

BORDERS AND THEIR LIMITS

"There is an episode in the life of Saint Francis that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, colour or religion. It was his visit to Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt, which entailed considerable hardship, given Francis' poverty, his scarce resources, the great distances to be travelled and their differences of language, culture and religion. That journey, undertaken at the time of the Crusades, further demonstrated the breadth and grandeur of his love, which sought to embrace everyone. Francis' fidelity to his Lord was commensurate with his love for his brothers and sisters. Unconcerned for the hardships and dangers involved, Francis went to meet the Sultan with the same attitude that he instilled in his disciples: if they found themselves "among the Saracens and other nonbelievers", without renouncing their own identity they were not to "engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake". In the context of the times, this was an extraordinary recommendation. We are impressed that some eight hundred years ago Saint Francis urged that all forms of hostility or conflict be avoided and that a humble and fraternal "subjection" be shown to those who did not share his faith.

Francis did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God. He understood that "God is love and those who abide in love abide in God" (*1 Jn 4:16*). In this way, he became a father to all and inspired the vision of a fraternal society. Indeed, "only the man who approaches others, not to draw them into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves, can truly be called a father". In the world of that time, bristling with watchtowers and defensive walls, cities were a theatre of brutal wars between powerful families, even as poverty was spreading through the countryside. Yet there Francis was able to welcome true peace into his heart and free himself of the desire to wield power over others. He became one of the poor and sought to live in harmony with all." (*Pope Francis: Fratelli Tutti, paras 3, 4*)

In Chapter Four of the Encyclical the Holy Father addresses the elements of having a 'Heart Open to the Whole World'. As the title suggests it is an element that can be very broad indeed. What Pope Francis does here is to focus in on the principles of the Church's Social Teaching and applies it to some circumstances but always indicating that these principles can be applied to any situation. He identifies a sometimes forgotten principle – "gratuitousness" – which he defines as 'the ability to do some things simply because they are good in themselves, without concern for personal gain or recompense.' "Gratuitousness makes it possible for us to welcome the stranger, even though this brings us no immediate tangible benefit" (*para 139*). The context of the Holy Father's writing here is in dealing with migration and he is encouraging us all to examine the principles which motivate us to contribute to the common good but this has universal application. "Life without fraternal gratuitousness becomes a form of frenetic commerce, in which we are constantly weighing up what we give and what we get back in return. God, on the other hand, gives freely, to the point of helping even those who are unfaithful; he "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good" (*Mt 5:45*). There is a reason why Jesus told us: "When you give alms, do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret" (*Mt 6:3-4*). We received life freely; we paid nothing for it. Consequently, all of us are able to give without expecting anything in return, to do good to others without demanding that they treat us well in return. As Jesus told his disciples: "Without cost you have received, without cost you are to give" (*Mt 10:8*)" (*para 140*).

In these days of preparation and discernment for the Plenary Council it seems to me that we might benefit from reflecting that it is important to treat each other with the dignity that God bestows on each one of us – whether we agree with them or not. Indeed in the history of the Church in this country there are many examples of differences that have arisen. The successful management of our differences has been achieved by an application of our fundamental 'gratuitousness' that ensures a reflection of our unity in God. Our own Order has many examples of this that are a great source of encouragement. We do well to bring that unity to the very forefront of our approach to each other as we discern the will of God for us all. Within "unity" there is no competition'.

Reflection.

1. How do I cope with recognising the God-given dignity of those I find difficult to accept?
2. What are the 'borders' I employ to excuse myself from engaging with others who have a different perspective than the one I have?
3. Do I have 'limits' that I use to justify my unwillingness to reach out to those who are 'different' from me?

Peace Prayer of St Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.