

# The Way of St. Francis



Works of Justice

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concerning care

# Franciscan Roots of American Catholic Social Justice Ministry

BY MAUREEN K. DAY

When I first was asked to write what is a Franciscan approach to social justice ministry, of course I said yes. I've been immersed in the Franciscan tradition for seven years and I wrote a book on Catholic civic engagement; I could do this upside down in my sleep!

But then I sat down to write. Even right side up and wide awake, I could not figure out what a distinctly Franciscan—as opposed to generally Catholic—approach to social justice ministry might be. Then it hit me. Consciously or not, Catholic social ministry in the

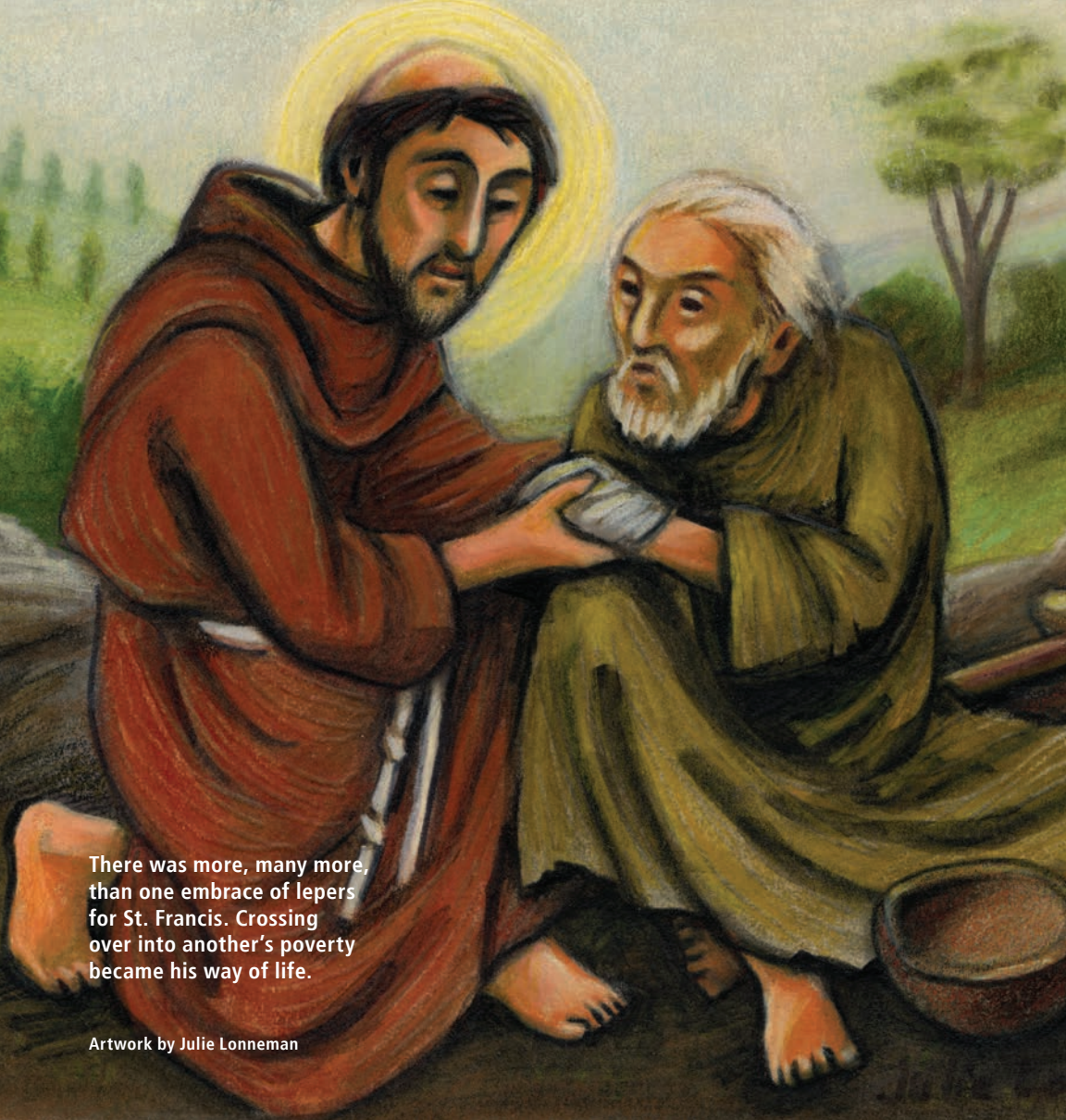
United States has been deeply shaped by Franciscan thought. I had studied JustFaith Ministries, the experienced and compelling nationwide organization for parishes, which is very Franciscan in its mission and values. Indeed, so are the vast majority of Catholic social ministry organizations in the United States.

The five characteristics of social ministry I identified in my book—*transformation, Christ-centeredness, community, justice or outreach, and compassion*—are rooted in Francis' life and the movements he inspired. Let's unpack these.



Photo courtesy of Maureen K. Day

**US Catholic social ministry is shaped by Franciscan thought, says author Maureen K. Day, seen here at the Franciscan School of Theology, in San Diego.**



There was more, many more, than one embrace of lepers for St. Francis. Crossing over into another's poverty became his way of life.

Artwork by Julie Lonneman

**Transformation** is incredibly important to the Franciscan tradition. Jerald Brauer, a sociologist of conversion, wrote that within the whole of Catholic history, Franciscans uniquely understood the role of the Holy Spirit and conversion in the life of the Christian. This is no doubt rooted in Francis' profound conversion in his encounter with the leper. The Lord led Francis to the lepers, a people he found abhorrent. But in Francis' trust and openness, what had seemed bitter to him "was turned into sweetness of soul and body." And far from being the

culmination of his conversion, Francis' encounter with the leper was just the beginning. Francis' transformation while showing mercy to the leper makes social ministry an act of reciprocity and solidarity rather than a paternalistic gesture marked by inequality and social distance.

