



*Francis' Sermon to the Birds*

**HUMAN MIGRATION: BIRD WATCHING OR ENCOUNTER**  
Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: "This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show *mercy* and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.'" (Zechariah 7)

A friend called me with excitement in her voice. “I found the perfect Saturday outing. It’s a bike-ride/bird-watch!” As avid cyclists, this seemed a clever twist, so two days later we donned our helmets, and with binoculars hanging from our necks we joined twenty bird enthusiasts on a bike path in rural Maryland. The moment that we as a group had found a rolling rhythm, I heard someone behind me cry out, “woodpecker!” We all came to a screeching halt and reached for our binoculars to see a red-bellied woodpecker.

The halfway mark brought a welcome rest as we munched on granola in a grassy clearing. Then our leader opened her bird field guide and asked in a serious voice, “What birds did you *spy* today?” The answers came quickly and with equal seriousness. One said, “blue jay”, another declared “finch”, while two simultaneously clarified “purple finches”.

After about twenty minutes of naming birds natural to the area, the leader focused in on us hatchlings, the only two whose sole participation had been an occasional giggle. With finger pointed she asked, “What bird did you two see?” Feeling an under the table kick from my friend, I pointed back to the leader and exclaimed, “a Baltimore Oriole!”

In a flash, the group became an angry parliament of owls diving at us unsuspecting city pigeons. With their sharp talons of words cutting into us, they yelled, “No way, impossible, never at this time of the year. You know nothing!” I then pointed my finger toward the leader and said, “Look at your shirt, on the front is an image of a Baltimore Oriole,” the mascot of the local baseball team. While struggling to stifle our laughs we found ourselves instantly exiled from the flock.

Many react to human migration with the same aggressiveness of the biking-bird-watchers. It is considered a serious issue, which is understood through the lens of an overly simplistic field guide shown on cable news, where identification of the species of a given bird immediately leads to its being labeled as native or invasive. As people-watchers, too many of us view immigration at a distance, through the restricted binoculars of prejudiced internet sites that fail to acknowledge neither the complexity of a migrant’s identity nor the arduous journey undertaken. While claiming to be expert observers of the issue, folks reveal themselves as better likened to a nationalistic murder of crows.



With the example of Saint Francis, often depicted preaching to the birds, we find an example of a bird-engager rather than a bird-watcher. Wherever he went, Francis created a culture of encounter, naturally reaching out to his feathered friends, whom he called his sisters and brothers. At a deeper level, the art and stories of his preaching to the birds are meant to serve as a metaphor for preaching to the peoples of all nations, representative of the various flocks of birds gathered

around him. Using his field guide of the Gospel, Francis' message to those who would listen was a consistent and intentional call to family, community, and participation.

Like Francis, we are to preach through the living of our lives in a manner that encourages the well-being of everyone. The challenge is to embrace a culture of encounter as Francis did, switching from the field guide of partisan politics to that of the social teaching of the Church and the Gospel. In this way we move from stereotypical bird-watching at a distance, to the actual engagement of people who are different from us, through genuine encounter. This would include poor doves, majestic falcons, and Baltimore Orioles!

This Franciscan culture of encounter lands us in our contemporary political arenas, as virtuous Christians. Pope Francis reminds us in *The Joy of The Gospel* that, "People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens, not as a mob swayed by the powers that be. Let us not forget that 'responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation'" (13). Such virtue requires of us a knowledge of the facts, that can serve to dispel the mists of lies and deception based on emotional fearmongering.

JusticeForImmigrants.org is a catholic coalition that can help us better understand the truth of migration, in light of the Gospel. Broken immigration policies across the globe continue to inflame the tensions. This leads to reactionary and restrictive policies and laws that separate families, which in turn heightens the political rhetoric. Migrants are vilified for taking local jobs and living off welfare programs, while well-documented research holds the opposite to be true. We, therefore, must move to counter such misinformation by better engaging the issue and encountering our migrating sisters and brothers. It is our responsibility to weave together today's migration stories of the struggle for truth, justice, and mercy, which resembles so many stories in the scriptures where families migrated in the hope of finding work, safety, food, and loved ones. Can we hear and respond to the call from the scriptures to love the migrant as ourselves?

Conventual Franciscan Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky often brings the preaching of the Gospel to life, like Saint Francis did in his time. Several years ago, when ordaining two friars to the diaconate in rural Maryland, not far from the bird-watch bike path, he began the liturgy reminding everyone that we were gathered on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. He called it a fitting day for an ordination in the USA, of two friars (a Mexican and a Venezuelan) who belong to an international religious community and would be ordained to minister in a universal church; for we friars know no borders. As Francis once preached to his sisters the Umbrian doves and to his brothers the Egyptian falcons (more particularly to the poor and outcast lepers of Umbria and the Sultan of Egypt), may we too share the Good News of the Gospel with those who have already alighted in our lands.