

INSTRUMENTS OF PEACE

A Franciscan Resource Book for Justice,
Peace and Integrity of Creation

- Part 2: Specific Themes of Special Interest
 - 7. Dialogue: Ecumenical, Interreligious and Intercultural



Order of Friars Minor
Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

English
1999

PART TWO

THEMES OF SPECIFIC INTEREST

As we said in the introduction to this section, this second part is composed of seven specific themes of great social and ecclesiastical importance at the present time. They could have been more but, not being able to make the book longer, we have selected these as the most apt and of greatest interest for living out our charism.

Each theme has a brief theoretical development that does not claim to be exhaustive but rather makes a presentation of the theme to stimulate reflection and action. This theoretical development of each theme is completed with the experiences and testimonies of friars from all over the world.

The theoretical part of each theme, having been written by a different author, can throw up some repetitions. However, we wanted to leave it this way because this section is not to be read at one sitting but rather each chapter should be consulted and worked on separately.

At the end of each theme or chapter a long questionnaire can be found. The reason, in effect, is to be found in its instrumental character. If these chapters are to be used for meetings on formation, both initial and on-going, or even in meetings of reflection with the laity, the long list of questions will better facilitate the group that is going to reflect.

Themes:

1. Option for the Poor
2. Peacemaking
3. Integrity of Creation / Environmental Justice
4. Life
5. Human Rights: Individual and Collective
6. Women and the Charisms of Francis and Clare
7. Dialogue: Ecumenical, Interreligious and Intercultural

7. Dialogue: Ecumenical, Interreligious and Intercultural



OFM General Constitutions, Article 95:1-2.

1. *The ecumenical spirit should be nurtured everywhere. When conditions permit, brothers should look for ways of working together with all other Christians...*
2. *The brothers' presence among believers of other religions should be kind and reverent, and brothers should work together with these believers to build up the people God has given them*

From the life of Francis ...

Perhaps no better example of Francis as a man of dialogue can be cited than the extremely positive response of world religious leaders to Pope John Paul II's invitation to come to Assisi to pray for world peace on October 27, 1986. The humility and honesty which Francis showed to each person are key factors in any dialogue--social, political or religious.

When Francis told the first friars that soon their brothers would include Frenchman, Spaniards, Germans and Englishmen (1Cel 27), he was preparing them for the need to dialogue! When the friars gathered in chapters, they dialogued about what God had already done through them and what new work God might want them to undertake. Thus the friars set out for Germany--twice (*Chronicle of Jordan of Giano*, #5 and 17). Learning the local language was a prerequisite for effective dialogue!

At one point Celano praises the unity of souls and harmony of behavior among the friars (1Cel 46). Francis exhibited a spirit of dialogue during his visit with Sultan Melek-

el-Kamel (1Cel 57). Those who go among unbelievers have two options: a) avoid quarrels or disputes, being subject to every human creature for God's sake, or b) preach the word of God openly (RegNB c.16). Those who avoid disputes and act courteously (RegB c.3) have some chance of being able to dialogue. Francis' humility had caused a large tree [Pope Innocent III] to bend down and raise up a small tree [Francis when asking the pope to approve the brotherhood's way of life] (L3S 53). When Francis preached, he spoke "with equal candor to great and small" (LM 12:8). "Men and women of every age flocked to see and hear this new preacher who had been given to the world by God" (LM 12:8). Francis told the friars that as long as they gave good example, people would provide for their needs. If the friars failed to give such example, the pact would be broken (2Cel 70). The "dialogue of life" continues!

Reflection

Introduction

Can we believe in a dialogue between religions in view of what happened in 1994 in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and in many other parts of the planet? However, the dialogue already exists, discrete, patient, and confident, between the official representatives of religions. Two common points unite them: a sympathetic curiosity and the sacred promise of not exercising any proselytism.

The non-Christian religions have not easily grasped the interest in this dialogue: each one of them considers that it possesses the "true" God, well inculturated. What is to be learned from others and what can be taught? Peaceful co-existence is sufficient. Two pre-occupations torment Christians who have taken the initiative in these meetings. The first, to be faithful to the command of the Lord: "Teach all nations and baptize them". The second: in what sense can we profess that Christ is the only savior of humanity.

