

Servant Leadership and Ecumenism

Divine Mercy Region, at its April, 2018 regional gathering, announced the appointment of Ms. Cami Mann, OFS to the position of regional chair for ecumenical outreach. Cami is a member of Our Mother of Sorrows Fraternity, Grand Rapids, MI. She brings a wealth of experience in ecumenism, having worked in ecumenical and interfaith outreach ministry for many years. Mike Carsten informed us that Divine Mercy is the first region to officially appoint such a position. We certainly are looking forward to having Cami lead us in this effort.

Cami has said yes to the invitation to enter a position of leadership in the Order. Admittedly, because this is a new position, she will have the opportunity to mold and create the role, the expectations, communications, and implementation of an ecumenical outreach program in the region. This will undoubtedly come with some risk, opposition, leaps of faith, and blazing new trails in the face of both internal support and challenges to the need or usefulness of such a ministry in the Order. She has said yes, knowing that the region currently has no funds to support her new ministry, no instructions, and no formal job description.

As Secular Franciscans, I believe we all need to take that leap of faith into servant leadership. St. Francis held the belief that all in the order have equal dignity, and the one in leadership is to serve his sisters and brothers. Cami is no stranger to serving the Order. In her home fraternity, she is leading a multi-year effort surrounding changing the culture from one of passive to active involvement in the community. She is no stranger to encountering opposition, as the journey Our Mother of Sorrows fraternity has embarked upon has come with its joys, sorrows, disagreements, and painful growth; and yet, through prayer, discernment, and openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit, is bearing fruit.

Often, we shy away from taking the leap of faith into servant leadership because we fear we will not be able to please everyone, or that we may not do a good job, or that it will consume too much of our time. It has been my experience that those who have taken that leap of faith to serve have expressed how many more blessings than hardships they receive. Embarking on the “yes” of serving the Order really does enrich one’s vocation and commitment and love of this living body we call Secular Franciscans.

Prior to Cami’s introducing herself, Mike Carsten, OFS presented information on his role serving the National Fraternity as Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee Chair. He shared with us the video presentation with participants from several Franciscan faith traditions.

When Cami introduced herself, she was immediately challenged by a member attending the gathering. She was addressing the desire to reach out and dialogue and connect with Franciscans of other faith traditions. “If we are inviting them into our circle, then why does it matter to be Catholic?” was one such challenge. This generated a bit of debate among our sisters and brothers. Viewpoints offered included, “You must be ‘Catholic’ to really be Franciscan”, to “You can be Franciscan regardless of faith”, or even “If you have no faith at all”. We had labels tossed about: Conservative. Liberal. Traditional. The discussion was getting a little heated with some apologetics, history, tradition, and personal testimony; emotions were starting to run high and some were digging in their heels. As the minister, I let this discussion continue for a little bit, knowing full well that it was making the room uncomfortable. When I felt it was time, I interjected and took the floor. “This discussion”, I submitted to the body assembled, “is proof that the position of ecumenical chair is needed--why we need dialogue, education and understanding.” While it is true that to be a member of the Secular Franciscan Order you must be “Catholic”, that does not preclude others

who wish to follow the values and life of St. Francis to form groups of like-minded people.

With the focus on the 40th anniversary of the Rule we profess as Secular Franciscans, I'd like to share a couple of thoughts regarding how reaching out in ecumenical dialogue is living the rule.

Article 13: *“As the Father sees in **every person** the features of his Son ... so the Secular Franciscans with a **gentle and courteous** spirit accept all people as a **gift of the Lord** and an **image of Christ**.”*

Article 14: *“Secular Franciscans, together **with all people of good will**, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively.”*

Article 19: *“they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony **through dialogue**, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the **transforming** power of love. . . .”*

St. Pope John Paul II set an example for all of us, bringing representatives from many faith traditions to Assisi to pray together, acknowledging the divine seed in all. Pope Francis has said that you first lead a person to a relationship with Jesus, then let the Holy Spirit do His work and perhaps they will come into the communion of the Church. We must also keep in mind that St. Francis lived in a “pre-reformation” world. In his days, there were no Lutherans, Anglicans or Unitarians. 500 years after the reformation, we have to bear in mind that there are other faith traditions with people who are inspired by St. Francis to live simply, serve the poor and underprivileged, and who strive to bring about “conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ.” *Article 13*

Let me end with a few thoughts of my own regarding ecumenism. For me, the best way to explain ecumenism is to describe what it is not. Ecumenism is not beating someone over the head with scripture quotes and apologetics. Ecumenism

is not compromising your belief system so as not to offend. Ecumenism is not agreeing that another's beliefs are equally true regarding issues of morals and faith. I believe from my personal experience that some object to ecumenical dialogue because they feel that if you accept someone with differing values or views, that means that you relinquish your own. That is not the case. True ecumenical dialogue begins by acknowledging the other, hearing their views, sharing their stories and our stories, discovering wonderfully how much we have in common outweighs our differences, and working together to bring more souls to Jesus.

Finally, let me answer the question, for me, that was raised at our gathering. Why does it matter, then, to be Catholic? I am Catholic because I love the Church, the Sacraments, the Liturgy, the rich tradition, the history (the good, the bad, and the ugly), and the people I have had the pleasure to meet who support me in my journey and walk in this pilgrimage here on Earth. I am Catholic because I believe this is where God has called me to be. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will inspire others to investigate the Church I love, but I can guarantee this: Unless I am loving, accepting, engaged in courteous dialogue, bearing peace and joy, seeing the divine image in all people regardless of creed and faith tradition, I will only be exclusive, judgmental and unwelcoming to those very people God sends to cross my path.

Sisters and brothers, I can think of no greater service to our Order and the Church than to reach out in ecumenical dialogue with our brothers and sisters who strive to follow St. Francis as we do. Leading souls to Jesus and living the Gospel is an inclusive mission. Don't let labels get in the way of bringing souls to Jesus.