**The Beatitudes**

These reflections were developed by two Secular Franciscans in the Atlantic area of the Regional Fraternity of Eastern Canada, Doug Hagen and Sherrill Guimond. In a shorter form, they were presented at an Area meeting, and then, these texts became the basis for one of the retreats hosted by St. Francis of Assisi Fraternity, Cornwall, PEI.

We are using the version of the Beatitudes found in Matt 5:1-12.

**First Beatitude: Blessed are the poor in spirit,**

**for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven**

The Beatitudes are a blueprint for what a follower of Jesus looks like.

The universal call to holiness is the same call we hear in the Beatitudes.

We can even match up the Beatitudes to the seven deadly sins – they are opposites.

This first Beatitude is really the prerequisite to prayer.

In many ways, it is the first key to the kingdom.

In Jesus’ time, to be poor in spirit is to be humble-hearted.

Material poverty is never an end in itself.

The truly poor in spirit, the humble-hearted will always reach out to the poor – the materially poor to help and support them.

We are in fact called to have a preferential love of the poor, because that is where we can be Jesus to others.

If we want to find Jesus, spend some time with the poor, because that is where Jesus will be.

Absolute poverty – remember the widow who gave her last two coins? Now remember, the story of Lazarus at the door of the rich man where the dogs would lick his sores. This was abject poverty; he had nothing and he was born to the bosom of Abraham. This is the poverty of spirit Jesus is referring to. We have nothing – we are nothing apart from God. When we realize this, then, it is here that our hearts and our hands can be open to receive all that the Lord wants to give us. It is a spiritual disposition to be poor in spirit. It is the poverty that realizes our lack of power, our lack of resources to save ourselves. It helps us to loosen our grip on the things of this world. We refer to it as detachment from material things. A wise person advises to hold loosely all that is not eternal. Those things which are eternal are: God, God’s love, God’s word, God’s people. Everything else we should hold loosely.

Many Christians find this the most challenging of the Beatitudes.

The problem arises in trying to define poor. If you are a middle-class Canadian, or an Indian living on the streets of Calcutta, then the definition of poverty would be quite different. Each would define poor in terms of a particular culture and its economic conditions.

Another source of confusion arises from scripture itself. Who are the “poor” to whom Jesus addressed these words?

In Luke 6: 20-23, Jesus announces to the materially poor, the hungry, and the dispossessed of his day, that they are the recipients of God’s blessings.

Isaiah had written that at the arrival of the long awaited Me3ssiah, blessings would come to the little people, the seemingly insignificant.

Now Jesus is proclaiming that the promised kingdom had come. He looks on those who are like “sheep without a shepherd”, and says that the time is now. “The Kingdom of God is yours.” Luke 6:20.

By the time that Matthew wrote his gospel; however, the Christians community included those who were not materially poor. Certainly, the basic teaching of Jesus must be applicable to them too. After all, material poverty is not a good thing in itself. It is often a hindrance to full human living. A person can hardly be concerned about intellectual or spiritual things when every bit of energy is needed to obtain food and shelter. So what is Jesus saying?

The early Christian community realized that it was not the mere lack of material possessions that opened a person to God’s reign. Rather, what Jesus saw in the poor around him and what he shared with them, was a condition of mind and heart, an admission of dependency. Thus where Luke writes: “Blessed are your poor”, Matthew wrote: “Blessed are the poor in Spirit.”

In other words, Blessed are those who know their need for God. This opens a new way of thinking about this Beatitude. Knowing one’s need for God is acknowledging one’s insufficiency, one’s vulnerability. Francis was poor in Spirit. He stood before God empty-handed knowing that all is a gift from God. As Franciscans, we try to develop a non-possessive attitude, that willingly shares God’s gifts with others, realizing that a human’s worth, is worth more than any possession.

This implies a non-grasping approach to life and a conscious sense of actually depending on God for life, truth, love and freedom. Even our prayer depends on God. “Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool!’ This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” Luke 12:16-21.

True spiritual wisdom – knowing what to hang on to and what to let go. Pope Francis seems to me to understand this principle. The fewer things we are attached to, the more freedom we have to love, to make our whole life a gift. This first beatitude makes us free, supple, and flexible beneath the action of the Holy Spirit. This beatitude invites us to come before God, holding out our hands – emptying ourselves so in turn, we can receive everything God wants to bring into our life. This holding out our hands means we are not only free to receive the gifts God wants to give us, but we are in a posture of giving.

Being poor in spirit calls us to be humble. We are called to do God’s will – to put God and others first. For most of us, this is a difficult garment to wear – a garment that takes a lifetime to break in – if we manage to break it in at all.

