

The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans - Assumption BVM Province

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Spirituality and the Places of Our Lives **ROCCA MAGGIORE** Conversion to Non-Violence



Rocca Maggiore: Medieval Fortress above Assisi

As a young man Francis enjoyed all the dreams and aspirations of every other young man in Assisi. He wanted to become a knight, be victorious in battle, gain glory, wealth and win the hand of a fair maiden. Two experiences had a significant impact on his dreams. One was the destruction, in 1198, of the Rocca Maggiore by the inhabitants of

Assisi. This massive medieval fortress, at the top of the hill into which Assisi is built, housed the representative of the Holy Roman Empire who governed the people. The destruction of this symbol of oppression brought about the downfall of feudalism, a way of life that would never rise again. The citizens used the stones to build a wall around the city. One can assume Francis was part of the assault. He would have been sixteen years old.

A second experience happened in November 1202. Assisi declared war against its bitter enemy, Perugia. The two armies met at Collestrada, ten miles distance from Assisi, and the superior forces of Perugia soundly defeated the Assisians. A great many soldiers were taken prisoner, among them Francis. His dreams of glory were shattered. What followed was a slow shifting in his heart.

The gradual transformation that unfurled in his spirit began to teach him that violence was not something external to be resisted with active or passive techniques such as setting up walls, or having the finest weaponry to engage in battle or defend one's possessions. All of these were externals and never achieved anything.

It is true that there is violence and evil outside ourselves, but what Francis learned was that the propensity to violence, this vein of evil in which we all share, is the center

within ourselves which keeps alive our judging of others, our greed and anger, our revenge and self pity, or the need to have power and be in control. All of these are within the heart and are the source of violence. In learning this Francis also learned that the absence of peace is inside one's heart, not outside. And the only way to peace is to achieve peace of heart, peace of soul, not to take up weapons and engage in war.



The Field of Battle at Collestrada, 1202.

There is a poignant scene in the movie GANDHI. A group of Indians gathered in an enclosed square to listen to someone speak on non-violence. A British general led troops into the square and blocked any means of escape. He then ordered his men to begin firing. During the massacre one of the Indians could be seen running through the crowd and shouting: "Receive their anger; receive their anger." A thousand were killed, but not one stone was hurled back.

I thought a lot about this (apparently historical) event. I had been living with someone who had a volatile, volcanic personality. One day he came screaming at me, frustrated and angry beyond words at something going on in the community. Being the local minister at the time he perhaps took it out on me because I happened to be the authority figure. During the outburst I remembered the above scene from the movie and I kept saying to myself: "Receive his anger; receive his anger." A deep calm followed and to this day we share a wonderful respect for one another.

Similar moments happened during work with the pilgrimages in Italy. Over the years we would go to important sanctuaries where the friar caretakers couldn't care less about seeing or ministering to another group of pilgrims,

perhaps because of being too long at the job. They were cranky, angry and disrespectful. I would say to myself, "Roch, receive their anger; be kind and respectful." Inevitably there would be a softening in their demeanor and they would feel good about themselves.

We do not handle violence with violence. Violence is not broken down by becoming violent ourselves, or by returning anger, or by being offensive to a friar at a sanctuary or a waiter in a restaurant. We do not handle what is ugly and repulsive with exclusion. We embrace, we welcome. We offer gentleness. Violence in people's hearts is broken by non-violent embrace and forgiveness.



Walls of the Rocca Maggiore

The Rocca Maggiore one sees today was rebuilt between the 14th and 16th centuries. It still towers above the city of Assisi and reminds one of an imposing imperial fortress from the Middle Ages. It symbolizes the rivalries between pope and emperor, Assisi and Perugia, Maiores and Minores. A pilgrim who visits this stronghold will likely be impressed by its strength and defensive capabilities. It stands forth, however, as a symbol of violence, war and much that defeats the human spirit. It also can serve as a challenge to non-violence and the pursuit of peace. It might also give one pause to reflect on Francis's ministry of peace and our call to be peacemakers.

Francis practiced what he preached. He was a messenger of peace and non-violence. His desire for reconciliation with all became the non-violent charism of Francis of Assisi. Someone gave me a quote many years ago that fits here: *There is nothing as strong as gentleness and nothing so gentle as real strength.* How true these words!

A fitting conclusion to these comments comes from the Rule of 1223, 3. Francis writes:

I counsel, admonish and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ not to quarrel or argue or judge others when they go about in the world; but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle, and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming. ... Into whatever house they enter, let them first say: "Peace be to this house!"



Francis tames a violent Wolf at Gubbio.

So Francis gradually entered another battle which became the interior battle to peace. This meant coming to grips with the aggression inside his own heart. The struggle happened in the places of solitude. Here he came to grips with his own demons (pride, fear, violence, ambition, cowardice, power). In doing so he embraced that ominous, negative side of his

nature and turned his life over to Jesus to be redeemed. He learned that the person in union with Christ need not fear evil nor deny it. In reliance on Christ and his Spirit the battle with one's own violence can be won, and what seemed bitter and ugly became sweet and beautiful. Sensing a new power he would go out and act on his discoveries: facing his father, embracing a leper, or accepting the ridicule of the townspeople.

What are the places or circumstances that evoke violent responses in our lives? In our homes, work centers or neighborhoods, how do we receive those persons in our life who make demands on us, we who are teachers in classrooms, or pastoral ministers, or mothers and fathers, or blue collar workers? How do we welcome those members of the human race who sometimes lead us where we would prefer not to go, and ask us to do what we don't want to do? How do we receive those who use us, who come charging at us with anger and frustration? How can we learn to receive anger as a path to being a peacemaker?

Reminder

SFO QUINQUENNIAL CONGRESS

July 3-8, 2007 - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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