

BRING PEACE

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Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon. Article 19

I had originally intended to write on a completely different subject, but as I began I was led here. There have always been political, religious, or moral disagreements among people. In the past 15-20 years, we have seen people expressing their opinions in ways that are more and more extreme. Instead of reason, we have emotion; in place of discussion, we have insults. Social media adds to this by giving the shield of anonymity to the most hurtful remarks. It isn't so much what people believe, as the way they say it, that is driving us apart. Anger and insult cause divisions. Those divisions make common ground impossible and prevent us from working on the real problems in our communities, our country, and our world.

What can we, as Secular Franciscans, do about this? Probably not that much, on a grand scale. But, as you must know, this culture of argument and insult has invaded our communities, schools, workplaces, churches, and families. In those places, where we live out our vocations, we can make a difference.

In writing this, I thought of my family. Our political opinions range from libertarian to the most progressive liberalism. We differ in our politics, religion, and philosophy. Yet my children and children-in-law are in constant contact with each other. Our gatherings

are happy and filled with love. I will not say they are free from "discussion," or even "intense discussion," but we always end up eating together around the dinner table. We support each other in times of sorrow and rejoice together in times of joy. We are a family, and the love that binds us together is far stronger than any differences we may have.

Even in the midst of our "discussions," my children would never say anything really insulting or hurtful. Our shared love as a family prevents it. In the past 20 years, the ties that have united members of families, churches, communities and our country have been eroded. The loss of those connections has enabled people to be as nasty as they wish. So, back to the question: what can we Secular Franciscans do? We can establish, and re-establish, the connections that help us to have respect and love for each other. We can do this by listening.

First, we can listen to what people are saying: all that is said, not just the first two words. You don't have to agree, just listen. Try to understand the facts of the story, or the reasons for the argument. Second, listen to the person speaking. Listen with an understanding heart. Why are they saying this? How do they understand the words? Are there emotions behind what is being said? Is agreement, or a connection, possible? Third, listen to yourself. Are you

shutting yourself off from discussion? Are your own beliefs interfering with your ability to understand? Do you interrupt the other person to score a point? Is your own anger or impatience a barrier? Fourth, listen to God. (This should also be first.) Are you treating this person as a child of God or as an enemy? Is your purpose argument or discussion? Do you want to learn or to win? Do you understand that you are already in relationship with this person?

Listening seems like such a little thing, but it isn't. When we don't listen to people, they feel devalued, and then they devalue the lives of others. The turmoil in our

society comes from millions of people who are talking and shouting, but not listening. This brings us further and further apart from each other. Listening begins relationships and keeps them together. Listening is not agreement; it means that we respect each other. It confirms the dignity of each person. It opens the path to real discussion, and from there leads to understanding and peace.

We cannot solve the world's problems by ourselves. But, through listening and forming connections with those we meet, we can change the world we live in. May we bring our Franciscan peace and goodness to all our brothers and sisters.



ENCOURAGEMENT, FELLOWSHIP AND PRAYER IN THE AGE OF PANDEMIC

By Roberta Oliveira, OFS
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“... For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.” (Romans 1:11,12)

It is believed that Paul wrote these words to the Romans while on mission to Jerusalem. He was separated from the church by distance, but not in spirit, and writes to encourage them on their faith journey. In fact, the New Testament is filled with examples of early church members encouraging one another during times of separation, persecution, and fear from the very beginning. So why would it be unusual for us to want to encourage each other now?

Most of us can play the news reports in our head. Something bad is happening in China! Italy is going through the same thing! People are sick and they are dying! They are overwhelmed! All of Europe is bending to a horrible virus! A nursing

home in Washington State! New York is on lockdown! Dear God, please protect us. Please do not allow our churches to be closed. Fear, sadness, and loss were mounting. As this unfolded, our fraternities were scrambling to determine what we were going to do about meetings, retreats, etc.

For our fraternity, there were a few emergency conference calls by the Council. We had planned our first Lenten Day of Recollection for March 14 and were scheduled to meet the following Tuesday as a fraternity. Can we or should we meet? We were working with a minimal and ever-changing amount of information of what was being called a Pandemic. Can we still offer our first annual Lenten day of retreat? It includes