

DIGNITY OF WORK IN THE BUILDING OF PEACE

Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

In a recent visit to Colombia, I found myself on a pilgrimage with several other friars to the Marian Shrine of Chinchiquera. Making a number of stops along the way it became what I call an ABC-tour, visiting again and again “Another Beautiful Church”. While praying in these churches there were two statues that caught my attention, because the saints were holding objects purchased in a local home goods store. Saint Isidore the Laborer was holding a shovel, I could still see the remains of the barcode sticker on the spade, and the Peruvian Saint Martin de Porres was wielding a broom.

These images reminded me of advice, given to me years ago by a senior friar who said, “When people in your ministry mistake you for the janitor, you will have found an important way of truly being the presence of the risen Jesus, who was once mistaken for a common gardener”. This sage advice always reminds me of the dignity of labor. This is the belief that equal respect should be afforded to all jobs and that no occupation should be seen as better or superior.¹ Pope Francis concretely connects this belief to the human person saying, “Work is fundamental to the dignity of the person. Work, to use an image, 'anoints' with dignity, fills us with dignity, makes us similar to God who has worked and still works, who always acts.”²



Saint Francis’ theophany was a call from Jesus the Lord, spoken in the context of work. In the small ruined church of San Damiano in Assisi, the young Francis prayed before the crucifix and heard the voice of Jesus say, “Francis, go repair my house, which as you see, is falling completely to ruin”.³ Francis’ first response to this anointing was to give money to the priest to keep a lamp burning before the image of the cross. Then he began his first work, the rebuilding of the church of San Damiano.⁴ During the three years following this moment of conversion, Francis being filled with the light of dignity through work, attracted others to join him in rebuilding churches. They rebuilt them never touching the foundations, for Christ was already the firm foundation of the churches.

¹ Dignity of labour. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dignity_of_labour (accessed June 30, 2019).

² Pope Francis. General Audience, May 1, 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130501_udienza-generale.html (accessed June 30, 2019).

³ Thomas of Celano. *Second Life of St. Francis*, # 10.

⁴ Thomas of Celano. *First Life of St. Francis*, # 8:18.

When the church dedicated to the Mother of God, the Portziuncula, had been restored, Francis and his followers prayed within the church. They opened the Book of the Gospels to the passage where it is described how Jesus sent his disciples into the world to preach, to work: “And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics.”⁵ After having had the passage explained to him, Francis exclaimed, “This is what I wish, this is what I am seeking, this is what I long to do with all of my heart”.⁶ Francis then changes his clothes for a tunic in the shape of a cross (harkening back to his first theophany with Jesus on the cross of San Damiano) and a simple cord. In this context of the fruits of his labor, in the last of the churches he had rebuilt, Francis heard again the voice of Jesus. Through the Gospel the Lord called him to amplify his work of rebuilding by preaching repentance through the message of peace. We are told that when Francis preached, he would always say, “The Lord give you peace.”⁷

Gathered in Medellín, Colombia in 1968, the bishops of Latin America (CELAM) taught about the importance of the Church having a “preferential option for the poor” in the context of justice, peace, and poverty. Inherent in these concepts is the dignity of work and the belief that no occupation is better than another. In our own time, Franciscans have been working continually to rebuild the house of the Lord, our common home, through our preaching of peace and anointing others with the light of dignity, in the context of a world that continually falls further into ruin. The final Medellín document offers three factors of peace, which needs to be inherent in every Christians’ preaching of the message of repentance, in both word and example.

Peace: A Work of Justice

We hear the echo of Medellín in Pope Paul VI who wrote, “If you want peace, work for justice.”⁸ The Medellín document emphasized that a just order is needed to create an authentic peace where, people can find fulfillment and dignity and is respected in a way that a person becomes an agent of his or her own history.⁹ Such preaching of peace through justice must defend the dignity of persons, of workers, and of labor. “It is in this sense that the integral development of a person, the path to more human conditions, becomes the symbol of peace.”¹⁰

Peace: Is Built not Found

As Franciscans have been preaching repentance and peace for over 800 years, we give living witness to the insight of the Medellín document that the building of peace is a “permanent task”

⁵ Mark 6:7-9

⁶ Thomas of Celano. First Life of St. Francis, # 9:22.

⁷ Ibid, # 10:23.

⁸ Pope Paul VI. If You Want Peace, Work for Justice, January 1, 1972. http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19711208_v-world-day-for-peace.html (accessed June 30, 2019).

⁹ Latin American Bishops, Medellín, Colombia. Medellín Document: Peace, September 6, 1968, #14a. http://www.povertystudies.org/TeachingPages/EDS_PDFs4WEB/Medellin%20Document-%20Peace.pdf (accessed June 30, 2019).

¹⁰ Ibid, #14b.

and that “the Christian is the artisan of peace”.¹¹ The constant need of rebuilding the house of the Lord, our common home, is the placing together of living stones that respects the intentions of the master builder who works in creating the world and all that is on it, in both peace and goodness.

Peace: God is the Foundation

Here the Medellín document teaches that God alone can bring about social peace, without which there will remain social, political, economic and cultural inequalities.¹² Francis understood this by always keeping the foundations of the churches he rebuilt, because Christ is always our foundation. It is only with an abiding relationship with God, that dignity can be found and preached as a light to invite and anoint others to build with us, in the way of peace.

During my ABC-tour in Colombia, I encountered many statues of Saint Francis. All of them had Francis gazing lovingly at a cross or holding a Book of the Gospels. While these images certainly highlight Francis’ relationship with the Lord Jesus, the bringer of justice and peace, they fail to capture the specificity of the dignity of labor, to which the Lord personally called Francis and similarly anoints Franciscans to work at today.

I could not help but wonder if it might not be more appropriate for an occasional redo of the statues of Saint Francis, in the same manner of the statues of Isidore the Laborer with his spade and Martin de Porres sweeping with an actual broom. How much more appropriate would it be if Francis were to be found standing at the base of a ladder, with stones around his feet, holding a bucket of mortar and a trowel in his hands? Of course, with such an image one might too easily mistaken him for a common laborer, as someone once mistook the risen Lord, the Prince of Peace, for a gardener.

¹¹ Ibid, #14b.

¹² Ibid, #14c.

