

FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND COVID-19 WHAT DOES “GETTING BACK TO NORMAL” MEAN?

Do you know the story of Francis of Assisi - 1182-1226? Hopefully, someday soon, some of us will gather in person to explore our spiritual lives in the company of Francis.

While we are in confinement because of the pandemic, we can wonder about “getting back to normal.” When Francis was 20 years old he underwent a violent, year-long ‘confinement’ as a prisoner of war. Prisons then were dungeons with little or no sunlight and where prisoners were sometimes chained to a wall and tortured. Imagine this kind of ‘isolation’ for an entire year.

When Francis was released, he spent a long time recovering physically and psychologically. But he did not go back to what was normal. His conversion, his spiritual transformation was beginning. It helped him discern what was life-giving and what was not life-giving in the normal around him.

In a culture that feared and shunned lepers, Francis confronted his own deep fear and physically embraced them. It was an essential moment of his spiritual transformation: “When I was in sin [estranged from God] it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. But it was God who led me among them...When I left them, that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body. Afterwards, I lingered a little, but it did not take me long to leave the world.”

Leave what world?

In a world of rigid and even violent – but very normal – patriarchy, Francis ended up having a deep friendship with two very strong women: Clare of Assisi and Jacopa de’Settesoli of Rome. This, in spite of church documents, such as the Decretum Gratiani, that declared, “Adam was deceived by Eve [therefore] it is the natural order that the lesser [woman] serve the greater [man].” Another church document, the Glossa Ordinaria, declared, “A husband is able to judge a wife, correcting her...weakening [her] by beatings and hunger, but not to death.”

In a world where creation was normally taken for granted as only a resource to be used by humans, Francis lived a deep relationship with those he named Sister Water, Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind,...

In a world where the church had become a Holy Empire that killed enemies in Holy Wars, Francis risked his life during a horrific battle between Christians and Muslims, and went to meet the Sultan, Malik al Kamil. It became an historic embrace of friendship.

Francis’ discernment of the “normal” reminds us that, during this trying time of COVID-19, we can take the time to discern what to say Yes to and what to say No to. Before we yearn for the day when we will “get back to normal,” we can take the time to discern what in the “normal” is life-giving and what is not.

Possibly the most glaring situation exposed by the pandemic is the normal state of our “seniors’ homes.” COVID-19 has forced us to see that in too many situations, our elders are not living in “homes” but sometimes barely surviving in dangerously inadequate institutions. It is crucial that we say a very sacred, collective NO to this normal reality – as well as a very sacred YES to the use of our

tax money to fully support real homes where love and affection for our elders thrive. We also need a stronger collective effort in doing what we can to help elders stay in their own homes with support, whenever that is possible. Out of a shameful national failure we need to collectively create something beautiful and lasting; something that actually celebrates the presence of our elders among us.

Francis of Assisi's very own greeting, "Pace e bene" - Peace and all goodness – was to many a shocking statement in a time when the church's wars were considered not only "just" but actually "holy."

Pace e bene. Hope to be physically with you soon.