**FRANCISCAN RESPONSE TO RACISM**

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*“Racism is a virus that quickly mutates and, instead of disappearing, goes into hiding, and lurks in waiting.”* ***-*** *Fratelli tutti* ***(97)***

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is an annual event observed across the world on 21 March. This article focuses on the Franciscan response to end racism in our society and in the Church.

**Francis, a sower of the seeds of peace, continues to inspire**

St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) was born in Assisi, Italy. His international popularity hasn’t waned in eight hundred years. Pope Francis says, “This Saint of fraternal love, simplicity, and joy, who inspired me to write the Encyclical *Laudato si’,* prompts me once more to devote this new Encyclical to fraternity and social friendship. …Wherever he went, he sowed the seeds of peace…” (*Fratelli tutti* 2).

**Francis’ mission to break discrimination and to build fraternity**

Francis’ own contemporary society socially and culturally discriminated the poor and excluded the lepers. Francis, the son of a wealthy merchant, was courageous and unconventional to cross the barriers of poverty and leprosy. “He lived among the outcasts and lepers… it is one which appeals to us very strongly today” (John R.H. Moorman). The mission of Francis has been one of breaking discrimination, building fraternity, promoting peace, interfaith harmony, and dialogue.

**Racism: a huge challenge to society and to the Church**

The monster that has been eating up human society as well as the Church is racism, which is practised even in the twenty-first century. It has dehumanized Black people. Dalits (in India) and Black people are the most discriminated and oppressed people in the world. In spite of constitutional provisions and legislation, the racial violence perpetrated against Black people keeps on mounting even today (e.g., the deaths of George Floyd, Brenno Taylor, Ahmaud). One cannot say confidently that the Churches are entirely free from racism.

**Franciscans, the followers of Francis**

The followers of Francis are called Franciscans. In his lifetime, Francis founded three Orders: the First Order, for men, is known as the Order of Friars Minor; the Second Order, for women, is called the Order of St Clare (OSC) or the Poor Clares; the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) is for those single or married. The First Order consists of three independent branches: the Order of Friars Minor (OFM), the Order of Friars Minor Conventual (OFM Conv), and the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin (OFM Cap).

‘The history of the Franciscan Order is an endless poem, to which every century has added its own verse” (Gemelli). The Third Order Regular of St Francis (TOR), only of friars, was founded in 1447. Members of other Franciscan Regular Third Order Congregations can be male or female, and they live in community according to their gender. There are many Franciscan women Congregations such as the Congregation of Daughters of St Francis of Assisi (DFSA), the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM). All of these Franciscans adhere to the Roman Catholic Church. The Anglican Society of St Francis of Assisi (SSF), the Lutheran Franciscans, and the Franciscan Ecumenical Order, adhere to other churches.

**Response of the Franciscans of the United States to racism**

“The National Commission of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) in the United States, hereby declares that racism is morally wrong. It does not love or respect life. Neither Scripture, nor our Rule of Life, nor our faith justifies it, for any reason, or under any circumstance. As Catholic Christians and Franciscans, we owe it to ourselves to do the following in response to racism: to identify and eradicate the structures in our social institutions that perpetuate racism and replace them with structures that are fair and just, and that value the lives and gifts of every person.”

**Franciscans as Leaders in bringing about racial equity and justice**

**“**To pray for an end to racism; indeed, to pray for interracial solidarity, for our laws and our faith practices to reflect our compassion and value for the dignity of every human life; and that we lovers and followers of Jesus and Francis of Assisi, be leaders in bringing about a rightly informed sense of racial equity and justice in our land and in our Church.” One and a half million Franciscans all over the world are working together to end racism.

*“I have a dream that one day down in Alabama …little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers … With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our Nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together; to pray together; to struggle together; to go to jail together; to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.” – Martin Luther King Jr.*

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