To respond to these two questions Christians think they need the other religions; however respectful, the dialogue is set to continue for a time. This will be studied in depth on four levels:

- A fundamental dialogue due to the fact of living it together.
- A fundamental dialogue on the safeguarding and development of human and humanitarian values.
- The sharing of spiritual, that is, mystical experiences.
- The theological interchange and confrontation of languages about God.

The II Vatican Council declared that other religions were "seeds of the Word". John Paul II, in a prophetic expression, has declared: "When a person prays, it is the Spirit that makes him pray".

Some men and women have made their mark on the history of the Church through their testimony to fidelity to God and to faith in humanity. Among these testimonies Francis of Assisi has been, and still continues to be, a symbol of peace, reconciliation and fraternity for the tens of thousands of persons who venerate him throughout the world.

A) Dialogue in the Life of Francis of Assisi

Throughout the whole of his life, Francis of Assisi, besides being a man of prayer, was also a man of dialogue. It is this manner of presence in the world that he made privileged in order to enter into relationship with God, men, women, his brothers, his sisters and the whole of creation.

It is easy to point out moments of his life in which dialogue plays a central role, that of directing actors towards reconciliation, peace and fraternity. We do not wish to give a detailed account here, since that work would be too extensive, but we do wish to note some that are related to different forms of dialogue.

- A dialogue that converts: Lord, what do you want me to do? (LM 1,3).
- A dialogue that liberates: How St. Francis miraculously cured the body and soul of a leper (Flor 25).
- A dialogue that brings peace: How St. Francis tamed, through divine power, a most ferocious wolf (Flor 21).
- A dialogue that opens the heart: How St. Francis taught Bro. Leo what perfect joy consists of (Flor 8).
- A dialogue based on practice: His knowledge of Scripture. His prophetic spirit (Cf. LM 11,1).
- A spirit that opens up to the stranger: The meeting with the Sultan (Cf. LM 9,8).
- A dialogue that cures: The leper (Cf. 1C 146). The deaf and dumb (Cf. 1C 147, 148).
- A dialogue that transforms: How St. Francis converted the three murderous robbers (Flor 26).

B) To Evangelize in Dialogue.

A new Service for Dialogue in the General Curia OFM.

GUIDE LINES

Motivations

1. Evangelization, that in St. Francis had a very special feature, dialogue, is an essential element of the vocation of the Order. The General Definitorium, therefore, following the mandate of the General Chapters of 1991 and 1997, considers it urgent to deepen, support and promote the commitment of the Order to evangelization by setting up structures that help the Friars Minor to enter into a positive and fraternal contact with all peoples, without obstacles of a religious and/or cultural character, in order to announce the Gospel while recognizing and respecting the values proper to the different cultures.
2. Encouraged by this mandate and wishing to express concretely the V Chapter of the GG.CC., the General Definitorium has gathered the results of previous consultations and decisions to bring together in a unitary vision the contemplative and evangelizing dimensions of the Franciscan vocation, underlining at the same time, the communitary, fraternal and open-minded traits of Franciscan evangelization and of the impossibility of separating formation from action, testimony from annunciation.
3. The Definitory General, while collecting the fruits of the work carried out up to now and summarized in the document "Fill the earth with the Gospel of Christ (1 Cel 97)", invites the friars to consider their vocation within the broad horizon of a world

situation that continuously evolves.

