



HAGGLING FOR THE COMMON GOOD
Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

Stepping into the crisp morning air of Arezzo, I decided to take a stroll under the arched walkways of an antique market. Turning a corner, I saw a man on his phone, his voice rising in intensity and accompanied by the frantic gesturing of his left hand. Just when I anticipated an explosion, he took a deep breath and placed his phone on an antique table. Now free of encumbrance, he gestured uncontrollably with both hands, while unleashing a string of expletives toward the unsuspecting phone.

They were words that caused parents of small children to hurry them along, while the other folk 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 energetic environment of a market into cesspool of toxic division.

This moment reminded me of a story that is told about Arezzo, captured famously in a fresco by Giotto in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. The primary figure is Brother Sylvester, standing outside the city gate with arm raised as he casts demons out. At the same time, St. Francis kneels in prayerful support of this exorcism.

When considering the symbolism within this painting, we find that the real demons in the city of Arezzo were those of social, economic, and political division. It seems that these demons of division, long ago cast out of Arezzo, have come to settle in our homes, 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 a general welfare, through a process 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, we must accept that it is based on the use of power to control a group. It is a false premise in which one group is believed to be superior and the other group inferior based on the color of skin, language, and ethnicity. 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 individuals, grows into communal and social prejudice that makes us all complicit at some level (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1869). This happens in relation to fair housing and education, immigration and refugee relocation policies, and the manifold problems with our prison systems.

As a citizen of Arezzo, Brother Sylvester raises his hand in a gesture of preaching against the division of the people in the city, 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 of the other. Sylvester counters by preaching against the phantoms of racism in the hearts and minds of the people. He offers the populace the Gospel alternative in the love of God and neighbor. At the same time, Francis falls to his knees as a righteous action of support through friendship, which upholds the life and dignity of all human beings through living the commandments of love (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 132).

Too often, we ignore the demons of political division by not discussing certain issues at the table. Such avoidance 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 also leads to a sinfulness of omission by the choice of remaining silent when confronted with racial injustice.

Another table where the sin of omission holds sway is in church, felt noticeably 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 doctrine of the Church, in the context of the Gospel, would be viewed as too political and drive a wedge in their communities, causing irreparable division.

Such preaching, however, has the power and the grace to contextualize partisan political issues into the moral issues that they truly are. The wedge of division already exists! Rather than causing conflict, our preaching the 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. Only then the difficult process of healing can begin to take shape.

As antidotes to poisons often originate from the poison itself, the antidote for us today is to begin talking about politics. 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.

Antique markets, like the one in Arezzo, can serve as a contemporary school of civil discourse. 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. Within these conversations for compromise, there exists the understanding that what is good and just for you can also be good and just for me. Through such an attitude of respect for others and self, we can cast out the demons of division found within the social, economic, and political conversations of today, by adding the all-important spice of antique market haggling for the common good.