

SFOs and Poverty
By Pauline Cahalan

In his wonderful book “To Cling with All Her Heart to Him” Benet Fonck, OFM probes deeply into the spirituality of St. Clare of Assisi. In Article 7 of our rule SFOs are called to “conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls “conversion.” The concept of poverty for SFOs has historically raised a lot of questions: “If I become a Secular Franciscan do I have to give away all my things and be poor?” “I am a professional person who makes a lot of money. Can I still become a Secular Franciscan? If I can become one, how will I have to change my lifestyle?” Fr. Benet writes explicitly about what poverty is expected to be for those who live the spirituality of Francis and Clare:

“The content of this life of poverty is not a virtuous practice nor a social condition, but rather a chosen life-style. It is concretizing in practical, everyday behavior the Beatitudes in which one suffers the loss of a “possession” to gain a treasure. It is the parables of the pearl of great price and the field of great worth played out in everyday existence. As pilgrims and strangers on their way to the Father, those who are evangelically poor are like the lilies of the field or the birds of the air; perhaps it might even be more accurate to say that they are like the ducks of the pond off whose back the water drips so that they can fly to new heights.

“Gospel poverty, moreover, is living “without property,” which means not having the attachments or appropriations of will or mind or heart or hand or person to bog one down, to distract one’s focus, to detour one’s striving. It is the choice to simplify one’s life (i.e., attend to one’s needs, lessen one’s wants, and curb one’s luxuries) so that neither a person’s bull-headedness or closed-mindedness or hard-heartedness or materialistic consumerism or inordinate affections get in the way of centering one’s life on relating to God in intimacy, trust, and docility. This style of life is liberating, cleaning out the clutter of one’s heart to make room for God to dwell therein, unshackling one’s spirit to soar to new heights of spiritual development, removing the distractions of one’s mind to concentrate on the presence and power of God, emancipating one’s body from the dependency upon unhealthy intake and practices, and unfettering those attachments to other people which keep one tied to the earthly and hold a person in slavery to unproductive and, in fact, destructive relationships.

“This evangelical poverty also has a dimension of outreach to it because as human beings we become stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God’s children. The “privilege of poverty” in everyday existence has with it a corresponding responsibility; to live in moderation to offset the squandering of consumerism, to demonstrate generosity in order to overcome the hoarding and manipulating of selfishness on all levels of human existence, and to promote justice so as to obviate the enslavement of peoples and structures and nature because of rampant materialism, misuse of power, unconscionable oppression, and unwarranted destruction of the environment.

“This is the gospel poverty that Francis and Clare embraced which, together with contemplation and community, incarnated the gospel life born of discernment, formed by penance, chastity and constancy, and proclaimed by being a mirror, a witness, and a prophet” (pgs. 45-46).

How to live the poverty of an SFO for those whose blessings provide for their needs doesn’t seem to provoke nearly as many questions as the life of those whose

blessings provide for their needs and wants. For SFOs in the upper income brackets it is important for them to keep in mind that they have an opportunity to mirror Christ and act out of Franciscan Spirituality to people the great majority of us will never encounter whether this be a person in the high end car dealership, their board room, the decision making processes at their places of employment, or their financial advisor. Fr. Benet explains how to keep things in life balanced as one strives for daily conversion.

Fonck, OFM, B. A. (1996). To cling with all her heart to him. Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press.

FORMATION QUESTIONS

1. What do possessions mean to me? Do I pray to distinguish between needs and wants, whether the money for a want would be better spent helping the less fortunate?
2. When I am around children do they see me making the distinction between a need and a want? If I have responsibility for children, am I teaching them, through actions and explanations, the difference between a need and a want plus options for the money one might spend on a want?