4. The situation of human relations on the threshold of the third millennium and the more recent documents of the Church magisterium place dialogue at the center of attention and preoccupations of those that seek the peace and well-being of humanity.
5. Also, the continual reference by the Pope and the authorized representatives of Churches and religions to our Father as a promoter of reconciliation, dialogue and peace, and their pressing and repeated invitation to the friars to carry out the mission of Francis, change the commitment to dialogue into one of the prerogatives of the Franciscan charism. In fact, in the increasing number of those who are engaged in promoting reconciliation and peace, the spirit that animated the human and Christian experience of St. Francis is manifested.
6. St. Francis was and is truly a man of dialogue in the strict sense of the word. He is a universal man through his most intense and radical Christian experience, reconciled with God, with himself, with all humans and with the whole of creation. He spreads the evangelical message to all with humility and charity.
7. But in order for the spirit of St. Francis to be significant for people today it must also be the spirit of all Franciscans and should animate and characterize all their evangelizing work.
8. In fact, the Franciscan culture and humanism offer an authentic response to the emerging problems in the various cultures and a well-founded hope of solving them. In a world characterized by disharmonies that directly affect humans in their relationships with creation and in the mutual relationships between persons and peoples, the Franciscan evangelization, solidly based in its own spirituality, in the Franciscan vision of the presence of God and in the humanity of Christ and in the vision of the intelligent man, is capable of giving an answer of hope by proposing a culture of proximity, an ecological and cosmic culture, a culture of dialogue. It is the way that makes the inculturation of the Gospel in the hearts of today's man possible (Cf. The Discourse of John Paul II in the Antonianum, with the command to the Order to be evangelizers of hope). The progress of technology and the sciences, the increase and the spread of the means of communications, the reciprocal influence of cultures, the speed of information, the new world of computing have created new situations that demand of us Friars Minor, if we wish to be faithful to our vocation, a response that would allow us assume the existing values and to purify that which could infringe on human dignity. Following the example of Francis, who wished to bring to all the Gospel made life, our form of life must respond to the new challenges of humanity in an attitude of dialogue.
9. The universality of the religious experience of St. Francis and his manner of behavior with Islamic authorities, offer an example of dialogue with the members of other religions that have been shown to convince and involve representatives of all creeds.
10. The experience of reconciliation, the establishment of the word of God, the relationship with creation and the model of the Franciscan community as a style of ecclesial life, convert the Franciscan experience into a point of reference for ecumenical dialogue.
11. From all these elements the unitary vocation of the friars to ecumenism and dialogue is born. It is precisely because of this that the Minister General wishes to pledge the Order to evangelize with a new impetus and with new forms. The Definitory General supports this renewed commitment through the creation of an organism that wishes to be a sign of an active will, the occasion of aid and the involvement of all the forces actually employed in the fields of formation and evangelization, in such a

way that the directives of the Minister General do not remain simply on damp paper.

Structure

12. The Service for Dialogue (SD) is instituted, constituted in three sectors:

- ecumenical dialogue
- inter-religious dialogue
- dialogue with the cultures.

Commission for Ecumenical Dialogue (CED)

Motivations

1. It is not only the II Vatican Council that pledges the Catholic Church and each Christian to the way of ecumenism and dialogue (Cf. especially the documents *Unitatis Reintegratio* and *Nostra Aetate*). The present Pope also has recently underlined, with three important documents, the necessity and the urgency of involvement for the unity of Christians with a view to the unity of all persons (Cf. the Apostolic Letters *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* and *Orientalis Lumen* and the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*).
2. The Order of Friars Minor cannot remove itself from this new consciousness or from these new orientations. In fact, on the establishment of our presence in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the authorities of the Order have followed, since they took the first steps, the principles of dialogue and collaboration proclaimed by the Catholic Church. The result of the good relations established with the principal Orthodox Patriarchs is fruit of a humble and convinced commitment to the service of dialogue.
3. The new situation that is emerging on the threshold of the third millennium is characterized by hitherto unknown demands that require that the ecumenical commitment of the Order takes on stability and continuity in order to offer all the Friars the opportunity of ecumenical knowledge and formation.

Commission for Interreligious Dialogue (CID)

Motivations

1. The Church watches with attention her relationship with the faithful of other religions. She seeks points in common in order to unite our efforts in forming together a great community (NA 1) since all peoples form only one community and have the same origin, given that God had the whole human race inhabit the entire face of the earth (Acts 17,26).
2. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and good in these religions. She regards their ways of acting and living with sincere respect. She exhorts her children so that, with prudence, respect and charity, by means of dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions and giving testimony of faith and Christian life, they recognize, keep and promote those spiritual and moral values as well as the socio-cultural values that are found in them. (NA 2).
3. The Church exhorts us, by overcoming the opposite experiences lived in past

centuries between Christians and faithful of other religions, to exercise sincerely mutual understanding and to defend and promote together social justice, the moral good, peace and freedom for all peoples (NA 3).