When things are really rough, we are well in tune with our own smallness, our dependence on God. However, if you are a parent and the children are passing viruses around like candy and you haven’t had a decent sleep in a week or more, when Murphy’s law kicks in, and the dishwasher and the car and the sump pump break in the same week, then it is hard not to cry out to God; it is hard to listen to that still faint voice saying: “My grace is enough for you.”

Now humility is not tolerating circumstances we cannot change while complaining about them. It is an act of will be at peace when our gut reaction is one of helpless rage. It means accepting what we don’t want to accept, being gracious when we want to complain, and trusting that God has a plan, even if it makes no sense to us. Being poor in spirit rescues us from self-righteousness and pride. When, all of a sudden I became the main priority in my life (a false god), where is there room for the kingdom of heaven that Jesus promises? Pride toppled Lucifer and causes all kinds of trouble in human relationships. When God can be understood, that is a sign that we have tried to make him into our own image – instead of the other way round. To be poor in spirit means that we are at peace, trusting that God is in charge.

Pride is not the only false god we have to watch out for. I mentioned earlier that we must cultivate a detachment. Our entire economy is based on acquiring more and everyone suffers when consumption falls off. What we have to keep in mind is that all things are good, if they are used properly. We must be aware that the idols we worship may and often do, end up controlling us. Few of us are called to the kind of humility demonstrated by Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta. She chose to live among the poorest of the poor. Perhaps we can relate better to St. Therese of Lisieux – The Little Flower of Jesus. She dreamed of being a saint, of loving Christ to the best of her ability. But she was no Joan of Arc. She was a cloistered Carmelite nun, separated from the rest of the world by the walls of her convent. She knew she would never do great things. But she could do small things to the best of her ability. She regarded all her assigned work in the convent humble tasks, like cooking, laundry and cleaning as a way to show her love of Christ through service. She taught us that ordinary doesn’t mean unimportant. We know that family life offers daily opportunities to place others before ourselves.

Other than Christ himself, Christ’s mother is the glowing example of poverty of spirit. Her unconditional “yes” to the will of God is a model for every Christian. “Be it done to me according to your word.” Her advice to us is the same as her advice to the servants at the wedding feast at Cana: “Do whatever he tells us.” We must remember – we must have faith that whenever we defer our will to the will of God, we open ourselves to God’s transforming power, just as Mary did.

Many, many saints lived in fine houses; many more had absolutely nothing – St. Francis of Assisi read the Gospel literally and had nothing. But all the saints knew their need of God, seeking to know God’s will in their lives and to live it. When we know our need of God, we seek to live God’s will, rather than our own.

“Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” What does this mean? Jesus’ apostles must have constantly asked him, because Jesus is constantly answering: “The kingdom of Heaven is like the king who wishes to settle accounts with his slaves………..” The king forgives a debt and then learns that the slave had not done likewise. The point is – the kingdom of heaven exists wherever one person forgives another – from the heart – a child. It is wherever mercy rules – not vengeance. We enter the kingdom of God when nothing is more important than the absolute beauty of God.

Matthew’s Gospel says that the Kingdom of God is like someone who sows good seed in a field and then his enemy comes to sow weeds. (Mt. 13: 24-30). The owner waits for the crop to mature and be harvested, then separates the good from the bad. We are living in the kingdom of God when we respect the lives of those around us, no matter what they are like.

When Francis embraced Lady Poverty, he came to the realization that there is no intrinsic reason for the existence of any aspect of creation. Although humanity is given a unique role in the order of creation, the existence of humanity is as gratuitous (unnecessary) as any other part of creation. It is in this fundamental poverty of being that Francis discovered the equality of creation.

But it doesn’t end there. A Franciscan spirit of poverty, also reveals the self-giving love of God, which permeates all of creation. Creation, all of creation has been called a Sacrament, because it makes real, makes present the love of God. The realization that every creature is a sign, a sacrament of the love God who causes all things to be should also provide us with the motivation to reverence all creation. What greater motivation can we have to become ardent promoters of justice, peace, and integrity of creation?

Let us pause and ask for the grace of a deep awareness of our need for God.

“Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age , who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.” 1 Corinthians 2: 6-7. “For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. “ 1 Corinthians 2, 11-12.

“You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound.

I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.” Psalm 4, 7-8.

Realizing our need of God can change our day-to-day focus:

* We become sensitive to God’s action in our lives
* We put more trust in God’s loving care
* God’s unconditional love becomes more real
* We notice that we are not alone in life’s struggles
* Having this vision reduces fears, worries, tensions of our daily living
* This fosters a growing awareness of God’s presence in all the events of our lives