



Franciscan Solidarity during Pandemic

Solidarity with the poor and the marginalized is an integral part of Franciscan Spirituality and one of the priorities of the Order of Friars Minor. St. Francis of Assisi not only loved Christ who was poor but he also loved Christ in the poor and the marginalized. He desired that nothing should get in the way of one's ability to embrace and relate to others, just as Christ allowed nothing to get in the way of His mercy and compassion to sinners. Thus, St. Francis lived a life of brotherhood and solidarity with the poor.

In the months of April-May, migrant workers in India made headlines all over the world. The sudden unplanned nationwide lockdown decimated the livelihood of the poor. The elected government abandoned them, leaving them on the streets and on the roads to die. Many perished while trying to return home to villages on foot, without food and water, under the scorching heat. Their excruciating pain is already unimaginable, but being treated worse than a refugee in one's own country is unfathomable.

We are blessed to live in a beautiful country Canada, where the people have not been forgotten by their elected government; a stark contrast to the reality in India. Initially, the pandemic hit me hard, having to stay indoors; celebrating the Eucharist without people, facing only cameras; not being able to socialize; letting go of a few plans that I had made for the year, etc. However, as days and weeks passed, I became more comfortable with the so called "New Normal" of life and started enjoying the fresh opportunities that have come along with it. Admittedly, it's not a huge challenge for me considering I am in a pretty safe place; but it pierces my heart when I see the misery of the poor, especially in Franciscan missions in India and not being able to help except uniting my prayers with theirs.

Covid-19 Pandemic has brought to the forefront good and bad things about humanity but the question still remains, when will it end? How long will we continue with hand-sanitizing, face-masking, and social distancing? We may defeat this virus eventually by following restrictions and with the help of a vaccine but the earth is not guaranteed to be a better place to live in unless one sanitizes the heart, mind, and soul where the virus of evil lives; unless one masks the poisonous words one breathes out; and unless one distances oneself from social evil. To combat any virus, what we need is the pandemic of love and solidarity on our mother earth - the common home for all.

On October 3rd; the day of Transitus of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis will sign his new Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. It's a good reminder for us; Franciscans and as well as for the rest of the world that Franciscan identity of Fraternity and Solidarity are not outdated but most needed at this present time. Celebration of Franciscan tradition will come and go but what does it profit us, if it's not lived in our daily life? Let us look to St. Francis of Assisi to unite us as we shower the world with love as seen through our acts of mercy and kindness.

Fr. Manoj Xalxo, OFM