



Introduction

Having studied the first two dossiers on the Christians' role in society and the pillars of the Church's Social Teaching, our journey now takes us to delve deeper into our social mission as Secular Franciscans who have the Rule and General Constitutions, that preferential and prophetic instrument to guide our choices. This dossier faces us with the life's commitment assumed with our profession and will allow us to reflect on the progress we have already made and how much we still have to go, both as individuals and as a fraternity. In this regard we take consolation in the words of our Seraphic Father who, at the point of death, said to his companions: "Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing" (1 Cel VI, 103).

1. The social mission according to the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

Along the lines of the Church's Magisterium and the Second Vatican Council in particular, the social mission of the Secular Franciscans is expressed in article 14 of the Rule: "Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively. Mindful that anyone who follows Christ, the perfect man, becomes more of a man himself, let them exercise their responsibilities competently in Christian spirit of service." (Reg. 14)

To this is added the explanation of the Constitutions: "Called to work together in building up the Church as the sacrament of salvation for all and, through their baptism and profession, made 'witnesses and instruments of her mission', secular Franciscans proclaim Christ by their life and words. Their preferred apostolate is personal witness in the environment in which they live and service for building up the Kingdom of God within the situations of this world." (Const. 17)

Our presence, therefore, is the result of a call that, together in the world makes us capable of building fraternal, Gospel-inspired relationships. Our vocation is to be leaven (cf. Const. 19) and minority leads us to walk the path of others, experience their difficulties, their pace of life, in order to share with them the hope that it is possible to believe in the Good in this life. Our primary and fundamental contribution to building a more just and fraternal world is a commitment to the fulfillment of the duties proper to our occupation and to the professional training that pertains to it. (cf. Const. 20.2).

Furthermore, in article 15 the Rule of the OFS invites Secular Franciscans to this witness and dedication in these words: "Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith." (Reg. 15)



Pope Benedict XVI reminds us: “For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.” (*Deus caritas est*, 25). However, “without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality.” (*Caritas in veritate*, 3). Charity is first and foremost a response to the immediate necessity in a given situation: the hungry must be satisfied, the naked clothed, the sick cared for, prisoners visited. This response to human need renders charity authentic and true, without however substituting for justice; rather, charity “never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is ‘his’, what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting”. “Justice is the primary way of charity ... an integral part of the love ‘in deed and in truth’ (1Jn 3: 18)” (CV 6).

For this reason, “The fraternities should engage themselves through courageous initiatives, consistent with their Franciscan vocation and with the directives of the Church, in the field of human development and justice. They should take clear positions whenever human dignity is attacked by any form of oppression or indifference. They should offer their fraternal service to the victims of injustice” (Const. 22.2).

Human growth is grounded in relationships with other people and with the environment which, apart from being cultural, or rather an expression of human creativity, is mainly natural. We are born in a context from which we draw life. Nature is at our disposal “as a gift of the Creator” (CV 48) and its precedence makes us responsible for caring for it and defending and making good use of its energy sources (cf. CV 49). To that purpose Secular Franciscans: “should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which ‘bear the imprint of the Most High’, and they should strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship” (Reg. 18).



2. Sources and references

Apostolicam Actuositatem – Chapter 8. *Documents of Vatican II*. Cf. www.vatican.va

BENEDICT XVI, Enc. Lett. *Deus Caritas est*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005.

BENEDICT XVI, Enc. Lett. *Caritas in veritate*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009.

JOHN PAUL II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christifideles Laici*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988.

Rule and General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order, published by CIOFS Presidency, Rome, 2001.

3. A practical example

Elisabeth Maria Satoko Kitahara – An aristocrat among the rag pickers (Japan)¹

Satoko Kitahara was born in Tokyo on 22 August 1929 of Kitaha-ra Kimschi, a university teacher, and Ei Matzura. She had a serene childhood at home, was educated in the Buddhist religion and initiated in studies. Drawn into the drama of the World War and shaken by the tragedy of her homeland, she formulated for herself and others this motto for living: “Conscious of the day of reckoning, we will make the effort to act”. She finished her studies, getting her degree in pharmacy at the Women’s Higher Institute of Medicine; at the same time, drawn by the Christian religion, she attended Catholic doctrine classes in the school of the Mercedarian Missionaries. She was baptized on 30 October 1949, taking the name of Elisabeth, to which she later added the name of Maria because of her special devotion to the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God.

¹ <http://www.satokokitahara.com>

The fulfillment of her life's plan now enlightened by faith became an unavoidable Christian demand. In 1950, in order to help those severely affected by the war and living in dire poverty, she began to help out in the charitable works organized by Fr. Zeno of the Mission of the Conventual Franciscan Friars begun by St. Maximilian Kolbe. The area of Tokyo known as Arinomachi (Ants' Town: that is, the post-war evacuated and abandoned, anonymous like ants) where entire families and individuals of every age, poor and outcast, sought refuge and organized themselves to keep alive by collecting and reselling the refuse from the city streets, became the field of Elisabeth Maria Satoko's apostolate. Here among the other Christian virtues shone forth the heroic charity of the Servant of God towards the needy to whom she gave spiritual and material help with admirable dedication. So as to live in complete solidarity with them, she left her family, the comfort of her well-off economic status, and her prospects of a brilliant career, and she moved to Arinomachi where, totally devoted to God and neighbor, she lived among the poor until her death.



With extraordinary self-denial she devoted her life to the human and Christian development of the poor in Arinomachi and especially of the children, sustained at all times by a living faith and ardent prayer, and a fervent devotion to the Immaculate Virgin Mary. She built a chapel as a place of prayer and Christian instruction, and it became the spiritual centre of Arinomachi where many people were converted to the Catholic faith and received baptism. After a period of feverish activity Elisabeth Maria, struck by tuberculosis because of her hard work and hardships, felt obliged to reduce her workload and eventually

withdrew into prayer and recollection, happy to be able to dedicate her time to intense prayer and to continue to suffer for the love of the Lord and neighbor. Satoko Kitahara's activities in Arinomachi had already assumed dimensions of National renown when she, now known throughout Japan as "Mary of Ants' Town", died at the age of 29 on 23 January 1958. She was buried in the cemetery in Tokyo following a funeral which saw the participation of ecclesial and civic dignities and an immense crowd of grateful admirers.

The fame of the extraordinary Christian witness of Elisabeth Maria Satoko Kitahara quickly spread throughout Japan and the world. The Order of Friars Minor Conventual wanted to promote the cause of her canonization with the consent of the Archbishop of Tokyo, and in 1975 a preliminary inquest on the fame and holiness of the Servant of God was conducted. In 1981 Archbishop Peter Seiichi Schiroyanagi of Tokyo opened the process of recognition, and its validity was declared by a decree of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints on 5 October 1984. At present the writing of the *Positio* on the heroic virtues of the Servant of God is in process.

4. Questions for reflection and dialogue in the fraternity

1. In the first part of the dossier we read that "Justice is the primary way of charity" – How is the commitment to justice experienced in your fraternity?
2. What do you understand by justice? Legal justice? Evangelical justice? What difference is there between them and how are they alike?
3. Blessed Pope John Paul II proposed the pursuit of environmental justice. Have you ever discussed this? What is it? How is it like the *Green Economy* and how is it different?

