

HAGGLING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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Having wiped the milky evidence of a morning cappuccino from my lips, I stepped out into the crisp cool air of Arezzo. Before long I found myself wandering under the canvas tents and arched walkways of an antique market. People were admiring the many objects they considered to be the spice of life, as I watched the spicy exchanges between sellers and buyers.

Then I heard a voice over the hum of the market. It came from a man talking on his cellphone, sharing his conversation not only with the market goers but also with the stoic figures in the paintings surrounding him in the middle of an art display. His voice rose in intensity accompanied by the frantic and constant gesturing of his left hand. Just when I anticipated an explosion, he took a deep breath and placed his cell phone on an antique side table. Now free of encumbrance, I witnessed his hands and arms gesturing uncontrollably as he unleashed a string of expletives toward the unsuspecting cell phone.

They were words that would have caused parents of small children to hurry them along, while the other folk looking on responded with either a shake of the head in disapproval or a nod of affirmation. The words were politically charged and racist, anti-immigrant and anti-black, transforming the natural environment of a market into cesspool of toxic division.

This moment in the market reminded me of a story that is told about St. Francis visiting Arezzo. Perhaps it was on a cool crisp day like that of the antique market, which quickly warmed into unbridled and prejudiced feelings. In a painting of Francis’ visit to the city, the primary figure is Brother Sylvester, standing outside the city gate with arm raised as he casts demons out of the city. Francis kneels, close by, in prayerful support of this exorcism.



Looking back 800 years through the lens of this medieval painting with its metaphors and symbolism, we come to understand that the real demons in the city of Arezzo were those of social, economic, and political division among the local residents.¹ It seems that these demons of division, cast out of Arezzo by Sylvester so long ago, have come to settle today in homes, towns, cities, and countries across the globe. They now manifest themselves as the phantoms of political polarization.

Yes, our political life is possessed. Politics is supposed to help us to collectively achieve meaningful goals that could not be realized individually. To achieve this general welfare, the political process is necessarily marked by negotiation, debate, and legislation, like the haggling at an antique market. In our world today, this spice of the market has been turned into the cesspool of division, which has become so deep that it polarizes family members, friends, and neighbors

into uncompromising camps that demonize the other in order to justify their own perspectives, policies, and prejudices.

To understand racism, it must be understood that it is based on the use of power to control a group. It is a false premise in which one group is superior and the other group inferior based on the color of skin, language, and ethnicity. All of these things still exist today. This attitude of superiority leads to thoughts and actions that at first glance might not seem racist but are intrinsically rooted in prejudice. This racism of the heart, recognized or not by the individual, grows into communal and social prejudice that makes us all complicit at some level. This happens in relation to fair housing and education, immigration and refugee relocation policies, and the manifold problems with our prison systems.ⁱⁱ

Brother Sylvester was a friar who lived in Arezzo during the time of Francis. In the painting he raises his hand in a gesture of preaching. He preaches against the people of the city who had divided into two groups, each thinking themselves superior to the other. Like the man in the market who yelled at his phone with wild gestures, the people of medieval Arezzo would have raised their hands in demeaning signs of disgust. Sylvester counters by preaching against the phantoms of racism in the hearts and minds of the people. He offers the populace the alternative of the love of God and neighbor.

At the same time, Francis falls to his knees in prayerful support of Sylvester's exorcism. This falling to one's knees in prayer becomes a righteous action of support through friendship, which upholds the life and dignity of all human beings through living the commandments of loving both God and neighbor.ⁱⁱⁱ As Jesus bowed before the Father in prayer, he then knelt before the poor and those who suffered social discrimination, calling them friends.

Today, we often, wish to ignore the demons of political division, by not discussing certain issues at the table because heated disagreements are inevitable. Such avoidance, however, only breeds the more dangerous phantoms of polarization in our homes and workplaces. In this vast separation between people it becomes easy, and in time even seems natural, to degrade and demonize any word, action, or person on the opposite side.

Such racism is also a sinfulness of omission by the choice to remain silent when confronted with racial injustice.^{iv} As antidotes to poisons often originate from the poison itself, the antidote for us today is to begin talking about politics at the table. No more silence or avoidance of sensitive topics. Instead we need longer meals where nuances and distinctions can be made, and civil discourse with a hope of compromise can once again find a home. In this kind of a space, differences of opinion strengthen relationships rather than break them, like a good antique market haggling.

Another table where the sin of omission holds sway is in our churches, in our failure to name the demons and preach like Sylvester did in his time. Friars have confided in me how they fear that preaching the Social Gospel will be viewed as too political and drive a wedge in their ministries, causing irreparable division. Such preaching, however, contextualizes partisan political issues

into the moral issues that they truly are. The wedge of division already exists! Rather than causing conflict, our preaching the Social Gospel can serve to uncover, to name the phantoms of polarization that have imbedded themselves in our hearts, our communities, and in our social structures. Then the difficult healing process can begin, and relationships might be restored.

Antique markets like the one in Arezzo, can serve as a school of civil discourse for us today. Through participating in and learning from the market haggling and exchange of goods, we discover that the true spice of life is not the object haggled over but rather the haggling itself. In these conversations for compromise exists the understanding that what is good and just for you can also be good and just for me. With this attitude of respect for others and self, we can cast out the demons of division found within the social, economic, and political conversations of our tables, while adding the all-important spice of antique market haggling for the common good.

ⁱ The World of St. Francis of Assisi: Essays in Honor of William R. Cook, page 54.

ⁱⁱ *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love - A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 2018, page 5. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf> (accessed December 16, 2018). See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1869.

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 132.

^{iv} *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love - A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 2018, page 4. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf> (accessed December 16, 2018).