

Can Prayer Connect?

By Tom Nguyen

Chapter 3 of our Constitutions is “Our Life of Prayer.” I think prayer is life-giving and meaningful. Sometimes when we think of prayer we focus on the praying of the individual. I think the beauty of Chapter Three is its focus on our communal praying.

The chapter begins with the image of prayer to God as “like a breath of love.” It is the very air that we breathe that gives life to the brothers, and this comes from the movement of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit invites us to listen inwardly to the voice of God that speaks to our hearts and, as Franciscans, we know that God speaks to us in many ways throughout all of creation.

But praying is never just a one-way path. Praying is an invitation into a dynamic relationship. The Spirit affects us in a way that we must “respond to God speaking to us.” I believe that the Spirit is inviting us to radically respond in our praying by striving for a genuine quality that connects and reaches the depths of our hearts in order that we may become a living prayer, an embodiment of God’s goodness and love.

The gem that I think can be found in this chapter is how “our prayer should be a special manifestation of our calling as lesser brothers.” It is not just any kind of praying that the constitutions focus on, but it is our communal fraternal kind of praying. What does it mean to connect on a communal dimension when we pray? How do we fulfill in our lives the depth of praying and share with each other how the Spirit is working in our lives as a fraternity? How can we “fulfill what the Lord wills” on a communal dimension if we don’t connect with each other and see how the Spirit can draw us all to a new sense of Gospel joy and vitality? Pope Francis calls us to live a life of Gospel joy! How do we possibly do this as brothers if we don’t share how the Spirit does give us joy, and if we don’t connect on a deeper level as brothers? This section of our constitutions is inviting us as brothers to really enter the communal relational reality of our fraternal living.

We are called to be “faithful to prayer so that those that seek the Lord may be drawn to pray with us.” That’s what happened for me a long time ago, when I was a candidate. It was because of the prayer life of the Capuchin Franciscans, which was so different from the way other people prayed, that gave me so much life and inspired me. It was because everyone around me at a liturgy would not hold back their voice in a joyful song of praise to God. This prayer – of music, of creativity, attentiveness to cultures, to inclusive language and care for those that society would like to ignore – is what invited my heart to join my voice and life to the Order of Capuchin Franciscans.

I’ve always had the image going through my formation that ministry starts from gifts. What we receive and how we live as brothers, and especially our life of prayer together, is what gives us the vitality that allows us to go forth to the poor who hunger for such relationality, connection and generosity that we have in our fraternity. “Francis wished to mold the entire life of the

brotherhood in a way that would be life-giving and nourishing within the Eucharistic life.” Francis realized that mirroring the Eucharistic life invited us into communion with one another to become one fraternity, one body, one church in Christ.

Being Capuchin Franciscans calls us to the fraternal dimension of praying that demands that we search for meaning and how our prayer can be done with that “creativity, spontaneity, and inculturation that accords with their genuine spirit.” One of the most powerful experiences for me of this aspect of our praying was at our chapter this year, during the remembrance of our deceased brothers. That was one of the most profound moments where we as brothers connected on such a deep level of appreciation and gratitude for the gifts of brothers, cultures and life, because we allowed ourselves truly to connect to the gift of the stories being shared, our voices being one, our lives being open to new cultural meaning, and our hearts giving God praise for all we have.

How are we expressive in our praying? Francis was one who was able to express his feelings and his connection with the dynamism of the Trinity through his song and music! He realized the importance of music so “with one voice and mind that the brothers would be able to be attuned to God.” Can we as brothers sing our hearts out in a way that focuses our communal sound of praying that touches our heart’s ear? Can we be expressive in our creativity in how we plan and lead the brothers in prayer?

As we reflect on our life of prayer and especially with the norms of the church and the things that we have to do, let us not get caught up in the routines that may cause us not to connect with one another. There are so many times when we can get into the habit of just walking into chapel and getting through the psalms or the motions of the Mass without ever being able to connect with each other. I think that’s the danger of routine. Our constitutions really remind us, and I think emphasize, that our praying as Capuchin Franciscans is “affective, a prayer of the heart” which leads to a truly intimate experience of God. Our prayer life needs always to have the affective beauty that moves and stirs the heart.

May we strive for a life of prayer which connects to the heart and that is filled with meaning and vitality that may inspire others to join their voices to the Gospel joy that is found in the life of the Capuchin Franciscans. “To pray, in fact is nothing other than to speak to God with the heart.”