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.

**Fourth Beatitude – Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied**

Now we come to the 4th rung in the ladder: from poor of spirit, to mourning, to meekness, and now hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

The “meek” are gentle people, not pushy, self-centered, or controlling. In humility, they treat others with utmost respect, understanding, and compassion. They do not gripe when hurting or when they are ridiculed for their beliefs. Rather, they identify with the Lord who suffered wrongs patiently and with forgiveness in his heart. They are good stewards of God’s good earth, treating creation with joyful and gentle gratitude. They will inherit the earth.

Jesus’ followers must have high ideals and goals and not be satisfied with mediocrity. The highest ideal of all is to desire above all else to put God’s righteous will into action and then work unceasingly with his help to grow in holiness, justice, and truth. Part of the striving to do God’s will is to realize that God teaches that we prove our love for him by taking care of each other, as Mother Theresa of Calcutta put it, “by doing something beautiful for God.”

Sister Helen Cecilia Swift, in her book “How Blest You Are”, tells us that Justice basically means having available for all people what is necessary to become fully human in the image of Jesus. She further tells us that just as our bodies crave food and drink, so our hearts should desire justice. This desire of justice should be a craving that demands to be satisfied and so it should lead to action.

Sister Swift tells us that hunger and thirst for justice has a way of heightening our spiritual awareness of our inner sinfulness that hampers our growth towards full humanity. Like the 2 blind men at the side of the road we need to call out to Jesus for light, recognizing our own helplessness and the power of Jesus to come to our rescue. We move away from the false values that entrap us towards the values of Jesus that give us freedom. (pg.45)

 We need to call out to Jesus to have pity on us. We need to talk to Jesus about our need for conversion. We then need to look beyond our own need for inner conversion, to see how those oppressive conditions in society interfere with all human growth. We see that some people cannot develop physically, psychologically or spiritually because they are forced to live in inhuman conditions. Lack of nourishing food, decent housing, adequate medical care and a solid education are conditions which keep people in virtual slavery. It is the work of justice to fight against these oppressions. This means more than giving Christmas baskets to needy families. Justice struggles to make it possible for everyone to work for a wage that ensures the necessities of decent human living. The basics of food, clothing, decent housing, medical care and education should be available to all people. (pg.46)

Sister Swift tells us that Jesus expects more from us than lifting up our hands in prayer. Jesus tells us to make justice our aim. We need to work towards changing any law or organizational way of doing things that discriminates against the poor, people of a certain race or nationality, women and children. In struggling for justice we try to change the structures that lead to this kind of injustice. Those who have heard the message of this Beatitude will produce action for justice. (pg. 47)

Jesus doesn't say "Blessed are those who *hope* for righteousness" or "Blessed are those who *campaign* for righteousness" but "Blessed are they who *hunger and thirst* for righteousness"—that is, people who want what is right as urgently as a person dying in a desert wants a glass of water. There is a saying, "Some people are so hungry that the only way God can appear to them is as a piece of bread." (Jim Forest, The Ladder of the Beatitudes, pg. 64)

The beauty is in the hungering, in the yearning. St. Augustine tells us, “the nagging hankering we feel inside is God’s voice, calling us home, keeping us a bit “restless until we find rest in God”.

Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, not only devoted her life to hospitality but kept asking the question, what is it about our society that produces so many people in *need* of hospitality. The answer she kept coming up with was, "Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy rotten system". When we begin to share in the sufferings of others, we cannot help but notice that suffering is often either the consequence of injustice or is made worse by injustice. A society whose main story is summed up in the good-guy-kills-bad-guy Western seemed to her a far cry from the kingdom of God. The core of the spiritual life, she explained, is to see the image of God in everyone, especially in those we fear or regard as enemies. "Those who cannot see Christ in the poor," she wrote, "are atheists indeed."

Richard Rohr, in his “Collection of Teachings’, speaks about Dorothy Day’s, “dirty rotten system” saying that we are all complicit in it and enjoying the fruits of it – Where were your shirts and underwear made? What wars allow us to have cheap food and gas? Usually the only way to be really non-complicit in the system is to “choose to live a very simple life….that’s almost the only way to stop bending the knee before the system.”

Francis perhaps best lived out the fourth beatitude “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.” The salvation of souls was ever the burden of Francis' prayers and wishing moreover to make his beloved Portiuncula a sanctuary where many might be saved. Throughout his life and up to his last breath Francis sought righteousness.

Fr. Fernanda Ventura in his dossier on “Evangelized to Evangelize” writes that this beatitude expresses a willingness to go further; it is not enough to be “nice” … it is not enough to cultivate the smile of political correctness – we need to make the struggle of others our own.

