

October 3, 2010 Feast of St. Francis

Lections: Genesis 1:24-31a; Ps. 148:7-14; Canticle of the Sun; Matt. 6:25-34

We begin today with a celebration of creation in a portion of Genesis, a few verses of a creation-centered psalm and the Canticle of the Sun attributed to Francis. Even the gospel gives us creation as an example of trust in the Creator, an invitation to imitate the birds and the flowers. Underneath these texts is the belief that Creation is good, that it is an extravagant gift of a loving Creator. One of the marks of mission in the Anglican Communion is the care of such a gift.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century just before Francis was born, various faith groups such as the Cathars in s. France and Lombardy and the Waldensians held a directly oppositional belief system: “that matter, the natural world, was inherently evil, the creation not of God but of the devil since it was corruptible. These folks believed that the work of God was the universe of souls, and that the path of salvation was a release from the sinful flesh. They held that the incarnation of Christ was a monstrous perversion and the crucifixion an illusion since the Saviour could not be contaminated by participation in the material world. Making love was inherently evil since conception continued the natural order; meat, milk and eggs were not consumed since they were the products of conception.”<sup>1</sup> All of this was considered a heresy by the church; preaching missions and eventually a crusade mounted an effective response.

It was also a time of populist, lay preaching; lots of people had lots to say and much of it fell outside the institution and traditional teachings by the church. Some monks, bound mainly to their abbeys by the rule of stability, critiqued lay society and also the wealth of the church, its tributes and the expansion of church courts. Someone said at the time that the church knew more about the law of the church than the law of the Saviour. One of these monks was Domenic, a Spanish cleric who combated heresy by creating a religious order with a rigorous regime of poverty. Another was Francis who also embraced poverty and all of creation with humanity not as superior but in right relationship. Francis had known wealth, war and illness. His absolute focus on Jesus, on incarnation, led him to embrace even the signs of the crucifixion on his own body. Francis’ ministry was not designed as a fight against heresy per se but tapped into a lay spirituality that was seen in monastic vocations. Anyone, from any walk of life, could join a monastery and find himself or herself in a different world. All were equally poor, all were equally faithful. It was a legitimate form of protest against the status quo.

By 1222, 3000-5000 Franciscans came together for a General Chapter meeting and the movement spread rapidly throughout Christian Europe. The Franciscans were itinerant preachers, not bound to one place. They were called to be pastorally available to everyone, including lepers. They were committed to “radical unprotectedness, to abandon self-will and to become ‘less than’ by serving others.” Francis had heard a voice while praying in the chapel of San Damiano which told him to ‘rebuild my church.’ He was faithful to this call.

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<sup>1</sup> McManners, John, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, Oxford, 1990

Last week we began to look at the decline of the church in our time, its need for rebuilding. Culture, as we discovered, has a lot to do with church challenges in every age. Most of us need to retool to deal with the loss of church memberships. Priests as old as I am were trained to expect the culture to support the church. Now we are in a post-Christian, post-Modern, multicultural context; what we assume about churchland is no longer accurate. Take, for example, a theatre piece in Ottawa sponsored by the American embassy, entitled the Hijabi Monologues. Two young Muslim women told a variety of true stories so that we could see that they were 'more than a piece of fabric.' Not only would that have not been on my radar screen 25 years ago but I also would not have been one of the few white Christian people in attendance. Whole age groups are missing from the church; if the institution is to survive we need both adaptive and transformational leadership. We need to understand the profound changes which are affecting us. (see attached list).

One of the most powerful changes is a shift from knowledge based faith or 'right belief' as an entry point into congregations. Today people would like an experience of faith, something that moves them and also makes meaning. Walking for a cure for breast cancer today invites reflection on service, common humanity, struggle, suffering and hope. Our mission trips give people a chance to enter an experience not a list of things to believe.

In Scott Seider's book, Shelter, he describes the only student run homeless shelter in the United States. For more than 25 years nearly 100 college students have kept this shelter open seven nights a week from November to April; it is in Harvard Square where the most privileged meet the most marginalized. The majority of students come from Harvard but others from Tufts, MIT, Wellesley, and Boston University. Important meaning-filled time is spent under one roof. "Something happens that lives on," says one student.

A former guest of the shelter recalled her amazement that 'these kids actually treated me as an equal....they didn't dwell on my homelessness. We talked about food, cooking, food salvaging and then it went on from there to books...the power dynamic was so flattened that we could just talk.'" This, she said, was integral to her ascent out of homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

I think Francis would be proud of this renewal of faith. Francis, who begged for food; Francis the wanderer, Francis who embraced poverty and became a saint. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera

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<sup>2</sup> Seider, S., Shelter, Continuum, 2010, p. 252

Major Shifts Affecting Churches Today from Gary Nicolosi, presenter at diocesan clergy conference

People are spiritual or secular but not religious.

The experience economy has replaced the production economy. Experience determines what is right, good and true.

The Millennial generation is the first generation in history more unlike than like their parents. They are resisting organized religion in large numbers, and they perceive reality as kaleidoscopic rather than linear.

People are less interested in an intellectual approach to faith and increasingly drawn to the experiences of faith. There is an increasing appreciation of feelings, intuition and mystery and a movement away from rationalism, logic and intellectualism. We have gone from Star Trek's Dr. Spock to Star Trek: the Next Generation's Data.

The visual is replacing the verbal, and the digital has replaced print in the way we communicate with each other.

We are moving away from denominational loyalty, to consumer religion. We pick what works for us and discard the rest. People shop for faith the way they shop for toothpaste. Brand loyalty is a thing of the past. Church is a way station rather than a destination.

The regional church, even among small congregations, has become increasingly common. People will bypass their local church to attend a church of their choice.

We have gone from isolation, alienation and individualism to connection, conversation and community thanks to the cell phone which as it develops more features is the most valued and necessary possession of the millennial generation.

Authoritative religion and truth has given way to pragmatism and utility. People no longer ask, is it true but rather, does it work for me.

The role of worship is changing from nurturing and strengthening the faithful to evangelizing and attracting new people.

There is an increasing insistence on excellence in the church's ministries, programs, and facilities. Mediocrity and second hand is not tolerated.

Hierarchy is giving way to flattened organizations and decision making is increasingly disbursed and participatory. The organizational pyramid is being replaced by the circle. Authoritative religion (we have the answer) is on the defensive and pilgrim religion (we live with the questions) is on the rise.

People no longer join churches; they form relational ties with others. The first question a newcomer asks is, is there anyone here like me.

The church is moving away from 'believing leads to belonging' to 'belonging leads to believing'. The focus is organic, developmental, process-oriented. The question for the church is how inclusive is inclusive.

<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>
Dwelling	seeking
Sacred space	sacred moments
Sacred as fixed	sacred as portable
Defined boundaries	open parameters
Either/or	both/and
Rational and logical	paradox and mystery
Religion/maintenance	relationships/connections
Permanence	transition
Stability	uncertainty/change
Settler	pioneer
Inhabiting	journeying
Loyalty: maintain tradition	pragmatism; do what works
Truth verifies experience	experience verifies truth
Hierarchy dictates	community negotiates
Take it or leave it	multiple choice
One size fits all	spiritual segmentation