

Social Justice: A Franciscan Perspective II - Reject of Society or Brother?

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Our Franciscan traditions make some special contributions to the foundations of Social Justice. Neither St. Francis nor our principal philosophers and theologians, Bl. John Duns Scotus and St. Bonaventure, spoke or wrote explicitly on the topic. It was not a topic of their day. However, Francis' life and writings lay a foundation for an understanding of reality that has profound applications in Social Justice. The philosophy and theology of Scotus and Bonaventure were shaped by their following of Francis, and, in turn, contributed to the roots of a Franciscan view of Social Justice.

Shortly after his conversion, St. Francis moved out of his former way of life and took up residence with the lepers. In his "Testament" he writes: "I left the world." He left behind a world of privilege and hierarchy to live in a Christ-like way as a servant of the rejects of society. For him lepers were brothers and sisters. A full understanding of Francis' intent in using the words, "Brother" or "Sister" underlies their application to a Social Justice analysis of reality.

Francis called his followers "Friars" or brothers. He lived with them, not as superior, but as brother. He meant that they should be brothers not just among themselves, like some kind of exclusive club, but rather brotherhood was to be their relationship to all men and women.

"Brother" was not meant to be a title, but rather, a description of a relationship that was a reality. Friars are to be truly brothers, and a sign and a model of all human and creaturely relationships, because the one Father/Mother God is the origin of all these relationships. We all are equal siblings under God; none of us has any greater privilege or worth. All are to share equally in the family inheritance.

Francis did not seek to possess creation, but rather, he saw it as belonging to God and as a book from which one could read about God. He treated it with great reverence. He picked up a lowly worm from the road lest it get stepped upon. His great understanding of creation and its relation to us is expressed in the "Canticle of Creation," which he wrote shortly before his death. The Canticle, I believe, also provides us with the foundation for a Franciscan approach to Social Justice

In the Canticle, he speaks of "Brother Sun," "Sister Moon," "Brother Wind," and "Sister Water." For us as Franciscans, this is not poetical language, but a description of real relationships that exist between us humans and all of creation. So we humans and all creatures are equal children of God. Creatures share in the same worth and dignity and

deserve the same respect.

I think that a basic Franciscan contribution to an understanding of Social Justice is this insight that all people and all creatures are brothers or sisters. We all share in the same fundamental being that God has created, are made of the same stuff. A true understanding of these relationships shows us why we must be in just relationships with all other creatures. If we can grasp this, we are well on our way to seeing the reasons behind our Social Justice teachings.