

## **Theme for Day Three: Accompaniment and the Transforming Community**

“The message of Francis and Clare, like that of the One whom they followed, is both demanding and liberating. To let Francis and Clare speak to us directly is to listen to a message that, like the gospel, will change who we are. Their words point to a more authentic way of living out our relationship with God and with one another. If we find Francis and Clare’s spirituality authentic, then we must listen to what they have to teach us about God. For their God is a God who might surprise us; the Christian community they invite us to join is one that might look somewhat different from the one we are currently a part of. Francis and Clare asked their contemporaries to do hard things: to reach out in love to the leper and the marginalized; to recognize, in poverty and simplicity, the face of Christ in the other; to move past superficialities in order to find and revere, protect and defend the God who is pulsing in the heart of a suffering world.” (p. xvii)

### **Derived from *The Tenderness of God: Reclaiming Our Humanity*, Chapter 4: “The Revolution of Tenderness”**

“Tenderness is a learned habit, an acquired sensitivity born of solidarity and keen interest in the lives, challenges, struggles, and joys of others. We do not become tender because we want to, just like we do not become fit because we want to. Desire is important, but dedication is even more critical. We dedicate ourselves to growth in tenderness, just as we might to greater fitness or flexibility” (p. 74)

“While it is common to read about the early Franciscan focus on poverty and preaching and even their imitation of Christ, these phrases fail to convey what was special, even revolutionary, about their way of life. Their evangelization, or sharing of the gospel, was intended to be a direct communication of the life-giving love of God. It responded directly to the question: ‘For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?’ Deeper and more direct than preaching with words, Francis and Clare directly communicated God’s tender care and allowed people to see love in concrete, practical action: encouraging, supporting, sustaining, protecting, cherishing, admonishing. People acknowledged and joined the ‘Franciscan revolution’ because Francis and Clare illuminated the truth of love’s power. They made real the life-giving presence of God in the human community. As others saw the possibility of life-giving love, they, too wanted to experience and contribute to its transforming impact on the world around them.” (pp. 74-5)

"How will we embrace and support our living together in ways that honor God and dignify one another? Can this life truly be a sacred pilgrimage of encounters that enrich rather than transactions that degrade? Only if we are willing to grow, to be changed, to have our assumptions and presumptions challenged, especially as we heed the invitation to accompany the poorest and most marginalized, and courageously to denounce and change the systems that marginalize and degrade. This is a solidarity that changes lives, a love that refuses to turn its back on the spaces of human darkness that many would rather ignore or deny: ...the places where ‘hardness of heart’ turns truly lethal and ugly, where human pathologies have led to suffering, depravity, and a sick intransigence that dishonors our dignity as a human community and as a species. A genuine turn toward a transforming solidarity at the margins requires a new, relational identity (as opposed to a more autonomous one, predicated on our assumptions, our personal goals, and the priorities and values we inherit from our cultures). For many of us, this invitation is likely to be at least as disconcerting as Francis and Clare’s insistence on material poverty. But if it is true that we need others to pull us out of the ‘smallness’ of ourselves, then this relational identity is the cornerstone of a fertile creativity that grows as we join forces with others and allow the wellspring of the Spirit to release grace into the world through our connectedness. This is a solidarity that gives life to all—not just to the marginalized but to us, too. What is ironic is that we continue to see Francis’s and Clare’s journeys in terms of renunciation—what they gave up—rather than in terms of what they gained: a genuine richness in

the quality of their lives, as love and kinship grew and spread and they showed the world that there is no ‘them’ and ‘us,’ just us.” (p. 77)

“In this chapter, we turn to the heart of tenderness, to understand what constitutes ‘the tenderness of God,’ which I will correlate with the more technical term ‘*miserickordia*.’ I am going to use these two terms interchangeably. *Miserickordia* is the spiritual and theological heart of Francis’s and Clare’s way of life, the heart of what they learned from God as they made the margins of society their home. *Miserickordia*, like the love on which it is based, is not a single emotion, nor even merely a complex of emotions, not a set of ways of interacting with another (e.g., mercifully). It expresses a way of being conditioned by our relationships with others, so that our concerns, orientations, and awareness are determined not only what we see or feel or experience but also by the reality of others. The care and concern conveyed by the word is multifaceted, not immune to indignation and righteous anger, but constantly responsive to whatever is relationally appropriate for the well-being of the other. *Miserickordia*, in other words, is an attentive, tender love that communicates direct and trustworthy presence. It is a deeply invested, active love that is protective, corrective, supportive, affirming, challenging, and whatever else the other needs for her or his deepest well-being. The spontaneity, immediacy, constancy and trustworthiness of this love is what is critical. This is a love that never leaves us. It is also a love that surpasses our expectation—always surprising and even humbling us with its generosity. What an incredibly critical corrective for us today, in light of what so often passes for ‘love.’” (pp. 81-2)

“Love, hope, and the joy of sharing life together were turning spaces of death into vibrant communities where everyone belonged and everyone mattered. Far from being some kind of utopian ideal or pious charity, these communities of *miserickordia* were a prophetic witness to God’s desire to come alive, to help us move from being merely human to being constantly humane, and to work together to build a world that is home for all. In committing themselves to the practice of *miserickordia*, Francis, Clare, and the earliest Franciscan communities of men and women were learning together the intimate tenderness of steely strength of God’s love in a profoundly new way.” (p. 87)

“Francis and Clare believed that the reality that God is always at work within creation simply because God is love and has loved all things into being was (is) our deepest reality, and it is not so much an effort of faith as an exploration of genuine relationship that allows us to experience this as our daily reality. The core of Francis and Clare’s desire was to invite people in the mystery of God’s love through what they did and, more importantly, through who they were—or rather, who they had become over the years of embracing relationship with God. They modeled, mirrored, and offered to us the possibility of living in and living out the love of God. And they did so selflessly, by example, preaching the gospel at all times and using words when necessary. Like Jesus, they invite us to experience the God who is at the center of our being and who walks with us out of the margins of our own existence.” (p. 107)

#### QUESTIONS:

Develop a holistic definition of “tenderness” using categories from this chapter. In what senses is tenderness a source of strength as well as vulnerability? As the opposite, perhaps *antidote* to hardheartedness? In what senses is tenderness an expression of power, and what does it teach us about power?

What are some of the elements of intentional community that arise from these vision of community described on pp. 90-98? How do they respond to Pope Francis’s “We are called to bear witness to a constantly new way of living together in fidelity to the Gospel.” (*Joy of the Gospel*, par. 92)?