FFMR—Visitation 2021

Every time we turn on the news, read the newspaper, or get the latest feed on our devices, we are reminded of the chaos that permeates our world: mass shootings, hate crimes, clerical abuse, environmental catastrophes, hateful rhetoric, and divisions—this group against that group; he says, she says. It’s overwhelming.

This chaos spills over into our Church, and into our fraternities. Visual artists react to it on painted walls and billboards; its reflected in political cartoons and the comic page of the morning newspaper. The word “toxic” grew into an intoxicating description for the year’s most talked about topics: pandemic, social isolation, economic collapse, intense anger and hatred, polarization.

How do we find direction in the midst of such chaos?

How do we bear Christ into this world?

How do we respond to this reality?

We need to re-gain our center, to re-focus our gaze on Jesus—the center of our faith. Jesus came into the world as our way, our truth, and our life—not on what was wrong with people and events. Jesus was attentive to the root cause of things. For example, He didn’t just see the widow dropping in two coins into the Temple treasury; He saw the root cause of her poverty in a society that failed to care for widows.

When St Francis heard the words, “Repair my Church,” he started with what seemed obvious. He soon realized that he was called to do more than just repair stone and mortar of a chapel. We, too, are called beyond what may seem obvious to tend the challenges right in front of us—in our neighborhoods, in our fraternities, in our Church, and in our world.

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What is in front of us is admittedly—chaos. Chaos is our context. So what do we see within the chaos? Does it create wonderful thinking? Jan, our National Minister, says *“prophetic creativity”* is a necessary renewal for the Order. Let’s be honest and transparent enough to own the fact that we sometimes don’t act honestly with each other. Let’s recognize that ego and ambition dominate our world, our politics, even our Church, even us at times.

We look for order in the midst of chaos. By carrying the cross of chaos is how we as Franciscans might bring our charism to the Church and world. Maybe that’s how we uncover and bring Jesus into the chaos. Of course, this requires hope:

* hope that invites us to embrace the dignity of every human life despite those who would denigrate people and ideas they don’t understand or agree with;
* hope that finds the very best in people when culture and customs direct us to find fault;
* hope that is found in our faith that Jesus—“God With Us”—is with us.

Let us choose a new role for ourselves, one that transforms grief and outrage, frustration and exhaustion into the skills of insight and compassion, serving the human spirit.

3

Fred Rogers—“Mr Roger’s Neighborhood”—gave us an example of living the balance between chaos and order. While our politics and public discourse seem to have become toxic, and we search for credibility, Fred Rogers offers us an example of what it means to celebrate humanity, diversity, equality, compassion, decency, and being neighbors to one another:

In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, a benevolent monarch named King Friday XIII, announces a plan to build a wall around his kingdom to keep out the “undesirables” and the “changers.”

In a later episode, Mr Rogers is soaking his feet in a basin of cool water on a day. He invites Officer Clemmons, who is African-American, to join him—this, at a time of segregation. “I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you,” Mr Rogers sings as they sit side by side.

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We wonder what he would have to say to us today? More importantly, what would we do? Where do we seek Jesus in the midst of a world immersed in chaos? What we may begin to realize, ever so gradually, is that here is God who chose to dwell in fragile, flawed, and fearful human flesh. Little by little, it may dawn on us that here is Divine life in our midst—in each one of us.

God is here and now in our midst—and so easy to miss! Finding the Divine in unexpected places requires mindfulness. *(Carolyn Townes would be thrilled to hear that!)* We can be so busy looking for one particular thing and miss the real thing that should have our attention. Hope and mindfulness is our compass; our balance; our connection to the Holy Spirit that hovers over the chaos; instruments that lead us to compassion, essential for healing.

Millennials are sometimes referred to as the WOKE generation. God seeks out the places in us that are deadened by apathy, selfishness, fatigue. There, God nudges us to be WOKE. When we are “woke” we open ourselves to possibilities, and we can find light in the darkness:

* Fred Rogers was woke—showing us how to create neighborhood;
* George H W Bush was woke—inviting us to be “thousands points of light;
* Pope Francis is woke—calling us to enlarge the horizons of our hearts, to be surprised by the life which is presented each day with its novelty;
* St Francis was woke—showing us how to rebuild and reinvigorate the Church and society, to get in touch with the reality of “God With Us”—Jesus.