part of what I find so appealing about Francis. But, before sharing some of my own thoughts on this particular question, let me invite you to take a moment to pause with me and to engage in the following exercise with me:

- (a) Take sheet of paper: folded in four squares. In the first three squares draw and image or write a thought that for you captures why you are so attracted to Francis. As you draw or write your thoughts, ask: what is it about this image or words that I find so appealing? Place your answer in the fourth square.
- (b) When you are done, stay with your thoughts/images.
- (c) Now I am going to ask you to find one person to share what you have in your paper. I am going to ask you to take time to listen carefully to what the other person has to say about their reflection. And when you are done listening to the other person, turn your paper to the other side and write what did you learn about Francis in this short exchange?

Thank you for participating in this exercise with me, while we do not have the time to go over all your findings in this session; I invite you to find time during this conference

to tell others about your insights, to share with others as you sip a drink or bite into a cookie or cake. And to take what you have heard here to your prayer these coming days.

Let me share with you three images of Francis that I think have a lot to say to us today, especially in relationship to our conference's theme of Multiculturalism. While the selection I have made is not exhaustive, it is reflective of my own desire to integrate some of our Franciscan spirituality into this human tapestry of many cultures. I have selected these three images because they provide *a way for us to begin understanding* how in Francis' own life, already, we find helpful guidance to issues we face today. While I have listed them in a particular order, the sequence is purely practical and secondary to the lessons they each contain. Also, they are not meant to reflect a historical chronology of Francis life.

- (a) The first image I want to share with you is the image of Francis kissing or embracing the lepers of his time.
- (b) The second image I want to share with you is the image of Francis before the Bishop, where he empties himself—strips himself naked—in order to listen more attentively to his heavenly father.
- (c) The third image I want to share with you is the image of Francis the 'pilgrim' that is Francis on the road, away from the walls that surround and keep Assisi safe.

The First Image: Francis Kissing/Embracing the Lepers

In our stories of Francis, we are often told and reminded that the lepers were not among his early friends. Historically and socially, we know that Francis belonged to a social class that would have very little need to associate with them, since lepers were marginalized and they were actually forbidden to enter the towns and cities. From a merchant's perspective—which was the culture Francis grew up in—there was simply no profit to be made by associating with them. Moreover, Francis' world and social experiences were radically different from those of the lepers; we may recall that lepers often were shun because of their deformities. In contrast to the physical appearance of the lepers, our earlier images of the young Francis are one of youthfulness, health and peer attraction. So it can be difficult for us to blame a young-man, like Francis, from distancing himself from them; after all, youthfulness seeks its own kind, and Francis was no exception.

Yet, we know that the lepers, while not being among his early friends, were certainly among his most significant companions. They were *key instruments of God* (Divine Providence) by which the young Francis would come to know himself better, and would come to know the will of God for him more clearly. In Francis' words, "The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed *too bitter for me to see* lepers. [But then] the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them."¹

I would propose to you that the Image of Francis before the lepers has profound spiritual lessons for us. Let me unpack two of them for us. First, it is the recognition by

¹ Donald Spoto. *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi*. Viking Compass, 2002. 59.

Francis himself and us with him, that *metanoia* or *conversion* is a *process that invites others into our current situations in life*. As the etymologies of the word suggest, it is a *new-mind-set that surfaces to the top*; a new way of *turning our minds* so that we can re-examine our patterns of thinking, speaking and acting that move us away from stereotypes, ignorance, biases, stubbornness, utopian ideologies, or full blown sin. For Francis this *metanoia* or conversion meant re-examining his own sin; he had to open himself up to that which *was most foreign to him*, the lepers. As he says, the Lord, led him to this group of fellow human beings who had always been there, but now he could see and no longer seemed bitter to him. The bitter penance or *ascesis* practiced by Francis congers up for us a *new reality*.