Ronald Rolheiser speaks about the story of a town built just beyond the bend of a large river. One day some of the children from the town were playing beside the river when they noticed three bodies floating in the water. They ran for help and the townsfolk quickly pulled the bodies from out of the river. One body was dead so they buried it. One was alive, but quite ill so they put that person in the hospital. The third turned out to be a healthy child, who they then placed with a family who cared for it and who took it to school. From that day on, every day a number of bodies came floating down the river and, every day, the good people of the town would pull them out and tend to them – taking the sick to hospitals, placing the children with families, and burying those who were dead. This went on for years; each day brought its quota of bodies, and the townsfolk not only came to expect a number of bodies each day but also worked at developing more elaborate systems for picking them out of the river and tending to them. And the town itself felt a certain healthy pride in its generosity. However, during all those years and despite all that generosity and effort, nobody thought to go up the river, beyond the bend that hid from their sight what was above them, and find out why, daily, those bodies came floating down the river.

Rolheiser tells us that what this story highlights in a rather simple way is the difference between private charity and social justice. Private charity responds to the homeless, wounded, and dead bodies, but it does not of itself try to get at the reasons why they are there. Social justice tries to go up the river and change the reasons that create homeless, wounded and dead bodies. (The Holy Longing, pg. 168 - 169)

What Jesus tells us in this Beatitude is that happy will that person be when they long for righteousness the way a starving person longs for food, and the way a thirsty person longs for water.

Deep within each of us, God has planted an insatiable hunger and thirst to know him and to love him. Psalm 42:1 tells us that “As a heart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God” and St Augustine tells us “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in thee”.

In spite of this, many people ignore the call and attempt to satisfy it in the wrong way. In this Beatitude, Jesus presents us with a challenge: we may either choose the way of righteousness or the way of unrighteousness. There is no middle road we can take if we wish to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther King Jr. placed the righteousness of God (which calls for justice, equality and freedom for all) above the unrighteousness of the Klu Klux Klan. When his home was bombed, and his family harassed, Dr. King chose the way of righteousness: “I have decided to stick with love, hate is too great a burden to bear.”

Jim Forest tells us in his book, “The Ladder of the Beatitudes”, that “the hunger for righteousness is the one appetite that Christ blesses – not to covet possessions or achievement or recognition, but to live, through every action and perception, the kingdom of God. He further states that Christian life is less our ideas about God than how we live with those around us. To follow Christ and turn a blind eye toward the poor is a contradiction. He tells us that “we, as Christians, are obliged to see and respond to the real world with all its fear, pain, and bloodstains, to be a rescuer, to protect the defenseless, to participate here and now in God’s righteousness.” (pg. 65)

An Orthodox nun, Mother Maria on March 31, 1945, with the gunfire of approaching Russia troops audible in the distance, took the place of a Jewish prisoner who was to be sent to the gas chamber and died in her place. “At the Last Judgement, I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my life, nor how many prostrations I made, instead I shall be asked, Did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners? That is all I shall be asked.”

The 1971 Synod of Bishops declared that “action on behalf of justice” is a “basic dimension of the preaching of the Gospel itself”. (document, Justice in the World –Introduction No. 6)

Fr. Michael Crosby tells us in his book, “Spirituality of the Beatitudes”, that “the 4th Beatitude expresses concepts faithful to the Old testament notion of justice.

The responsibility of the wealthy class toward the poor and needy people was described in Hebrew. When the prophets spoke of the need of the rich to hear the cry of the poor, they talked in terms of “righteousness” and “justice” rather than “charity” or “love.” He further stated that “Justice is the authority of God which must rule the world”. Hence, the goal of justice, people like Jeremiah believed, was to reorder the world’s chaotic alienation. Justice fulfills God’s whole plan for the world. Justice is essential to spirituality. Righteousness is a life lived in community with God’s will, adhering to God’s laws, a life of prayerful holiness. (pg. 101-102, 105)

Fr. Crosby also tells us that since our hearts have been made by and for God, they will never be satisfied until we dwell in God’s justice, until we are “right” with God…. We are to ask for justice in prayer, seek its power in reflection, and knock until we have opened for us ever-deepening experiences and understandings of this liberating presence of God-with-us. (pg. 107)

Matthew, in his gospel, presents Jesus as the one who bends the laws to serve justice and people’s needs rather than the other way around, which was the way of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus tells us in Matthew 3:15, “….Let it be so now; for it is proper for us, in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” His very existence on earth was for the fulfillment of “all justice”. (pg. 109)

Part of the striving to do God’s will is to realize that God teaches that we prove our love for him by taking care of each other. Mother Teresa puts it this way: “by doing something beautiful for God”.

