Reflections of a Minister General

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Peace, love, hope and joy to all.

*Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently,*
*Nourish the life of the world in our care;*
*Gift of great wonder, ours to surrender,*
*Trust for the children tomorrow will bear.*

So begins a hymn from two of our New Zealand songwriters, Colin Gibson and Shirley Murray. For me it expresses what the Society of St Francis and more specifically our Third Order represents. As Minister General I have been privileged to have moments of walking on holy ground as I have engaged, prayed, lived amongst our many tertiaries throughout our five provinces, all living out our Principles in their daily living.

One of my great joys was to suggest to our newly ordained bishop in the diocese I serve, that he become a Companion of our Society, because he had as Dean in another diocese walked closely with the Third Order. He quickly responded with a yes, and I am conscious that as he serves Christ in this part of God's world, his journey as a Companion with us who follow the Franciscan way will be seen in his leadership and commitment to show Christ by how he lives and to share Christ in all he meets. He recognises the Christ in everyone.

"To know Christ and to make Christ known."

As I have met and walked beside my brothers and sisters following in the way of Francis and Clare, we are very conscious that we have made a promise to make Christ known and loved everywhere; to spread the spirit of love and harmony; to live simply; and to do this by our prayer, study, work, and do it in the spirit of humility, love and joy.

I am always aware that I need to walk gently as I greet my brother or sister who is not always where I am in my journey with Christ. Sometimes I walk in front and sometimes I walk beside and often I walk behind, but what unites me with those I meet is a realisation that where they are, Christ is also, and how I share Christ with love, tenderness, and yet sometimes with a tough challenge can help in breaking down obstacles and the barriers that can divide us.

"To help us all see that we are all made in the image of God."
As I visit my brothers and sisters I know that the places and people I visit become holy ground. Their hospitality, their inclusive love, and their voice that expresses concern in our diversity gives me the courage and the wisdom that with God's help we can share a wider and more inclusive and hospitable picture of who we are.

I remember a moment of visiting a village in the Solomon Islands and a chief of that village expressing a prayer and wish as he thanked me, acknowledging me not only as Minister General but as a priest and that one day he may welcome me back to be the celebrant at the altar. His church is not yet there, but I rejoiced in the desire by him for change and a recognition that I was part of who he was in our journey together.

In Papua New Guinea I spent time living with one of my Franciscan sisters in her home surrounded by her family, and the care and love I received there, and the wonderful gathering of tertaries as we explored and learnt more about St Clare of Assisi were for me part of a bigger picture of us as followers of Christ. Similarly, the time of prayer and community as we gathered each day at Greyfriars in Canterbury during the Lambeth Conference and the quiet words of thanks from the bishops who knew of our prayer presence. And on my visit to Brazil, travelling many miles to formally welcome the groups into our Third Order, and a special moment of prayer at one place as we recited a psalm with four of the sentences in Portuguese and one in English. A recognition of offering praise and worship, and without the barrier of language separating us. Other events that stand out for me are the Chapter meeting in Johannesburg and the sharing together around the theme of love, and being part of Convocations and General Chapters in Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand all with a special mess-age of what it really means to follow in the way of Francis and Clare in our following of Christ, and to discover Christ in one another.

As Minister General I have been honoured to join us together in our unity and also in our diversity, to recognise as Francis did the uniqueness of each part of creation, and especially we, as the human part.

I acknowledge our gratitude and love for the nurturing and care that the First Order brothers gave to the Third Order in its growing to full maturity. As a mother, my two children were dependent on me in their growing years, but now as adults I greet them and listen to them and learn from them and know that as we share we are not dependent on one another but connected with a bond that can never be broken. My concern for them and their concern for me is to do with love. So it is with our relationship with the First and, may I say, our Second Orders.

I have a special icon that shows Christ walking beside a disciple, with an arm across the disciple's shoulders, one of love, support and yet not of superiority. My prayer is that as we journey together as a Society that image will show me who we are and how we relate to one another.
As I pray my daily Office and Community Obedience, and as I read the Principles for each day I have found it helpful to also place beside my daily reading those of my Brothers and Sisters in the First Order, and to reflect on what each part of the Principles is saying to each Order and for me especially as I pray for our Society. What I discover over and over again is that we become one in Christ, living in the footsteps of Francis and Clare.

Each province has its own way of living out our Principles and each province has its own challenges. Each province tells a story that completes a whole of who we are, and what they share shows a wider picture of who we are. As one of my brothers in the Solomon Island shared, what they do in mission and outreach they do representing each of us. It has been, and continues to be a journey of discovery, a journey of encouragement, a journey of inclusive love, a journey of challenge.

We are many, we are one,
when the work of Christ is done,
when we live in true community.

(From another hymn by Colin Gibson.)

As we pray for one another and as we strive to be an Order, I conclude with these words of St Francis, said when he was dying:
"I have done what was mine to do; may Christ teach you what is yours."