

Social and Economic Inequalities – Profound changes in the economy and in the nature of work itself have quickly generated enormous wealth for a few and accelerated economic and social inequalities. Computer-driven technologies replace factory jobs. Few people actually “make things.” A “knowledge economy” essentially excludes those with little education. Barred from full participation in the economy, they are consigned to low-wage service sector jobs where a single wage-earner cannot support a family. Youth entering the economy face great uncertainty with diminished economic expectations. Their parents’ generation saw an acceleration of socio-economic inequality, when a small number of elites (such as those in the government-favored financial industry) became much richer, while the middle class was shrinking, and continues to shrink. The poor appear structurally trapped in this economy, for while the US government since the 1930s was presumed to have an important role in fostering economic opportunity and social equality, currently powerful political voices undermine support for those government efforts. In the US and Britain such voices manipulate the sense of loss many feel from their experience of economic and social changes into nativist, xenophobic solutions such as proposals for walling out immigrants and the Brexit process. In Canada, abundant natural resources and technological innovation are fueling impressive economic growth. Canadians, in common with the people of the other ESC nations, face challenges from tensions between the very affluent and those who have less, as well as concern for the environmental dangers from economic development.

Gender Issues – Traditional assumptions about family, gender identity and sexuality are being questioned and rejected. A broad consensus is emerging of the need to respect the autonomy, agency and authenticity of individuals to foster fidelity and commitment to family. Questions about traditional understandings of masculinity and what it means to be a man are leading to diverse responses, with some men embracing gender equality while others aggressively assert male privilege. Women are claiming full human, social and legal equality. Over the past year, many credible accusations of powerful men harassing and assaulting vulnerable women have been amplified by social media into a real public awareness. Many younger women will not accept gender-based harassment nor obstacles to their careers and personal lives, but that view is not universally held, even among women.

Faith and Religion – Our societies are embracing secularism, with some curious exceptions. In some areas, an aggressive and ideological secularism seeks to exclude all expressions of faith and religion from the public sphere, leading to a bellicose and twisted counter-attack from fundamentalist religious groups. In the US White Evangelicals overwhelmingly support Donald Trump to the point of purposefully ignoring policies and actions clearly contrary to the Gospel. In Canada, Ireland (and to a lesser extent, Malta), the historically extremely influential voice of the Church is being progressively silenced. Influential groups and politicians overtly resist reference to religion in legislation or public policies. Others cynically manipulate fundamentalist beliefs to foster unjust laws to exclude some from societal participation, especially concerning issues relating to life, death and sexuality. Due to a constitutional understanding of the separation of Church and State in the US, secularism takes on a different dynamic as religion is seen as a “private” matter allowing great claims of religious adherence in the face of public secularism. Lithuania is in a unique position, with the Church having a critical role in the building of a Post-Communist, Post-Soviet society.

In the context of profound cultural change, the role of religion in society is disputed. Many continue in their faith. Others reject the search for God as an impossible task. Some assert a simplistic, fundamentalist understanding of God that legitimates individual success without reference to society at large. Still others thirst for spirituality or an “experience of the Holy” independent of organized religion. Thus, in the context of broadly held distrust of institutions, especially religious institutions, traditional

expressions of faith (devotions, Mass) give way to a search for meaning in work, and in experiences of prayer, beauty, or humanitarian service.

Science and Technology – Advances in science and technology produce contradictory effects. Ubiquitous digital information technology makes information readily available to everyone, but produces enhanced alienation, individualism and fear. Technology permeates our lives to our very fingertips, leading many to an unquestioning faith in technology to solve all human problems. But at the same time, increased knowledge brings an awareness that our relationship with nature has grown disordered and must be transformed. Unprecedented fires, storms and rising seas gain public attention, making climate change denialism untenable and increasing public awareness that our current path of technological development is unjust and not sustainable. Many agree that we need a different kind of economy, rooted in respect for the earth and its limits. But in the US, an influential group of people and corporations aggressively protecting their own economic interests fight against policies to protect the environment and climate.