This second spiritual lesson or new reality brought about by Francis *communion* with the lepers requires us to stretch our imaginations a bit further. Please note the words of Francis again, “But then *the Lord led me* among them and *I showed mercy* to them.” Together with Francis we have to acknowledge that it is always God who acts ‘first’ in our lives; it is only through God’s grace that any change of mind and heart can come about. It is God who leads us to new and life-giving attitudes toward those who are different than us. Embracing the other, be they an ethnic, race, gender, sex, age, or cultural other, can ultimately only come about by God’s grace operative in us. Francis is led to the lepers, to those who are strangers to him; Francis is led to the lepers, to those who are the most marginalized by his society. And it is in their midst that the possibility of communion-koinonia emerges. The new reality, the new mind-set and attitude reveals itself in terms of *Eucharistic-communion*: Listen to the words: “The Lord led me among

them and *I showed mercy to them.*” In this simple gesture of merciful-communion, we are transformed by and transported to the one Eucharistic table, where differences dissipate, where bitterness becomes sweetness, where alienation from each other is overtaken by mutual service, and where the other becomes a genuine self. Stated simply, we are no longer strangers, but are made sisters and brothers.

Let us now turn to our second image of Francis.

The Second Image of Francis: Francis before the Bishop.

I want to conjure up in your mind that cinematic-romantic image of Francis before the bishop. Let me spell it out a bit for you:

So, we have a crowd, some are genuinely curious, others are inquisitively-gossipy, some are there by pure chance—they happen to be passing by. Some are there because it is their habit or ritual insofar as they are accustomed to a stroll by the church. And some are there, like Madonna Pica, Peter Bernardone and Bishop Guido II, because the one is full of motherly concern, the other is raging with fatherly anger due to the loss of money incurred by Francis behavior, and the third one has to exercise his ecclesiastical office and duty, because as the bishop he is also head of the ecclesiastical court.

Now listen to the drama unfolding:

Francis speaks with the following assertive words and tone: “Listen, all of you, and *mark my words*. Hitherto, I have called Peter Bernardone my father; but because *I am resolve to serve God* I return to him the money and account of which he was so perturbed, and also the clothes I wore which are his; and from now on I will say ‘Our Father who art in heaven,’ and *not* my father Peter Bernardone” (3 Companions, 6:20).”²

Add to Francis words this other dramatic description of the account:

“In the presence of the bishop he was glad to give his father the money and even the clothes he was wearing. *So he stood there completely naked*. The bishop then *embraced him and covered him with his own mantle* (Anonymous Perugian 1:8).”³

As we listen to these words and description, perhaps we are surprised at Francis’ tone of voice; or I should say, I would want us to be surprised at the manner Francis addresses his elders. Much like in our time, being crass and obstinate before your parents is not always a laudable virtue. Francis telling Peter Bernardone that he is no longer his ‘father’ does not alleviate our concern or the situation before the bishop. Francis’ tone comes across as harsh in my own culture, where elders are respected, and where offenses against the Family—*familia*—are taken very seriously.

A more contemporary analysis of this scene is available when seen through the lens of psycho-therapy. It is easy to conclude that what is before us is a serious family

² GianMaria Polidoro. *Francis of Assisi*. Translation by Benet A. Fonk, OFM; Edizioni Porziuncola, 2005. 32.

³ *Ibid.* 31.

issue that could use some therapeutic interventions in the following manner: anger management for Peter Bernardone; perhaps some ‘confidence-building’ techniques for Madonna Pica; Francis may require a few sessions on dealing with his ‘resentment issues’ stemming from his privileged status; perhaps exploring his seemingly mild ‘anti-social’ behavior is in order for Francis as well. And might we also suggest a session or two for our bishop on handling and addressing his ‘savior complex.’ All in all, the current scenario brought about by Francis does merit some thoughtful reflection.

While not dismissing the therapeutic strategies you might have in mind, and without pretending to give you easy answers to the complex questions we might have of this scene, I think and believe *the lens of faith* can be helpful to us as we explore and reflect on this dramatic family picture. Given our lens of faith, I invite us to take our Gospel story into account; more precisely I want to draw your attention to Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2: 5-8.). This scriptural passage ought to help us navigate our reflection.