Ron Rolheiser tells us that “to practice social justice is to examine, to challenge, to refuse as far as possible to participate in, and to try to change those systems ..…that unjustly penalize some, even as they unjustly reward others”. Rolheiser further tells us “that the Book of Genesis makes four major, interpenetrating affirmations that provide the ultimate basis for justice. (1) it affirms that God made all people equal in dignity and rights; (2) it affirms that the earth and everything in it belongs equally to everyone; (3) it affirms that all human beings, equally, are co-responsible with God in helping to protect the dignity of everyone and everything; and (4) it affirms that the physical earth itself has rights and needs to be respected in and of itself, and not just as a stage for human activity.”

(The Holy Longing – pg. 174-175)

Ron Rolheiser makes this important point “ultimately, how we conceive of God will color how we conceive of everything else, especially justice and peace and the road that leads to them…We must try to bring about justice and peace as Jesus did, recognizing that the God whom Jesus called “Father” beats up no one.” (The Holy Longing –pg. 184-185)

“Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor” is a quote attributed to James Forbes, an interdenominational pastor in New York City.

The great prophets of Israel had coined the mantra: The quality of your faith will be judged by the quality of justice in the land. And the quality of justice in the land will always be judged by how “widows, orphans, and strangers” are faring while you are alive. That phrase, “widows, orphans, and strangers” was code for the three weakest, most vulnerable groups in society at the time. In Matthew’s gospel text about the Last Judgment, Jesus tells us that at the end of day, when we stand before the great King on the day of judgment, we will be asked only one set of questions and they all will have to do with how we treated the poor: Did you feed the hungry? Give drink to the thirsty? Welcome the stranger? Clothe the naked? Visit the sick? Visit prisoners?

Jim Forest, in his book, “The Ladder of the Beatitudes” tells us that one of the dangers of attempting to live a righteous life is that self-righteousness is always just a breath away. How easy it is to list the sins we have not committed, and to catalogue the sins of others. This is the situation of the righteous man whom Jesus describes in the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee makes a great show regarding how hard he has worked to justify himself. The tax collector had to do no sums, but simply to admit that his results did not justify him, so it was up to God what happened next. (pg. 78)

In Isaiah 51: 7, 8, & 16: “Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts; do not fear the reproach of others, and do not be dismayed when they revile you …(for) my deliverance will be forever; and my salvation (my justice) to all say …..You are my people.”

**Sixth Beatitude – Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**

Mercy is a hard virtue. We want mercy for ourselves but resist extending it to others. Christ calls us to become people living the mercy of God. Mercy is inseparable from purity of heart.

God has shown us profound compassion by loving us into existence, by forgiving our sins, by giving us the Lord Jesus to die so that we might live. As disciples of Jesus we must forgive others, without strings attached, even our enemies. We must stop holding grudges. We must stop harping on the faults of those who have hurt us. We must genuinely care for others by showing true compassion, as Jesus did when he died on the cross for everyone, even the person standing next to us who may have hurt us. If we give mercy, God will be sure to be merciful to

us as well.

Those who are pure of heart are single-hearted, undivided in their loyalties, without fakery or pretense. They put on the mind and heart of God, looking on others with the eyes of Jesus, accepting them as brothers and sisters, persons of incomparable inner beauty and worth. The pure of heart know what is really important - closeness to the Lord who alone can satisfy their inner longings for love and understanding. The pure of heart will not allow anything - wealth, fame, various pastimes, job, academic achievement, or the opinion of others - sway them from what is really important, seeing God in others and responding to them as other Christs’.

St. Francis tells us in his Letter to the Faithful: “…. love God, therefore, and adore Him with a pure heart and a pure mind, because He Who seeks this above all things has said: True adorers adore the Father in Spirit and Truth.”

St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote in his “Principle and Foundation” to his Spiritual Exercises: “I was created to praise, to reverence and to serve God, and that must come first. There are to be no conditions. Not “I will serve God so long as everyone speaks well of me; not, “I will serve God as long as I am reasonably wealthy; nor, “I will serve God so long as I am in good health.

Sister Helen Swift tells us in her book, “How Blest You Are” that In ordinary conversation when we say a substance is pure, we mean that it is everything it is meant to be. Absent are other substances that might lessen its quality. Pure implies wholesomeness not polluted by any harmful or even inferior ingredient. The message of Jesus is that it tells us that our hearts were made for God. It has a single purpose, one desire. It is a heart uncluttered with anything that can lead it away from God. Jesus says that all those with God-centered hearts will see God. Sister Helen tells us that we think of the heart as the source of human emotions, but the Jews thought of the heart as the source of life, the centre of thought and will. It is the heart that turns to God in repentance. It is the heart that loves God above all things; that longs for his will to be done.