

Minister's Letter



Brother Samuel SSF, Minister Provincial of the First Order Brothers, European Province, writes:

Dear Friends,

In the portrayal of the creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, attention is often drawn to the small but significant gap between the finger of God and that of Adam, the one stretching out to the other. What is not usually noticed is that the Creator's other arm is wrapped around the shoulders of a beautiful woman - Lady Wisdom, present at the beginning of creation, inherent in the warp and weft of the universe.

Over the past months we've been forced to wake up to the fact that the Lady Wisdom has been rather absent from the attitudes, the practices and the mindsets which have led to the gigantic financial and economic crisis presently engulfing the world - bringing anxiety, insecurity, hardship and poverty to so many. Too late we've recognised the foolishness of lending and borrowing money which didn't really exist at all. Bankers are receiving much of the odium for the disaster, but corporately we've all been caught out; we've all allowed ourselves to be conned by the vision of unlimited growth, the expectation that things can only get better.

We are also waking up to the fact that a similar foolishness has blinded our understanding of the natural environment, that there's an ecological crunch on the way which is potentially at least equal to, if not far more serious than, the credit crunch. Where is the wisdom in the breakdown of a sensitive and attentive relationship with the rest of creation, the squandering and misuse of natural resources, the loss of diverse habitats and species, the destructive effect of the human footprint on the planet?

Franciscans aren't immune to the foolishnesses of contemporary culture, nor, as banks go bust and as the effects of climate change become apparent, have we any right to say 'we told you so', but the present situation does provide us with an incentive to return to the wisdom that Francis himself discovered and treasured, and to learn again how to live and share it with some confidence. In a world which is rapidly losing confidence in the economic model that has dominated its thinking for the past thirty years or more, and in which reliance on the power of the market is being widely questioned, Franciscans should be rejoicing again in the overwhelming

abundance of God in and through all things which reaches its fulfilment in the gift of Jesus Christ. We can proclaim that abundance and demonstrate that generosity in our life together, in our working for justice for the poor and marginalised to share God's abundance with equality, in the wisdom of simplicity and in the witness that 'less is more'. In our community life we can choose to embrace and live by an ecology of gift rather than just an economy of work and reward.

Francis' wisdom reminds us too that all life, not only human life but the life of every creature, is in relationship to one another, that we belong together as part of God's family. This runs counter to the deep individualism of our culture which has lost the sense that we are part of one ecosystem, and that the loss of one person or one species will impoverish the whole. Again, our community life, our efforts at reconciliation and peacemaking, and our care for the environment can be powerful witnesses to a wisdom alternative to that which has prevailed in the most recent decades.

Though foolishness has overtaken us in the lead-up to this crisis, what has perhaps most characterised our consumerist culture in recent years has been an absence of joy; true joy which rejoices in the goodness and beauty of God reflected in each other and in the natural world. Despite all the riches of technology which have been heaped upon us, we have remained a deeply dissatisfied society, anxious about the future and passing the blame for whatever has gone wrong. On the other hand, with Francis, there's nothing dour or moralising about following Christ; rather he comes across to us as one who lived delightfully and playfully, like the figure of Lady Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, 'rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race'. Our Franciscan communities are called to be, above all else, places of joy where the life of God's Kingdom is experienced and shared, and where we enter playfully into God's creative purpose for the world.

Francis begins his Praises of the Virtues with the words: 'Hail, Queen Wisdom! The Lord save you, with your sister, pure, holy Simplicity'. May we rediscover such wisdom and simplicity today for ourselves and for our world.