Let us look at the reading of Philippians:

“Let the *same mind be in you* that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and *became obedient* to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

The spiritual theme of *kenosis* [ekenosen/emptied], or the idea of emptying oneself given to us by this passage provides a helpful *lens of faith* by which to interpret Francis own behavior. There is a parallel that can be made between Francis who stands before the bishop ‘completely naked’ and Jesus own self emptying before the Father. In this parallel, both Jesus and Francis stand in front of the crowd, they stand in front of us, as ‘slaves’—completely humbled and with the desire in their hearts to *be obedient* to the same ‘father.’ Francis’ words, “I am resolve to serve God,” to some degree echo for us Jesus own words in the Garden, “Father your will be done.” For both Francis and Jesus, the bitterness of the cup they have to drink transcends any familial or cultural connections. In other words, there is a spiritual lesson mirrored here for us. This parallel obedience between Jesus and Francis is further substantiated by the story of Jesus telling his parent in the temple that he has to attend to the will of his Father in heaven, and Francis’ words to Peter Bernardone that he also has to attend to ‘our Father who art in heaven;” while sounding hard and callous to our contemporary ears, they carry a profound message for us today, namely, the Christian vocation we all share *to be obedient to the will of God.*

This Christian vocation to be obedient to the will of God is often easier said than done. For many of us who find ourselves in a world full of competing and conflicting messages, being obedient, in the sense of right listening, is not easy. Finding the time to actually *listen attentively to the good around us* is hard enough. In my own 20 minute commute to and from work I am exposed to a countless number of competing voices: construction in the street of Chicago, cars honking at one another as a jester of frustration

and power; the daily guy pushing the city newspaper, the police car that sounds the siren just as I near the six-corner intersection; and the habitual driver who finds it acceptable to share his loud music with those within a block radius of their car. I am sure your list and mine could go on and on, but you get the point. Finding the *voice of God* amidst our secular world is not easy. The same is true for the inner-sounds of our hearts: maneuvering through a cornucopia of internal emotions is no easy feat either. There are the left over resentments and hurts; there are the unresolved issues; there is the rainbow of joyful emotions to get through; there is the classic ‘laundry-list’ of things I have to get done; there is the rushing of memories that inundate our minds. Again, the list could go on and on.

Let me restate this spiritual point succinctly: to ‘stand completely naked’ like Francis, or to ‘empty oneself’ in imitation of Jesus, in order to listen to the voice of God will require much time and effort. The image of Francis before the Bishop is important to us, because it sacramentally reminds us of what is at stake. As sacramental, this image also brings hope to us. Please note the sacramental action of the bishop: “The bishop then *embraced him and covered him with his own mantle.*”

For us secular Franciscans (indeed for all Christians), this sacramental or symbolic gesture of the bishop is the *place of grace, the place of hope for us*. Let me explain what I mean. As Franciscans, as Christians, we *are not alone* in our desire and efforts to attend to the will of God for our lives. Indeed the whole Church (the ekklesia) is there with its mantle *ready to embrace and cover us completely*. But this simple grace

is not easy to accept for many of us; especially in our times. Today, many of us are challenged by what we perceive as a fracture in the moral and pastoral credibility of our church. Many of us find ourselves, in conversations about what is most agreeable about church practices and what is most distasteful. The diversity of issues themselves are as complex as the people raising them: let me simply name a few: issues like ordination of women, sexual orientation and practices, pro-life issues, war and peace, immigration, poverty, liturgical norms and practices, economic reform, vocations in the church, racism, sexism, etc. etc.

It seems to me that the humble attitude of Francis before the bishop and the bishop's gentle embrace is precisely the best of any ecclesiology: mutual communion. In other words, it will help us to come together with a good amount of mutual humility and readiness to live out our unity in the Lord. As mentioned, we are not alone in our desire for communion, but we, as individual members, have to be attentive to that primary voice of God calling us to be a Church of mutual accountability. Only then can we see the church for what it can be, namely, the place of grace, and the place of hope. As secular Franciscans, we have an added responsibility to attend to *this place of grace* we call church: In fact, Francis' very own vocation began with this inner voice calling him to restore, to rebuild God's church. Francis comes to bishop Guido, precisely not on his own account, but on account of the voice he hears; He stands naked before the bishop and the community gathered before him, not as a childish protest or as a self-serving strategy, but as a believer who comes before the community of accountability to ensure that he is on the right path. In a sense, Francis wants to make sure the voice of God before the Saint