**Christ-centeredness** needs to be qualified. At its heart, the Franciscan tradition is deeply Trinitarian, and draws upon each of the three persons of the Trinity as well as the loving relationship they



A group of coworkers gathers at Fr. Virgil Cordano Center, a walk-in respite in Santa Barbara, California, started by nearby friars.

Photo courtesy of Old Mission Santa Barbara Facebook Page

share. Even given this, we can still talk about the unique contributions of Christ to the Franciscan tradition.

Perhaps most obviously, the Franciscan tradition is animated by the Incarnation. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, not only did God love us directly through the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth, but this was a game-changer for the entire created universe. God's love was made visible in that singular moment of Christ's birth as well as in every moment afterward that reveals God's in-breaking.

Christ offers us a window to both the fully divine and the fully human, illuminating who we are as well as the beauty of our brothers and sisters. Franciscan social justice ministry is incarnational.

**Community** is possibly the most visible characteristic of Franciscan life. Friars, sisters, seculars, and the so-called "fourth order" members (the non-professed who live lives inspired by Francis) gather regularly in living arrangements, ministries, parishes, and more to form, challenge, and encourage one another. First, community matters for the Fran-

ciscan heart. The world has a lot of suffering in it. If people know they are not alone in wanting to bring abundance to places of scarcity, community can mean hope rather than despair, bitterness, or apathy.

Second, one of the best ways to bring about social change is in *community*. Not only do we buoy one another in community, but also through collaboration, our gifts come together and grow. Amazing things happen when we work together.

**Justice** or **outreach** were the words I used in my book to describe social ministry. If an organization is focused on structural change, it leans toward justice. If it is more about charity or immediate needs, it leans toward outreach. But Franciscans have their own word that encompasses both: *mercy*.

The charitable work of Franciscans is well-known, but showing mercy through structural change is less discussed. In Franciscan theologian Ken Himes' *Franciscan Urban Ministry*, mercy through social reform was an important focus.

As an example, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century the

friars in Siena had become more lax in their denouncing of riches. The Observant Franciscan reform pushed back on this. They argued against the prevailing sentiment that those in poverty were there because of their own doing, saying instead that the impoverished were victims of an unjust system. They also denounced the common practice of usury and started their own nonprofit pawn shops where people could borrow money at a reasonable cost.

Needless to say, they made both friends and enemies in these efforts, standing as a prophetic witness and bringing good news to the poor. Mercy—structural and charitable—is a hallmark of Franciscan life.

**Compassion** means “to suffer with” another. To experience compassion—which is different from prophetic anger or pity—requires that we step into the suffering of another and feel some piece of it ourselves. It is deeply Christ-like, deeply Franciscan, and deeply human. It changes both the receiver and the giver. It brings beauty to an ugly situation, connection to the isolated, and security to the vulnerable. In truth, it is one of the most powerful human experiences.

A final “bonus” characteristic of Franciscan social justice ministry—this one

was *not* covered in my book—is **gift**. The Franciscan tradition recognizes a total distinction between Creator and creation. When compared to an infinite God, creation—including you and me—seems vastly insignificant. And yet, God sees us as wondrously significant. God is right. God delights in our joys, mourns our suffering, and tenderly embraces us as we leave our earthly life.

God loves us. And with this lavish love comes abundant gifts. Everything that exists—including you and me—is loved into being by God. And once we realize the gift of existence, it transforms everything. Everything and everyone is precious. We desire the good for all. Awe and wonder abound. This lens of *gift* grounds Franciscan social justice ministry.

This, then, is the Franciscan approach to justice: of bringing transformation, Christ-centeredness, community, mercy (charity *and* justice), compassion, and gift to our lives, ministries, and world! And our efforts in this approach are constantly to be renewed. As St. Francis famously said, “Let us begin again, because up until now, we have done little or nothing.” ❖

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*Maureen K. Day is an associate professor of Religion and Society at the Franciscan School of Theology. Her latest book is Catholic Activism Today (NYU Press).*

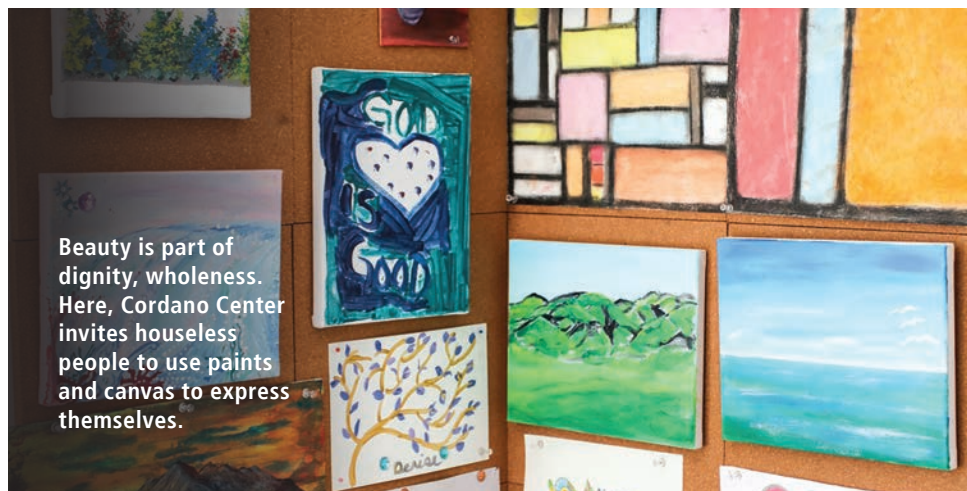


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