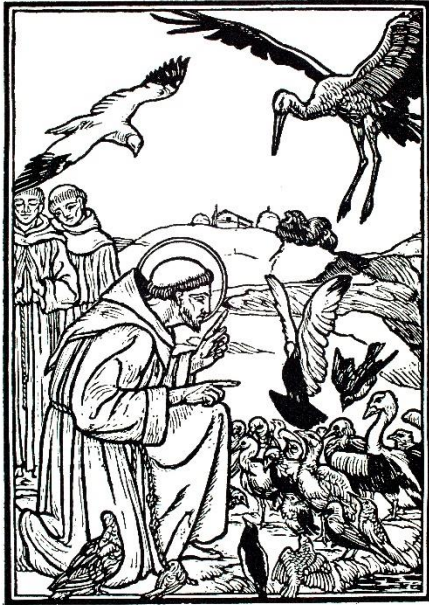


***“With a gentle and courteous spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord”***

***to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all ... (Titus, 3:2)***



Driving I-95 south from Philadelphia into Delaware motorists cross the state line and see an overhead message board that typically displays information related to road hazards and traffic conditions or perhaps a safety reminder. Recently, one such message read, “OBSERVE COVID COURTESIES.” It is not clear who composes these messages. They often employ clever turns of phrase or a witticism. So the choice of “courtesies” may have been mainly to provide an alliteration with “COVID.” On the other hand, it may have been an inspired choice, given all the meaning packed into the word *courtesies*.

In modern usage we tend to use *courtesy* (and the related adjective *courteous*), as a synonym for “politeness” or “manners.” But the word has a long history. Its earliest appearance in English around 1200 associates it with “courtly ideals” or “chivalrous conduct” and “elegance of manners.” By 1300, it carried richer meanings, including “good will, kindness.”<sup>1</sup> It is these latter meanings that flashed from the highway message board, suggesting that in a time of pandemic, maintaining physical distancing and other actions could be seen not as requirements or regulations but as acts of good will or gestures of kindness—as courtesies.

Such an understanding of courtesy would certainly have resonated with St. Francis. As a young man who aspired to knighthood, he would have absorbed the ideals of chivalry, which he later adapted to the gospel life after his conversion. Think of his courtly devotion to “Lady Poverty” or his admiration of “Sir Brother Sun.” Among the Franciscan early documents is *The Versified Life of St. Francis* by the 13<sup>th</sup> century poet Henri d’Avranches. He writes of “comrade courtesy,” by which Francis confers “The name of brother on each of the creatures” as he “addresses them in dulcet tones and eagerly invites them / To proclaim the praises of the Highest Good...”<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely this spirit of courtesy that should be evident in the individual and fraternal lives of Secular Franciscans. Article 13 of the OFS Rule states, “As the Father sees in every person the features of his Son, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, so the Secular Franciscans with a gentle and *courteous* spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ.”

In the official commentary on the Rule, Fr. Benet Fonck, OFM, elaborated on that stating, “hand in hand with simple living is coming to recognize that in Christ all are equally brothers and sisters. There is no room for prejudice or exclusiveness in the Franciscan way of life. In fact, the sense of community and the will toward community compel the Secular Franciscans to discover Christ in everyone, especially the lowly and poor and disadvantaged.”<sup>3</sup>

In the *Franciscan Journey* formation text that so many of us are familiar with, Fr. Lester Bach, OFM Cap. says that all Secular Franciscans should display a courteous spirit. “Courtesy is our human way of recognizing the dignity of another person.” He adds, “Courtesy has more authority than politeness... Politeness has less to do with relationships than to acting correctly in social situations. Courtesy springs from our inner spirit of respect for all people.”<sup>4</sup>

As with any part of the Rule, living Article 13 should begin with our lives in fraternity and family, and from there, extend to our surroundings. A Secular Franciscan should never be quick to find fault or feel aggrieved at a slight or an offense whether perceived or real. In his reflection on the OFS Rule, Fr. Richard Portasik, OFM wrote, “St. Francis, influenced by the courtly spirit of his day, responded with gentleness to everyone including those who opposed him or sought to harm him...when he was thrown into a snowbank by robbers, he brushed off the snow and continued on his way with a song on his lips grateful that he could suffer for the sake of Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

None of this is easy, which is why prayer, penance, and Eucharist must be at the center of our lives. However, when as Franciscans we endeavor to treat all people with a gentle and courteous spirit, we become an evangelizing presence in a world where, too often, anger and rejection rather than love and welcome are the lived realities. When we accept all people as God’s gift, we embody the dignifying Franciscan greeting of “Pax et bonum” – Peace and all good!

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions**

- As the Father sees in every person the features of his Son, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, so the Secular Franciscans with a gentle and courteous spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ. [*Rule*, 13]
- Secular Franciscans are called to make their own contribution, inspired by the person and message of Saint Francis of Assisi, towards a civilization in which the dignity of the human person, shared responsibility, and love may be living realities. [*Constitutions*, 18:1]
- They should deepen the true foundations of universal kinship and create a spirit of welcome and an atmosphere of fraternity everywhere. They should firmly commit themselves to oppose every form of exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion and against every attitude of indifference in relation to others. [*Constitutions*, 18:2]

#### **For reflection and meditation**

Where in your everyday life do you see an “attitude of indifference” that deprives others of dignity?

---

<sup>1</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, “Courtesy,” [www.etymonline.com/word/courtesy#](http://www.etymonline.com/word/courtesy#) (accessed Aug 2, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> *The Versified Life of St. Francis*, [franciscantradition.org/francis-of-assisi-early-documents/the-saint/the-versified-life-of-saint-francis-by-henri-d-avranches/950-fa-ed-1-page-503](http://franciscantradition.org/francis-of-assisi-early-documents/the-saint/the-versified-life-of-saint-francis-by-henri-d-avranches/950-fa-ed-1-page-503) (accessed August 2, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Commentary on the OFS Rule of 1978, <http://www.sfo.franciscans.org.au/rulesconst/commentary.htm> (accessed August 2, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Lester A. Bach, OFM Cap., *The Franciscan Journey, Embracing the Franciscan Vision*, 229

<sup>5</sup> Richard A. Portasik, OFM, *Way of Life, Reflections of the Rule of The Secular Franciscan Order*, 1990, 19.

**Image:** “Saint Francis of Assisi” 1920s woodcut illustration by Italian artist Antonello Moroni, Alamy Stock Photo, used with license.