

# Franciscan Education as an Agent of Change

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**Dear brothers and sisters**

May the Lord give you his gift of peace!

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Franciscan education is sometimes characterized as a marriage of intellect and affect, a wedding of the head and the heart. Surely, head and heart are the “vital organs” of any academic endeavor that would claim the mantle of St. Francis. But isn’t that neat formulation forgetting something that is essentially Franciscan? For Francis, it wasn’t enough to think deep thoughts or even to feel great compassion. He insisted that those profound thoughts and compassionate feelings had to be acted upon. Francis had a decided bias in favor of deeds. He rejected learning for learning’s sake. And he certainly had no time for abstract religiosity or good intentions that died on the vine of moral lassitude. He was convinced that, without concrete action, our noble ideas are mere phantoms and our holy desires are pure pipe-dreams. He was fond of pointing out that “a person is only as learned as his actions show; and a religious is only as good a preacher as his actions show.” He also insisted that if, and only if, the disciples of Christ “give Him birth through a holy *activity*” will the Word of God once again become flesh in our flesh and make a real difference in our world. So, a genuinely *Franciscan* education must be oriented to praxis: to work, to doing good works, and to work at transforming the world. A few thoughts about each.

**To work.** In the *Testament* which he dictated from his death bed and in which he reviewed the essential elements of his spiritual journey, St. Francis wrote: “I worked with my hands, and I still desire to work; and I earnestly desire all my brothers to give

themselves to honest work.” Francis was convinced that work is a grace. It’s a God-given gift. Now, some people are hard-pressed to believe that: those who dread the sound of the alarm clock in the morning; those who count down the days, hours and minutes before their next vacation; those who live for the weekend and eagerly await the earliest possible date when they can retire with full benefits. For these unhappy laborers, work is a curse. But Francis had a different perspective. He spoke of the “*grace of work.*” He wrote in his *Rule of Life* for his friars: “Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the *grace of working* may work faithfully and devotedly so that, while avoiding idleness . . . they do not extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute.” To Francis, work was a gift, a blessing, a path to holiness, a concrete, practical way of demonstrating one’s love for God and neighbor. It wasn’t just “church work” or the helping professions that Francis considered grace-filled activity. He was convinced that any kind of honest work can be a boon to one’s spiritual life and a benefit to one’s brothers and sisters. Any kind of human labor, when performed in the spirit of prayer and devotion, can become the work of God, our own unique way of joining God in the ongoing task of creation, as Blessed John Paul II reminds us in his encyclical on dignity of human labor, *Laborem Exercens* (14 September 1981).

I believe Franciscan educators need to shun the ivory tower luxury of thinking that education is an end in itself and that all talk of preparing their students for a job in the workplace is somehow or other beneath their professional and professorial dignity. But what can be more dignified than to affirm the dignity of work and the dignity of the worker—all workers, not just those who work in white collars and hold prestigious positions in society? What can be more dignified than exposing and disposing young men and women to the “grace of work”? Helping your students to prepare for their life’s work, to acquire a robust work ethic, to take pride in the work of their hands, and to respect the work of others—whether it be the work of a housekeeper or a house

builder, a farmer or factory worker, a street sweeper or a brain surgeon—is a very “Franciscan” thing to do.

**To do good works.** In the same chapter of the *Franciscan Rule* that deals with work, Francis also says: “Let all the brothers always strive to exert themselves in doing good works.” In this regard, as in all others, he set a high bar for the friars by his own example. The hands that repaired run-down, road-side chapels around the city of Assisi were the same hands that touched the untouchable in medieval society: the leper. Francis ministered to those whose disfiguring disease placed them on the margins of society. He changed bandages on the lepers’ wounds and sought alms for their sustenance. He embraced their debilitated bodies and affirmed their much-abused human dignity. The first Franciscan friaries were outside the protective walls of Assisi and in close proximity to the leper colonies where Francis and his brothers were at home among the homeless (cf. Michael Cusato, OFM, “Wall-to-Wall Ministry: Franciscan Ministry in the Cities of Thirteenth-Century Italy,” *True Followers of Justice: Identity, Insertion and Itinerancy among the Early Franciscans. Spirit and Life*, 10, St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2000, pp. 31-61) and where Francis wrote these challenging words to his followers of every time and place: “Let all the brothers . . . rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside.” As I mentioned earlier, such experiences of being with and living among the poor, the marginalized and the outcast can be profoundly transformative. They certainly were for Francis. They can change one’s values. They can change one’s goals and priorities in life. They can change one’s perspective on the economic and social structures that both shape and misshape us. They can change one’s understanding of one’s self, one’s world and one’s God. That’s why *service-learning opportunities* need to be an essential component of a genuinely Franciscan education, so that your

students might be taught by “the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside” life’s most important lessons.

**Finally, to work at transforming the world.** Many of you are familiar with an incident from the early days of Francis’s conversion to a gospel way of life. Unsure of the direction his own life was taking and seeking God’s guidance, Francis prayed before the crucifix that hung in the church of San Damiano, a little, ramshackle, roadside chapel just outside the walls of Assisi. As he stared at the icon of the suffering Christ, Francis heard a voice say to him, “Francis, rebuild my house which, as you can see, has fallen into ruin.” With his bias in favor of action over mere intention, Francis took the words literally. He picked up a carpenter’s hammer and a mason’s trowel, and began to repair the rundown sanctuary.

In time, of course, Francis came to understand that the building project which the Lord was inviting him to undertake was far greater and far grander than the renovation of a church. Some Franciscan scholars today would argue that the building project envisioned by the man on the cross was far greater and far grander even than the renovation, renewal and reform of the Church, the one described in the Creed as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” The “house of God” is more than a temple and more than the community of Christian believers. It is nothing less than the world, God’s good creation. That is what has “fallen into ruin.” That is what needs rebuilding. That is what requires all the wisdom and knowledge, all the skills and talents, all the energy and enthusiasm, all the passion and compassion of your students. Ultimately, this is what you are preparing them to do: to apply what they have learned under your tutelage to the rebuilding of God’s house, the transformation of God’s world, the refashioning of God’s creation so that it more clearly reflects the integrity, justice and peace of God’s creative purpose and plan. ...

Thank you, and may you and your students be blessed with the gifts of “peace and all good.”