Damiano cross is real and authentic. And the bishop, having known Francis and perhaps now intuiting the moment of grace before him, covers him and readily embraces him completely. He covers him not in an opportunistic gesture of a clever ecclesiast, but in humble recognition of what is good, holy and beautiful before him. Through the lens of faith, you and I are challenged to go deeper into what is before our very own eyes, even if that deepening of our vocation means we leave the confines of our comfort.

This idea of going beyond ourselves for the sake of the other can be elaborated upon in our third image of Francis.

The Third Image of Francis: Francis the Pilgrim who goes beyond the walls of Assisi.

Because standing naked, humbled before the crowd and bishop apparently is not enough, we have this third image of Francis as pilgrim, going beyond the walls of Assisi. Lest you imagine the pilgrim life via our comfortable pilgrimages we take to Lourdes, Assisi, our Lady of Guadalupe Basilica and the Holy Land let me remind you of what this pilgrim life meant for Francis:

“Robbers suddenly rushed out upon him. When they asked him in a ferocious tone who he was, the man of God replied *confidently* in a loud voice, ‘*I am the herald of the great*

King. What is that to you?’ But they struck him and cast him into the ditch filled with deep snow, saying, ‘Lie there, *foolish herald of God!*’”(1Cel. 16)⁴

And what did Francis do? We are told the following:

“But he rolled himself about and shook off the snow; and when they had gone away, he jumped out of the ditch and, *with great joy, he began to call out the praises of God* in a loud voice throughout the grove.”⁵ And as one author put it, “Of course, he started to sing in French.”⁶

This is not a very glamorous pilgrim life for any one, be they Franciscan or not—even if they sing in French afterwards. While there is no shortage of stories told of how Francis in his pilgrim-life had to endure countless humiliations, sleepless and hungry nights, I do not want to fixate on the morbid spirituality that often can arise from this and similar accounts. The temptation to romanticize this pilgrim life is all too easy. In our own Franciscan history, we have examples of how this fixation or romanticism on suffering can lead to unhealthy spiritual and theological divisions and controversies (for example, the ‘Spiritualist Movement’ in the early history of the Franciscans). Even in our early nomenclature as ‘sister and brothers of penance’ we risk the same interpretative temptation to misappropriate our penitential practices. I am sure you have a good number of stories to tell about member in your respective communities who quibble about how the fraternity is not living up to its Franciscan penitential standards. There is

⁴ Ibid. 33.

⁵ Polidoro, 33.

⁶ Ibid.

always one or two in our midst for whom there can be no limit to the suffering our penitential life brings or to the suffering they put us through. I or you may be among those who feel such attraction and conviction. But for now we leave this penitential debate to God to sort out.

Nevertheless, it is important to hold on to the spiritual and redemptive value of suffering. And so, without totally dismissing this medieval and theological suffering motif, I want to focus on the particular *human freedom* that can be extrapolated from the image of the suffering pilgrim who dares to go beyond the wall of Assisi. I say *dares*, because I do think that any serious commitment is not void of risk. Perhaps we can look to our early examples of this redemptive suffering theology in Isaiah's image of the *suffering servant* and our Pauline exhortations and examples on the same topic of suffering. But this we will leave for another time and place.

Let me return to the words and example of Francis in order to highlight the *human freedom* I am talking about; the human freedom that can emerge out of redemptive suffering. We do so by noting Francis' response to the robbers: "*I am the herald of the great King.*" Note also that Francis responds with *confidence*. It seems to me that Francis' stated identity and his *confident attitude* reflect well for us what human freedom can mean for us today, especially when we are face with a plurality of challenges and, at times, overwhelming tasks. As Christians, and as secular Franciscans, we find ourselves being part of an ever evolving societal identity where competing values are debated, negotiated, appropriated, and dismissed. In recent years, decades, the market place or

commons has become a ‘public’ space; in other words a ‘commons’ that has very little tolerance for the religious identity of any kind. Somehow we have now relegated the term ‘public’ to that which is separate from the religious sphere—the public has become the new ‘profane.’ For us Americans this has meant a preference for the separation of church and state. While not pretending to simplify the issue here, we can safely say that the lived-experience of our faith life vis-à-vis the public often take the back sit—A most salient exception being during elections when we may find ourselves in serious discernment deciding how to integrate our vote to our faith values.