4. The history of the Friars Minor is full of encounters with members of other religions, especially with the religions called historical: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. There is a special connection with Judaism. The Church confesses that all the Christian faithful are included in the vocation of the Patriarch Abraham. She does not forget that she has received the revelation of the Old Testament through the Jewish people with which God sealed the ancient Alliance; because of this we wish to encourage mutual knowledge and appreciation and fraternal dialogue (NA 4).
5. As regards Islam, a considerable effort has been made to continue our Franciscan presence and to support our Brothers and Sisters that work in Muslim countries. Since 1982 the Definitory General supports this aspect of inter-religious dialogue through the International Commission OFM for Relations with Muslims. "As followers of St. Francis and of the first missionaries of the Order, the friars are to be especially concerned to go humbly and devoutly among the nations of Islam, for whom, too, no one is all-powerful except God" (GG.CC.95, 3).
6. "By a kind and reverential presence among them, the friars are to work with believers of other religions in order to build up the people God has given them" (GG.CC.95,2). Therefore, the Definitory General wishes to promote the inter-religious formation of the Friars with the creation of the Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue and takes the following measures in respect to its structure and activities:

Commission for Dialogue with Cultures (CDC)

Motivations

1. Evangelization is an essential part of the life of the Friar Minor. We evangelize because it is necessary to help the human person to find ways to find a response to his anxieties. The principal objective of evangelization is the person, not the increase in the number of believers. Also, the love of Jesus Christ for the person drives the Church and, therefore, the Order to continue its mission.
2. Evangelization does not penetrate to the depths of the human person if it does not reach the most intimate part of the culture in which it lives¹. A faith that does not make itself culture is a faith that is not fully embraced, not entirely thought out or faithfully live².
3. The evangelization of cultures has as a consequence the inculturation of the Gospel.

¹ We take as a definition of culture the following statement of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 53: "The word 'culture' in its general sense indicates all those factors by which man refines and unfolds his manifold spiritual and bodily qualities. It means his effort to bring the world itself under his control by his knowledge and his labor. It includes the fact that by improving customs and institutions he renders social life more human both within the family and in the civic community. Finally, it is a feature of culture that throughout the course of time man expresses, communicates and conserves in his works great spiritual experiences and desires, so that these may be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family".

² John Paul II, Discourse to the Participants in the National Congress of the Church Movement of Cultural Work, 10th Jan. 1982, no.2. The diversity of peoples, races, religions and cultures with which the Friars Minor are in relationships because of their vocation, requires a special preparation that facilitates a more fruitful activity.

The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a requirement of culture but also of the faith. This is not identified with any culture, it is independent of all cultures, but, at the same time, it is called to inspire and impregnate all cultures.

4. The profound inculturation of the faith will engender Christian values that will have their basis in the love of God and in the love of neighbor, a summary of the whole of Christianity. From this point of view the CDC will work in the bosom of the Service for Dialogue (SD) in such a way that the friars "are to lend aid readily to further this work of inculturation" (Cf. GG.CC.92, 2), that is called to impregnate all pastoral action of the friars.
5. Many cultural elements of the peoples are manifestations of the "seeds of the Word" (Cf. GG.CC. 92,2). But this presence does not signify that the cultures are already evangelized. The Order of Friars Minor has reaffirmed in its age-old tradition the urgency to announce the message of the Gospel in all ages, in all environments and in all cultures. The presence of Friars Minor who respect the cultures is an experience of the history of our Fraternity. The diversity of peoples, races, religions and cultures with which the Friars Minor have relations through their vocation, requires of these a special preparation that will help them to achieve more easily a fruitful activity.
6. By their vocation, the Friars Minor are called to "repair my Church" in each generation. This attitude is only achieved by evangelizing. This action can only be realized through a sincere evangelizing activity of cultures that justifies the existence of an organism that helps the Minister General and his Definitory to animate this undertaking that forms part of the essence of the vocation received from the Lord.
7. Having their identity clear, which is born of their totally evangelical life, the Friars Minor will know how to discern the values of authentic cultures, in a way that avoids all syncretism and rejects the anti-values that the false culture or the anti-cultures wish to introduce into the different peoples. At the same time, the inculturation of the Gospel requires the respect of the distinct forms in which the culture of he who evangelizes is manifest; at the time he is bringing the Gospel the cultures enrich the Friar Minor and they make him and his religious fraternity grow. The Order manifests in the diversity of the Friars, who come from distinct cultures, the variety with which it is possible to be faithful to the received charism.

