

## What is Mission?

By Peter Mueller

As evening falls over Northeast Washington on a Wednesday in late September, four FMS lay-missioners-in-training and several FMS staff members settle into chairs in the living room of Casa San Salvador to hear a presentation on the Franciscan Charism by Sr. Ilia Delio, OSF. Her presentation is only one of many the missioners receive, but in many ways it is one of the more significant, describing what, at heart, mission is to a Franciscan.

Francis' way of ministry, Sr. Ilia begins, is to *be* with people, rather than just to *do* things for them. This is a hard concept to take in, especially for those raised in a results-oriented North American culture. We tend to think of service as a one-way street, a provider on one end and a receiver at the other, and we try to measure the amount of good being done by noticeable changes in the receiver's condition. Conversation, however, rather than monologue, is the style of ministry.

St. Francis, she points out, had been disappointed in worldly ambition, and thereby came to experience *metanoia*, a shift of the mind. His embrace of the leper signified the transfer of interest from self-centeredness to God-centeredness, and he took on the life of poverty to maintain that focus. Quite literally, he sought to remove anything that would come between himself and God, and between himself and others.

St. Francis understood very well that it was not material things that stood between him and others, but the invulnerability that those things afforded. The vow of poverty does not, as is often thought, mean that one should live without things; we are human beings, and we need to have things to survive. Rather, it means to live without *possessing* things; that is, to give up the independence that comes from owning property, to throw away the safeguard against misfortune that property is.

This vulnerability is what defines Franciscan ministry. To minister to others, it is the minister who must let go. She or he is not bringing something, a gift, to others; he or she must go down, become dispossessed and vulnerable. Only then does the impediment of the impersonal, giver-receiver relationship disappear. Only then can we attend; only then can we converse.

In addition to becoming poor, the minister must strive to recognize God in everything, including that which is most tragic, disgusting, frightening, and sorrowful. Prayer is essential for this, says Sr. Ilia. St. Bonaventure wrote that every person on earth is an icon, a mirror of Christ. Francis certainly felt this, and, we are told, "became a living prayer". Francis' prayer was attentiveness to God wherever he was. In his footsteps, Franciscans seek to recognize that "the person where you are is the Word".

In that respect, Sr. Ilia mentions, the Franciscan tradition really is a very contemplative one. To contemplate reality is to "see with the eyes of the heart". Contemplative prayer serves to take us out of ourselves and into the other; we become able to see that the love

of God in our own lives is in the lives of others as well. Through contemplation, we are able to look past the surface and recognize Christ in others.

We often feel helpless when faced with tragedy, powerless to help. For missionaries, Sr. Ilia notes, this is a daily occurrence. They must live in the midst of great suffering and injustice, unable to relieve large portions of it. In those times, contemplation both teaches trust in the love of God to cure all evil, and nurtures compassion. We learn to love others *in* their weakness and suffering. By compassion, by sharing in suffering, we, as St. Paul says, “make up...what is lacking in the suffering of Christ”.

The missionary can not neglect to do, and should strive to make a change, concludes Sr. Ilia; but she or he should also remember that, “all you can do is give your life out of love, and trust that love can heal”. The aim of Franciscan ministry is to sit down and see God in people, to name the good in their midst, and to live in it and return it to the source of all good, who is God.