Whether we see ourselves as republicans, democrats, anarchist, libertarians or members of the green or red party, as Franciscans we share a common identity; like Francis, we too claim or want to be heralds in professing our ‘Gospel to life and life to Gospel.’ Intrinsic to this movement of Gospel to life and vice versa is a faith life that propels us to go beyond ourselves or to go beyond that which is most common and comfortable to us, in order that we may bring some transformation. This going ‘beyond ourselves’ is what is at the heart of the Franciscan pilgrim life. Like Francis we desire to go beyond the wall of Assisi in order to reach the leper, the outcast, the sultan. That is to say, we desire to go beyond our respective family of origin, beyond our white, black or brown neighborhood, beyond our town or city, beyond our ideological, social and political comforts. Stated differently, native to our Franciscan vocation is our very ‘secularity’—that is our being *in the world*. Unlike the monastic spirituality, the holiness and the transformation we bring must occur in the very heart of the public or *polis*.

For us secular Franciscan, for those of us who relate to Francis the pilgrim, then, there is no transformation without the muck of the world—we are literally thrust into the public by our profession. In our Franciscan lingo, we have expressed this movement outward in terms of our Apostolic Commissions, which not only make explicit who we are, but make *public* our agenda. Our Pilgrim agenda is very clear, then: we say we work for values of the Family; seek work that yields greater Peace and Justice; we desire to infuse our Work place with a more visible Gospel ethics; we are bold in our prophetic Ecological witness which calls for an affirmation that all Creation—animate and inanimate—is redeemed by Christ; and we inspire future generations, especially our Youth and Young Adult, by pointing to our very foundations as Franciscans, our Gospel life. It is in this public sphere that the words of Francis can have greater meaning for us. Like Francis, with a high degree of confidence, we have to know and say who we are to a world that may not want us to do so. Francis teaches us that *Human freedom* stems first and foremost from ‘knowing who we are *as* Christians and knowing who we are *as* Franciscan.’ Francis does not mince his words when he says: ‘*I am the herald of the great King. What is that to you?*’ I do not doubt that we share a similar vocation with Francis, and I pray that we may have the courage and freedom to speak-out our identity.

I am mindful of the fact that knowing our identity and proclaiming it is not always that simple, but I intuit and have seen how helpful it can be. The Commissions we proclaim demand many sacrifices, both on a personal and relational level. Let me share a personal illustration: in my professional work, as director to our interfaith and ecumenical ministry, I have had the privilege of learning and hearing from others how important it is

to come to the common table with transparency of faith and identity. As a matter of fact, one of the guiding principles of interfaith and ecumenical dialogue is precisely the need to speak from one's particular perspective. So as I approach the table of dialogue, I have to keep in mind my Franciscan spirituality and values. Concomitantly, the human freedom that comes about from not having to pretend, falsify or mitigate one's identity is significant. I find it very liberating to know that I have something to offer to those I am in conversation with. Similarly, I would imagine you have your own countless illustration of how important and liberating knowing who you are has been for you. I am sure you would concur with me when I say that a robust faith and civic life often presupposes that we know ourselves well.