Following in the footsteps of St. Francis, the ex-Minister General HERMANN SCHALÜCK concentrated on the necessity for dialogue as he traveled to various countries to meet with the religious leaders of the whole world. This practical example has been emphasized by the friars who try to commit themselves in a constructive dialogue with the members of other beliefs and ethnic groups - especially in situations where these differences have been at the root of tensions, conflicts or wars, as in the Great Lakes District of Africa or in the ex-Yugoslavia.

OFM Commission for inter-religious dialogue

Examples from the lives of the friars...

In today's multi-cultural world, dialogue between different faiths is an essential key to peace. Few people understand that better than FRANÇOIS PAQUETTE, former head of the Franciscan commission for relations with Muslims. Trained as a neuropsychologist in Montreal, **Canada**, he found himself dealing increasingly with patients from Sri Lanka, India, China and Vietnam at the health center where he worked

before joining the Order in 1987. He became fascinated by the different cultures and religions that were rapidly becoming a permanent part of his native city; his curiosity led him to start helping out as a volunteer at a local intercultural center.

But it was not until he was doing his novitiate that Paquette really discovered the power of such interreligious activities. One of the brothers was planning a local gathering to reflect the spirit of the 1986 peace meeting in Assisi and he went along to help. "For me it was a kind of miracle," he recalls with a smile. "I was stunned to see leaders of all the different religions in Montreal coming together to pray for peace instead of fighting amongst each other." Paquette's eyes light up as he explains how the annual initiative has grown along with his own participation in it. "Now we have around a hundred different delegations from the native peoples, the Bah'ai, Sri Lankan Hindus, Vietnamese Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists, Laotian Buddhists, Cambodian Buddhists, two groups of Jews, Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims, Sikhs and also Christians from sixteen different denominations - about a thousand people altogether coming to our friary in Montreal to pray for peace! The setting is very simple, just a plain cross on which we place a banner for each of the different religions taking part and a big picture of a dove symbolizing peace. We want everyone to feel at ease and afterwards they are all invited to share with us in a vegetarian meal." That annual gathering, broadcast live on radio and television, may be the most visible highlight of the Franciscans' activities in Montreal. But throughout the year Paquette and his brothers are equally involved in all sorts of practical actions to support members of the many other faiths present in the city. These may include petitioning for land for the construction of a Vietnamese pagoda, protesting against a group of skinheads who scrawled graffiti on Jewish tombs, organizing an Islam-Christian funeral, or intervening to diffuse violence between Sikhs and Muslims at a local secondary school. "This last example," says Paquette, "really shows how we can make a difference for the future of our society. By working together with a Sikh leader and an Imam we were able to show the children the many aspects of their cultures which they have in common with people of other faiths. When they begin to see each other as real people rather than as part of a stereotyped group, they are able to leave behind the prejudices which have been passed onto them and even to start challenging the attitudes of their own parents."

There are many other examples of Franciscans who are promoting dialogue and peace among young people, sometimes through education programs, more often simply by bringing families from different ethnic groups into daily contact with each other. An interreligious kindergarten in Bosnia, or a school for Muslims and Christians in southern Lebanon helps children in those troubled parts of the world to grow up with a greater respect for the habits and traditions of people from other faiths. An annual interreligious media and film festival in Cairo influences thousands of young people and helps them overcome the prejudices of the past. The aim of the Franciscans is never to be seen as an "organizer" of events or activities but rather to be facilitators of this "dialogue of daily life."

