



Franciscan Action Network

Transforming the World in the Spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare

P.O. Box 29053 • Washington, DC 20017 • 202-527-7575 • 1-888-364-3388 (toll free) • 202-527-7576 (fax)

A Franciscan Approach to Civility in Discourse

Francis of Assisi is recognized as an embodiment of peace. His constant greeting of peace and all good is a suggestion that our interactions with each other and the language we use with each other lay the foundation for our relationships. Francis was able to greet people with a word of peace because Francis was a person of peace. According to the life of Francis by Thomas of Celano, Francis took up the call to be a disciple by going about poorly and not possessing silver or gold. In this disposition his words became “like a burning fire, penetrating the inmost reaches of the heart, and it filled the minds of all the hearers with admiration”. The author goes on to say “He always most devoutly announced peace to men and women, to all he met and overtook. For this reason many who had hated peace and had hated salvation embraced peace through the cooperation of the Lord, with all their heart and were made children of peace and seekers after eternal salvation” (Celano X). Francis’ message of peace was credible because of his integrity. His poverty made him a person free from self interest.

Francis used his language of peace especially in a most significant and effective way when engaged with people of power and authority. He appealed to a sense of faith and reconciliation in a stand off between the mayor of Assisi and Bishop Guido. Bishop Guido excommunicated the mayor for promoting alliances in a war with Perugia. At the recitation of the Canticle of the Creatures, the mayor was moved to forgive the bishop and the bishop apologized in a gesture of reconciliation.

In his “Letter to Rulers of the People”, Francis calls leaders to faith and integrity and asks them to promote faith among the people.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the language of Francis and promoting peace is his encounter with the Sultan. Francis and the Sultan were engaged in an experience and exchange of mutual respect in the atmosphere of different cultures, different faiths, and different worldviews of a people at war with each other.

The essence of the process of governance in the United States is a participatory democracy. It is attentive to all points of view. Franciscan Action Network is engaged in the process of policy reform to promote peace, care for the environment, and a concern for the poor. Often our perspective on issues is very different from other views. We feel that we are one voice among many. Yet we believe in our positions and we give voice to our view. We believe that our contribution to public conversation should be civil and respectful. We recognize the dignity of those with differing views. For this reason Franciscan Action Network offers some principles for public conversation based on the life of Francis and our Franciscan traditions. Currently in our national conversations on policy we are experiencing a great degree of inflammatory language. It is language which exaggerates differences and hardens positions and language which is provocative in nature and uses violent imagery at times. Our purpose in proposing these principles is to be mindful of a Franciscan way to promote policy reform and to demonstrate peace in an ongoing process of transformation.

In order that an ongoing transformation in our society and our world occur we propose that conversation on public issues should

- **Respect the dignity of all people including the dignity of those who hold an opposite view**
- **Call policy makers to their sense of integrity in faith and values and to respect those values**
- **Use terms or a vocabulary of faith to unite or reconcile rather than divide**
- **Recognize that all human engagement and dialogue is an opportunity to promote peace**
- **Recognize that dialogue and engagement can lead to new insight and mutual understanding**

We recognize that it is a blessing to be able to give voice to our opinions and it is our responsibility to do so as a way of promoting the common good. There are moments when we recognize that the way that we give voice to our views can promote a transformative sense of peace and make us instruments of peace. Our hope is that public conversation can be a transformative peaceful influence on our nation and on our world.