Francis confidence in stating who he was to those who ask him witnesses for us the value of knowing who we are, especially in relationship to human freedom. From a theological and spiritual perspective, there is no greater human freedom than the one that comes from knowing we are *made in the image and lightness of God*. The 'Imago-Dei' (our inherit dignity from God) is not only a faith or theological statement, but it is also a public statement that call us to greater good, beauty, truth and being. Stated succinctly from a Franciscan point of view, our Franciscan vocation, our pilgrim identity, is a public vocation; we exist *for* and *in* the world. The public manner of our life, as alluded to earlier, is the commitment to our Commissions; which strive to point to the source of our identity and life—the great King, Abba, Creator to which Francis appeals. Now what remains is for us to confidently ask the public, our secularity, the same question Francis asked: '*what is that to you?*' I certainly hope your question finds a more amenable

response than the one Francis received. If not, then remember our great Franciscan virtue of Joy—we might be able to get our own French choir going pretty soon, and in this manner, with Francis, begin to call the praises of God, from our own ditch.

At the risk of sounding redundant, let me conclude this section by saying that the walls outside of Assisi are waiting for us Franciscan pilgrims. I encourage you to discern closely which walls might be holding you in a bit too tightly. What walls in your life are keeping you from those who need you the most? Francis himself found a way to go beyond the walls of Assisi to an unknown world in need of hope and healing. Might we dare to speak openly and candidly to what awaits us beyond our walls? I hope we do; my intuition tells me that if we do, we will be the better for having done so.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

In reflecting on the life of Francis through these images, it occurred to me that there is a profound connection to be made between our Franciscan identity and *Divine Providence*. I want to share some thoughts in this direction. I am aware that the time we have is limited and that what I have to say about this connection is preliminary. But asking what these images, mine and yours, have to say about Divine Providence should be worth it. While I will share some of my own connections, I invite you to take your own images and do the same.

Divine Providence in our Catholic spirituality carries a variety of theological meanings. For some of us the image itself of Divine Providence is associated with the ‘eye’ of God; for some it is associated with a Marian representation, as is the case for our Puerto Rican brothers and sisters for whom “*La Divina Providencia*” takes center stage in their popular religiosity. Yet for other, Divine Providence might be viewed as an esoteric label of God that, while not fully comprehensible, it is nevertheless comprehensively consoling; as so cleverly illustrated by our American bills which have printed in them: “IN GOD WE TRUST.”

For us in the Western world, the notion of ‘Providence’ is primarily associated with the idea of prudence or having right knowledge or wisdom about things, as was the case in the philosophical tradition. We would say providence is having a kind of foresight that allows us to act better in the sense of responding to things more appropriately. In relationship to our faith, Divine Providence is seen as the *Wisdom of God* that is ever present in time; present in creation, as the Old Testament, numerous states (Eccl. 5:5; Wis. 6:17; 14:3; Judith 9:5). Similarly, Divine Providence in our New Testament becomes that Wisdom of God revealed to us in *Grace*; more specifically a *Grace* that is brought about in the Person of Jesus Christ, and whose *Grace is poured over us*-- making *all things* new (Rom. 3:24). And for those of you who like reading our early theological tradition, we can note that often providence is seen vis-à-vis the problem of good and evil; and as the councils assert, that while evil is *permissive only*

(The Council of Trent: Sess. VI, can. vi, A.D. 816), divine providence protects and governs all things (The Council of Vatican, Sess. III, c. I, d. 1784).⁷

Again, whether we approach Divine Providence from a cultural, intellectual or theological perspective, it is important, for us Secular Franciscan to engage it from our particular spiritual tradition. We have to ask, in light of Francis example to us, what points of convergence and divergence with Divine Providence might we need to acknowledge for ourselves.

I suggest to you that our images of Francis mentioned above provide some helpful insights. First, in the image of Francis kissing and embracing the lepers, we are not only reminded of the centrality of conversion for the Christian life, but are challenged to see this very conversion as a process that gradually and continuously brings us closer and closer to a new vision in Christ: a vision, as we saw with Francis, that dares to embrace a beauty which is totally different—the lepers; a vision that dares to say yes to those who are most marginalized. In a word a vision that brings us closer to God because I we are near to our brother and sister whom we encounter on a daily basis. In this sense of Franciscan communion, then, Divine Providence is not some magical eye or some words written on a money bill, on the contrary, Divine Providence, when seen through the eyes of Francis becomes the very catalyst (grace) that moves us closer to ourselves, others and God. Kissing and embracing the stranger is no longer just a human act, but a human act that shines God's work in and through us.