In **Morocco** where the population is almost entirely Muslim, the friars are acutely aware of this form of witness that their continuing presence provides. BERTRAND COUTURIER has spent half his life among the people of Morocco and has seen many young Muslims grow up and find jobs after attending some of the courses the Franciscans are providing. High in the Atlas Mountains, better known for the tragedy of the Trappist monks in **Algeria**, a handful of friars and Franciscan Missionary Sisters of

Mary are teaching local boys basic carpentry skills while the girls learn embroidery and other crafts useful for becoming productive members of society. The sisters also provide a place for young women who come to give birth there and to learn about such issues as health and education, which help to promote their human dignity.

In the city of Meknes, **Morocco**, three other friars run the St. Antoine Center, a library and cultural center which provides courses in Islamic culture and literature, language lessons and sports activities for about 600 local students. They are supported by a team of twelve volunteers who have graduated from the center and now want to help with the friars' work. GUSTAVO SANCHEZ is a young Mexican friar who has spent two years in the Atlas mountains and another four years living and working with the students at the St. Antoine Center. After finishing his studies in Rome, he intends to return to Morocco to carry on his work there. "It's a project which is run by the students themselves," he explains. "Every month we meet together to decide what we want to do, how we want to work and how we can help the students to better understand and appreciate the culture in which they live. For example, during the month of Ramadan we alter the timetables of the courses and work through the day without stopping for lunch. This allows us to fast together with the Muslims and allows them time to prepare the special meals together with their families."

Despite the continuing tensions between the Croatian, Muslim and Serbian people of the former Yugoslavia, the tenth anniversary of the World Day of Prayer for Peace (Assisi, 1986) provided an occasion for various efforts aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue in Sarajevo, Mostar and Split. In Sarajevo, a panel discussion on the theme of the return of refugees as a precondition of lasting peace (which included the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees and officials of the Bosnian and Croatian governments) was held in the Academy of Science and Art of Bosnia & Herzegovina. An interreligious prayer service was also held at a cemetery in Sarajevo with the participation of a delegation of the Franciscan brothers and sisters from Assisi who presented an olive tree as a sign of peace to be planted in Sarajevo. MARCO ORSOLIC has also worked hard to build on these initiatives in a very practical way by helping to open a multicultural center and library in Sarajevo in December 1996.

The Kurdish people of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria have long sought a unified homeland after centuries of dominance by oppressive rulers. Their growing communities in exile throughout Germany have led to new opportunities for friendship and collaboration. As members of the German friars' JPIC Commission, JÜRGEN NEITZERT and other friars have worked alongside seven Christian peace organizations in the German "Campaign Against the Arms Trade." Together with the other members of this campaign, they have begun to raise awareness about the pivotal relationship between the sale of German armaments and the plight of the Kurdish people in Iraq and Turkey. Jürgen Neitzert has traveled to **Turkey** together with Kurdish friends on numerous occasions, bringing humanitarian relief and a small semblance of peace to the people living in makeshift shelters in the slums of Ankara, Diyarbakir, Istanbul and other Turkish cities. More than three thousand villages, now ghost towns because of the forced eviction which comes alongside the Turkish military's heavy-handed treatment of the Kurd population, dot the countryside. The city of Diyarbakir alone has quadrupled in size since the early 1980's. The historically self-sufficient Kurdish slum dwellers are often forced to search for food in garbage dumps and many suffer from severe bronchial

infections throughout the harsh winters. Jürgen and his colleagues encourage community meetings among the Kurdish and Turkish people living in Germany and lobby German political leaders to try and halt the arms trade. As a Franciscan, Jürgen has felt uniquely placed to encourage non-violent solutions and Christian-Muslim collaboration.

