

Dear Sisters, Associates, Friends, and our dear Brother Fr. Mike,

So much is written about our Father Francis that it is a challenge to choose a focus for few minutes of reflection on what his life teaches us. But this year, as we have spent time with *Response in Faith*, our Rule of Life, a sentence in Principle 3 suggests a framework for seeing anew what we are called to as Franciscans.

[Jesus] is our bond as we strive for union with God, with each other, and with all that surrounds us and awaits transformation.

How can the life of Francis help us open up the meaning of this sentence?

First, to take another phrase from our Rule, Francis modeled for us how to live the radical claims of the Gospel. As we heard in the first reading in the voice of Paul—but it could also be the voice of Francis: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. . . I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.”

Francis took on the self-emptying love of Jesus that he found in the Gospel and molded his life in the pattern of Christ, teaching, healing, and reconciling. The themes shared with the brothers and sisters reflect kenosis: poverty, minority, hospitality. Nothing was to keep him from union with Christ and a life framed by the Gospel.

The church leaders of his time did not initially understand what he was about. When he first took his rule for the brothers to Rome it was rejected because it was “only the Gospel.” Had those leaders read today’s Gospel, I wonder if they would have missed the irony in Jesus’ prayer: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned and revealed them to little children.”

What Francis was about was the following of Jesus. And we are invited as Franciscans today to renew our own commitment to do so.

This is not easy, nor is it the usual pattern of Christianity. Unfortunately, Christians have managed to avoid most of what was so unequivocal in Jesus’ teaching: nonviolence, sharing of resources, simplicity, loving our neighbors.

The problem, as Franciscan Father Richard Rohr has said is that

We worshipped Jesus instead of following him on the same path.

We made Jesus into a mere religion instead of a journey toward union with God and everything else.

This shift made us into a religion of “belonging and believing” instead of a religion of transformation.

The key points in Rohr's summary echo the themes in principle 3 of Response in Faith – following Jesus, seeking union with God and everything else, and transformation. Listen again:

[Jesus] is our bond as we strive for union with God, with each other, and with all that surrounds us and awaits transformation.

Francis showed us how the following of Jesus leads to personal transformation, to becoming a new creation. In the stories of his life, we learn that he felt revulsion when he saw lepers disfigured by their disease. He kept his distance even when bringing food and clothing to share with them.

When he finally had the courage to embrace a leper and kiss his wounds, he described how what had been the most bitter became the sweetest. I have to think that Jesus saying that his yoke is easy and his burden is light is like that. When we enter into a life of self-emptying, our experience and our perspective changes. And what seemed hard, becomes easy.

In visits with sisters across the congregation, I have heard stories of how initial revulsion can turn to love. One retired sister was asked to work with special needs children and shared with me how difficult it was for her at the beginning. But after a time, as she tenderly wiped the mucous and saliva from their faces, she felt that same sweetness that Francis talked about. Another told me that being with hearing impaired children unnerved her because they were so loud and their voices were so harsh. She asked God for help to understand their needs and to respond to them in love and she was amazed at the transformation in herself.

Through such experiences of transformation, the stories of Francis help us to see that our union with God and our union with our brothers and sisters comes from the same source—our God who prays that all may be one.

Finally, Francis helps us to see that we are called to contribute to the transformation of our society and its relationship to creation.

There are many, many stories in the life of Francis to choose from here.

I think that the story of Wolf of Gubbio is most instructive.

A particularly fierce wolf was devouring some of the townspeople's livestock at Gubbio and it had also been killing some of the people. Attempts to kill it had failed and citizens lived in fear. Francis visited and hearing the problem, decided to speak with the wolf. They met and he blessed the wolf with the sign of the cross. Recognizing that Francis came in peace and was not a threat, the wolf went to Francis and curled up next to him. Francis proposed that if the wolf stopped menacing the townspeople, they would provide for him. The wolf extended his paw, signaling agreement, while the townspeople watched from afar. Francis and the wolf walked back into town and the wolf and townspeople both accepted the

agreement. The wolf never troubled Gubbio again, and the citizens kept their bargain by feeding him. He lived among them for two more years as an honored guest.

If you think you hear themes from Fratelli Tutti in this story, you are right. The fundamental dignity of all creatures, the right relationship between people and creation, and the power of reconciliation all come through in this tale. Moreover, it reinforces the unity we are called to have with all that surrounds us and awaits transformation. As we look at the climate crisis, we have a great need today to learn from Francis how to see and respect the dignity of all creation and work to turn around the practices that have so damaged it.

While in this short time, I have only touched on how looking anew at the life of Francis can lead us to reflect on our own lives. But three things are clear:

The following of Jesus is at the center of our lives as Christians and Franciscans.

The striving for union is at the center.

And our real need for transformation is at the center.

That is why in our rule, we proclaim that “Jesus is our bond as strive for union with God, with each other, and with all that surrounds us and awaits transformation.” This evening let us again accept the call to live the radical claims of the Gospel.