⁷ It should be noted that the citations of the canons and the reference made to the 'permissive' nature of evil is taken from the online New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia description of Divine Providence, Cf., www.newadvent.org.

Secondly, when we see Divine Providence through the Image of Francis before the Bishop, we are invited to enter a deeper place where our own familiar and familial self is forged by the *ascesis* or spiritual discipline that attunes us to the Voice of God. As we noted earlier, this spiritual listening becomes a priority for us; no longer simply concerned with the hustle and bustle of our secularity, we begin to recognize and we begin to look for the deeper calling from God: in other words, the left over resentments and hurts; the unresolved issues; the rainbow of joyful emotions; the cornucopia of our life—all that we are and desired to be is attended to with listening hearts. There, before the bishop, Francis stands naked; and so do we stand naked, that is to say, attentive to the Word of God before us. A word that we said takes us into a new place of grace and hope. There with the Bishop stands the Church, the very community of accountability, ready to embrace us just as we are, ready to charge us with a renew sense of freedom. And in this sense, Divine Providence can not simply mean *human fate* or a disengaged humanity.

For us secular Franciscan, to stand naked before the Bishop, the Church and the world, means that we are, first and foremost, standing as a people who are ready to embark on a life long journey. As our image of Francis the Pilgrim attests to, a spiritual journey that goes beyond the walls of Assisi. In this sense, our Franciscan pilgrimage or journey is one that constantly challenges us to go to the place of *greatest human freedom*; the freedom that roots itself in the *image and likeness of God*. Like heralds of the great King, Abba, Creator, we go about singing God's praises, right in the midst of the world. Divine Providence, for our Franciscan pilgrimage means that we are about the *Opus Dei*; we are about the Work-of-God. At the very heart of our Franciscan activities, lies the conviction that we, Franciscans, exist in and for the other. Our Apostolic Commissions,

that is to say, our Franciscan commitment to, with and for the world, is not mere human activity, but the very labor of love. In this sense of work, Divine Providence is the work of God working through us for the transformation of our human experience. It is *work* precisely because my hands, my feet and my body will bring it about. It is *of God* because only God can make the work a genuine and authentic experience and expression of human freedom.

Before concluding this section, I want to draw our attention to my earlier comments on Divine Providence being stamped in our green money bills. There I noted that Divine Providence is translated into the phrase: *In God We Trust*. I want to tell you that we have our very own *stamp* of Divine Providence in our *Rule of Life*. In our Rule we should be able to find this divine Trust. While there are wonderful convergences that could be highlighted between our Rule and Divine Providence, in the interest of time, I will highlight one for you. In *Chapter Two: The Way of Life # 11*, we read:

“Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. Let the Secular Franciscans *seek a proper spirit of detachment* from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs. Let them be mindful that according the gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God’s children. Thus, in ‘the spirit of the Beatitudes,’ and as pilgrims and strangers on their way to the home of the Father, they should *strive to purify their hearts* from every tendency and yearning for possession and power.”

This citation from our Rule not only gives us an example, par excellence, of how Divine Providence is stamped in our Franciscan life and spirituality, but also serves as the very basis for understanding our Secularity or Secular state of life.

SECULAR LIFE

Taking our clues from this passage, #11, I want to say a few things about how we can further understand our ‘secularity’ in light of the life of Francis and Divine providence. Here, too, much needs to be said and could be said by me, you and others. But given our time together I will limit myself. While not explicitly stating the theological reflection our Catholic church has provided for us through Vatican II, I know that my own mind and heart often stay close to church teaching. So I hope that what I say here will also resonate with your sense of what it means to be a part of a larger ecclesial vocation.