In working together for justice and peace, people of different Christian traditions often discover the same deep personal commitment to others that is an integral part of their faith. Approximately seven years ago, the Irish Franciscans initiated a ministry of peace and reconciliation among the Catholic and Protestant people at Rossnowlagh, **Ireland**. Rossnowlagh is one of three “Designated Houses of Specific Ministry” organized by the Irish friars--the others being a prayer fraternity in Killarney and the Merchants Quay complex in Dublin--and is particularly well-placed in Donegal, near the border separating the Republic and the North. The Center offers hospitality to some 30 people and is a place where Catholics and Protestants can come from all across Ireland to meet together, pray and reflect on reconciliation. Conferences with guest speakers are organized regularly to augment the Center's normal activities. JOHN O'KEEFE, the Director of the Center, has helped set up a network of “experts” on prayer and reconciliation who are informally affiliated with Rossnowlagh. The Center is currently completing a library which will be attached to the retreat house and contain special collections on interreligious dialogue and peacemaking.

For more than ten years as pastor of Our Lady of Charity Church in Brooklyn, New York, **U.S.A.**, ROBERT SEAY, a noted opponent of capital punishment, was closely involved in efforts to bring about peaceful solutions to difficult situations involving racial and ethnic tensions. In the “Howard Beach incident,” a young African-American who was killed by a gang of white youths was the son of one of Robert's parishioners. The killing caused extreme racial turmoil in the city of New York. Robert worked with political and religious leaders in a variety of ways and served as consultant to the family of the slain youth in an effort to achieve peace. The simplicity and dignity of the funeral which Robert organized was a significant factor in keeping racial tensions from exploding.

In another incident known as the “Crown Heights riot,” a Hasidic Jew was killed by an African-American. Robert and other clergy were called to the police precinct to help diffuse the situation. Robert worked together with the New York City Mayor at that time, David Dinkins, providing moral support for his efforts to ensure justice and racial harmony. In the aftermath of the Crown Heights riot, a coalition was formed to examine more permanent ways of promoting meaningful dialogue between diverse ethnic and cultural groups in the city.

The Pastors for Peace program, which has helped transport huge quantities of basic supplies and building materials to the people of El Salvador and Nicaragua, is also founded on ecumenical collaboration. During some twenty years of community organizing, ED DUNN has found inter-Christian collaboration to be an essential component of peace and social justice initiatives. Ed recently joined a Presbyterian minister, Chris Hartmire, and a local project coordinator, Ellen Rogers, in setting up a sister-city celebration in Sacramento, California. The gathering, dubbed “Celebrate Hope,” was the highlight of almost a decade of collaboration between the people of Sacramento and the “new town” of San Bartolo, El Salvador. Through his support for the San Bartolo-sister city project and his ongoing coordination of the Central American

Pilgrimage, Ed has led hundreds of Franciscans and their parishioners to learn more about the life and lasting witness of the martyrs of Central America. For Ed, such collaborative efforts for justice are most effective when they are part of a shared faith community.

PHILIPPE SCHILLINGS has become convinced that Franciscans have special gifts to give to the work for migrant peoples throughout the world. He was a missionary in Brazil for twenty years before returning to his native **Belgium** in 1985 to work with Portuguese immigrants. As director of the European Office of International Catholic Migration in Brussels, Philippe was approached by a Kurdish immigrant who said: "Our trade union needs a chaplain and we want you to do it." Philippe replied, "Why me? I am a Catholic and you are Muslim." The Kurdish man answered, "But you are a Franciscan; you people are a bridge between Muslims and Catholics." Philippe is convinced of the need to develop a spirituality on that role as "bridge builders." Today as East European countries struggle to adjust their economies and social structures after decades of centralized communist control, thousands of people are still knocking on the doors of Western European nations seeking political asylum or simply a better way of life. Rather than focus solely on the problems and negative impact of migration, Philippe adds: "We must emphasize the positive aspects of the arrival of newcomers in our midst. Often, Franciscans are more at ease helping refugees and migrant peoples with their immediate needs of food, clothing and housing. But we also have to think long term about their situations and play an advocacy role for them. Focusing international attention on the root causes of migration is crucial before all people can enjoy the fundamental right to live a decent life in their own homelands."