B. Changes in the Church – Pope Francis is enthusiastically embraced by many as an agent of renewal in the Church who has restored its credibility. But the Church is also hobbled in its mission by intolerance of diverse theological views, the abdication of evangelization, prophetic preaching and pastoral care of youth.

Church in the Public Sphere – The social forces outlined above contribute to a decreased sense of the value of the institutional Church and distrust of its ability to address meaningful responses to the human condition of its members, others, or society at large. The institutional Church is deemed outdated, irrelevant, or sometimes hypocritical in its actions and failures to act. Scandals in Church leadership, secularism and other factors over the past generation have greatly reduced the social status of the Church and partly decreased family support for and the number of religious and priestly vocations.

Cultural Diversity – The US Catholic Church is experiencing “full pews and empty pulpits.” Those in the pews are increasingly immigrants, while the number of priests and religious continue a decades-long decline, resulting in a dearth of native vocations. Bishops in North America and parts of Europe increasingly recruit priests from other countries, some of whom appear poorly trained to lead Congregations whose language and culture they do not share.

Political Positioning – Pope Francis appears to have broad lay support for his agenda for the Church, but only modest public support from US bishops. US bishops’ meetings address the concerns of prior popes, with little discussion of *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si*, and *Amoris Letitia*. While many bishops express little interest in promoting an integral approach to human, spiritual, social and ecological development, many lay faithful desire to “be church” with personal responsibility for faith formation and small faith communities, integrated with accompanying those on the margins and promoting justice.

Youth – Due to numerous factors over the last 50 years, the Church throughout the area of the ESC has failed to sufficiently support catechesis and religious formation for young people, leading to a substantial departure of young adults from the Church and dramatically reducing the number who would consider a religious vocation.

C. How Friars Address These Changes – Friars are responding to the social and ecclesial changes outlined above, though not at the rate of the changes themselves. Their responses can be clustered into two groups: the pursuit of fidelity to our Franciscan vocation, and engagement with society, especially the marginalized. Changes challenge friars to renew their Franciscan identity, even as they age and

decline in numbers. Friars once thought that they could face the challenges of change alone, even if they actually could not, and accepting that reality challenges us to humbly ask others for help. So another theme within the responses is collaboration, whether with Friars of other entities, with other Religious, the laity, or with others of good will.

Fidelity to our Franciscan Vocation – Most ESC Provinces are currently discerning stronger inter-provincial collaboration or the restructuring of their fraternal governance. Six US Provinces vote in May 2018 about becoming one Province, while in October 2018, the two Canadian Provinces will become one, and the former Province of England is now a dependent Custody of the Irish Province. These efforts to restructure are meant to promote renewal and obtain organizational efficiencies. Most began with collaborative initial formation efforts seeking to provide the best formation possible and have progressed to cooperation in ministry and administration. The responses of the Friars to these efforts mix enthusiasm, hope, sadness, and resistance. The myriad issues raised by these discussions currently consume much leadership time and will for the immediate future. Overall, the social and ecclesial issues, along with restructuring call for a deep examination of Franciscan identity and response to the signs of the times.

ESC Friars are engaging our Franciscan tradition within the broader Franciscan Family. They vigorously support the agenda of Pope Francis which many see as engaging and giving life to our charism as exemplified by our Father St. Francis. Many seek to retrieve our Franciscan tradition, including its intellectual dimension. These activities stimulate greater awareness that Friars are part of a worldwide Order and a broader Franciscan movement. Sound scholarship, including the work of the ESC Commission on the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition (CFIT), continues to clarify our shared understanding of our charism and roles in the Church, as well as animating a renewed sense of identity.