Let me contextualize my comments with the following guiding principles: One, it is imperative that we understand our ‘secularity’ in light of our ecclesial vocation; in other a word, our ‘being in, for and with the world’ is first and foremost a ‘vocation’ we have received from God. Who we are as secular Franciscan is a *graced-identity*, we are not our own. To use Pauline language, every hair in our heads has been accounted for already; and we are mere servants—that is the privilege we have been given. Stated differently, to be *graced* or to have grace in our life means that what we have received far exceeds what we can give. And for us, the *place of grace* is never outside the reality of

the *ekklesia*, the church, or as I've said above, we are always moving in and through the Church, which is our community of accountability. Left to ourselves, we would be lost. This is why what we can give is *what has been handed down to us* through the ages, namely, the love and glory of God in the Person of Jesus Christ. This first guiding principle we can summarize as a secular life in Faith—a faith that is given to us for others.

Two, our secular life must be understood *within the very history of salvation*; what I mean here is that our secularity can be understood best when we move away from superficial polarities, dichotomies or any type of dualistic thinking. The ideas or notions that perpetuate a *fuga mundi* mentality ought to be foreign to us; it is not that our secularity is in opposition to the world, but quite to the contrary, our secularity only makes sense in light of the world; so our flight is not away from the world but directly into the heart of the world; as I indicated above, our secularity places us right in the muck of things. In this sense, we can imitate our brother Francis who, himself, imitated Jesus' *Incarnation*. We read, 'God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son that we might have life abundant.' Or we read, *Et verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis*. The Word became flesh; in other words, God enters our history in real, tangible ways. This second guiding principle can be summarized as a secular life in Love—a love given to us in Christ; a love that manifests itself throughout time and in service of one another.

Finally, our understanding of secularity has to be guided by a genuine desire for the '*New Heaven and Earth*' that has been promised to us. What I mean here is that our 'secularity' is not the mere fruit of our human efforts; the work we do, or as I've said

before, the work we engage in because of our secularity, is first the *Opus Dei*—the work of God. That we have been invited to partake in this *extravagant creation* is a gift and a responsibility. In other words, you and I are invited to cooperate with this grace and to bring to light our truest self, which is a life rooted in God’ own Trinitarian life. In other words, our secularity is—at once—worldly and more than worldly. It is worldly insofar as it partakes of the divine invitation in time; and it is more than worldly because by its participation our secularity becomes ‘sacrament’ since it points to the ‘new heaven and earth.’ Our secularity, stated simply, has to be understood within the larger reality of God’s mystery. This third guiding principle can be summarized as a secular life in Hope—since the vision we hold and the vision that sustains us is of a “New Heaven and New Earth.”

Now what remains is for us to ask what does this secular life look like, especially in light of the passage of our Rule of Life cited above? I would present to you the following picture:

In the citation of our passage we read:

“Let the Secular Franciscans *seek a proper spirit of detachment* from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs.”

It would seem to me that our Secular Life has to look in such a way so as to testify to this *proper spirit of detachment*. What is impressive here is that the statement leaves very little room for interpretation, lest we are tempted to compromise on our Franciscan values. Simplifying our own material needs can be interpreted pretty straight forward. I

won't board you with my own efforts here, but suffice it to say that much work will need to be done by all us here if we are going to make a fundamental option for the poor. Our secular life, it seems to be, needs to be one that finds intimacy with poverty, in every sense of the word. Be it an intellectual, physical, emotional, social or spiritual poverty.

We then hear:

“Thus, in ‘the spirit of the Beatitudes,’ and as pilgrims and strangers on their way to the home of the Father, they should *strive to purify their hearts* from every tendency and yearning for possession and power.”

I must say that the task of “*puritas cordis*” a life of striving for purity of heart is certainly a life-long task. In this sense our secularity is a constant life lived from a particular location. I would suggest to you that the *location* in which we situate ourselves is precisely another way of speaking of our *secularity*: Let me explain it by pointing to Francis. Francis was very clear with his choices; he *re-positioned himself*, he chose a *particular location* for himself. By this manner of *re-locating* himself away from possessions and power, he made himself more accessible to the pulse of humanity. In this manner, he showed us that secularity has to include a choice to locate ourselves next the lepers of our times; we have to locate ourselves close to the church that holds us accountable; and we have to locate ourselves close to that pilgrim walk that takes us to the source of human freedom that comes from knowing that we are all made in the image of God. It is then and only then, that our hearts can begin this wonderful process of purification.