The desire to share more deeply in the daily life of the local Hindu population led SCARIA VARANATH and SWAMI DAYANAND to move away from their traditional Franciscan friary in India and create their own ashram community, some 300 kilometers north of Bangalore. Depending totally on the donations that local people bring, the two men lived a very simple life of prayer and meditation. The house they lived in was given to them by the local bishop and is always open to anyone who wants to come and talk, learn, meditate or simply share a meal with the two friars. "Many ordinary people come to stay with us at the ashram for several days at a time," says Scaria, "Also the wealthy people who are searching for some light and meaning in their lives." Scaria recalls how he was taught to fear other religions as he was growing up in a very traditional Catholic family in the days before the Second Vatican Council. "I was told by my parents and church authorities not to talk to people of other faiths or to even look at Hindu temples and gods!" Now he says his studies of Hindu scriptures and literature have led him towards a greater insight into his own Franciscan vision of the world. "Hinduism is based on a profound spiritual vision of the oneness of reality in which rivers, seas, every living thing is a manifestation of the divine and therefore to be treated with respect."

Bringing the spirit of St. Francis to life amongst different cultures and religions was the idea behind the establishment of a retreat center near Bangkok in **Thailand** in 1985. Today that center still offers a place for meditation and prayer but has expanded to include a hospice for AIDS patients, almost all of them Buddhists who have nowhere else to go and die in peace. It is one of the many examples worldwide of dialogue through practical gestures rather than intellectual ideas. One of the friars who worked there, ANTONIO EGIGUREN, recalls how most of the local people would confuse St.

Francis with St. Anthony - "they were simply two statues that could be seen in the Catholic churches! We wanted to show the face of St. Francis to the people through our simple lifestyle and through our service to those most in need." The hospice can accommodate up to ten patients and has done much to combat the fears and prejudices which surround that kind of care for people dying of AIDS. The friars are not interested in pushing Christianity on their patients, but they tell one moving story of a young mother of two small children who came to the hospice after her husband died of AIDS. Not long before she too died of the disease, she told one of the friars that *Me Pra* (Mary) had come to visit and comfort her in the night. "But you are a Buddhist," the friar replied. "Yes," she said, "but *Me Pra* knows what it means to be a mother who suffers."

General Constitutions

Article 70. "The brothers should promote mutual acceptance and good will among people and be instruments of the reconciliation that Jesus Christ accomplished on his cross."

Other references: articles 68:1-2; 93:1; 94; 95:1-3; 96: 1-3 and 127:3.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the largest Christian groups (besides Roman Catholics) in your country? Do you ever join them in prayer? in formal dialogue? in works of mercy?
2. What are the largest non-Christian groups in your country? Have you ever joined them in prayer for world peace or for some other intention? in formal dialogue? in works of mercy?
3. How is St. Francis regarded by the Christian and non-Christian groups in your country? If positively, have you used this as a possible starting point for dialogue?
4. Does your local community or provincial fraternity participate in ecumenical or interreligious dialogues in the spirit of the October 1986 meeting in Assisi of world religious leaders to pray for world peace? Does the story of Francis meeting the Sultan encourage you to participate in interreligious dialogue? With what attitudes?
5. What obstacles to dialogue might you be presenting? might your local community offer? might your provincial fraternity experience?
6. Can you identify other forms of dialogue in the life of Saint Francis as well as those that were suggested above?
7. What recurring indicators do I notice in the way that Francis of Assisi enters into dialogue? What are his key strengths in promoting dialogue?
8. Which type of dialogue challenges me most?
9. When are there occasions I can promote dialogue in my daily life?
10. What are the factors that can motivate me to do so?
11. Who are those (people or circumstances) whom I could involve in dialogue?
12. Where, under what circumstances and how?
13. What are my fears and my challenges?
14. What are my own strengths and what can help me to be a initiator of dialogue?
15. In your fraternity do you have meetings with members of other Christian confessions or other religions? What is the purpose of these meetings? Is it for prayer, for dialogue or for reflection? What is your experience of these meetings?
16. Do you collaborate in campaigns or action on behalf of the poor, of peace or of the environment?