Renewal efforts must respond to strong cultural forces, such as individualism. Many of the Friars struggle with the “*me/my-ism*” so prevalent in our cultures. Some individualism can facilitate evangelization, as when Friars express their individual giftedness in diverse work and ministry not sponsored by Provinces, such as through the professions. Individual calls discerned within the community open the Friars to the creative work of the Spirit to proclaim the Gospel every day to many thousands of people with emails, websites, blogs, and YouTube videos. But individualism can prevent Friars from living for others through a concern for “my schedule,” “my ministry,” and “my computer,” even to the point of being pulled away from fraternity and becoming isolated.

Friars present a face of the Church inspired by the teaching of Pope Francis. Many Friars accompany those with a sense of Church very different from traditional parish ministry. St. Barbara Province is in a provincial process of renewal and restructuring, letting go of parishes and turning over more and more administrative tasks to lay people to allow “Friars to be Friars.” The Province of Malta is seeking to adopt a more meaningful way of using its material, financial, and personnel resources in conformity with *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si*. Many Provinces of the ESC maintain retreat centers and houses of prayer or hermitages open to people of all faiths and beliefs where Friars are available to accompany the search for God, the thirst for spirituality and the quest for meaning. In profoundly secularized societies, these resources help build bridges between our rich Franciscan heritage and the multi-faceted spiritual needs of the people of today.

Engagement with Society – Even as Friars increase in age and decrease in numbers, in the spirit of St. Francis, insofar as they are able, they reach out to those in need around them. Our communities of Friars include both those fragile and tired with dissipated dreams, and those seeking to create more inclusive and affirming faith communities, in both their fraternities and local ministries. Most ESC Provinces are not currently in a position to undertake new missionary initiatives, but local fraternities are challenging themselves to be open to cultural diversity, develop multi-cultural competency, and the ability to work and live harmoniously with those of other cultural backgrounds. Given the significant proportion of

aspirants to the Order who are immigrants, the North American Provinces in particular are working to make their fraternities more welcoming to men of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Mission and evangelization are at the core of the founding of the new Canadian Province. The fundamental values of the Franciscan heritage – and particularly the challenges associated with *living out the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ* in a culturally and linguistically diverse Canadian society – are inspiring a revitalized approach to mission in Canada. In Vancouver and Montreal, for example, parish ministry is putting friars in close contact with immigrants, youth, lay ministers etc.

The Friars of the ESC reach out to minister to those on the margins of society, especially the poor, the homeless, migrants and Indigenous people. Virtually every Province has Friars or sponsored institutions devoted to ministries of service and presence to the marginalized. In some Provinces, almost all ministries conduct outreach to people on the edges of society.

In Merchants' Quay Friary (Dublin) the local community began a project with facets ranging from drug rehabilitation to shelter for the homeless to feeding those on the streets and without funds. With the project up and running, leadership has been turned over to laity with professional skills. Immaculate Conception Province (New York), founded in the 19th century to serve Italian immigrants to the US continues to serve and accompany new immigrants, but now in nine languages. In 2014, the Holy Name Province (New York) decided that each of its local fraternities would seek to respond concretely to the needs of immigrants to the United States. St. John the Baptist (Cincinnati), St. Barbara (California) and Our Lady of Guadalupe (New Mexico) Provinces continue a tradition of more than a century of ministry among Native Americans in Arizona and New Mexico. After many decades, several Provinces continue in ministry among historically African-American communities and have recently opened *Ite Nuntiate* communities to expose friars to the needs of the poor and migrants, including an inter-city *Ite Nuntiate* community on the US/Mexican border.

ESC Provinces are involved in numerous social service, educational, retreat, and communications ministries, such as St. Anthony Foundation in San Francisco, St. Bonaventure (New York) and Quincy (Illinois) Universities, Siena College, the Franciscan School of Theology (California), St. Francis Retreat (Pennsylvania), Serra and St. Francis Retreats (California) and Franciscan Media (Cincinnati). Most are now led by lay people but remain connected to the Friars through Franciscan Friars presence on their oversight boards. St. Barbara, St. John the Baptist, and Assumption (Wisconsin) Provinces each have programs to pass on the Franciscan charism to the lay leaders of their sponsored institutions and to animate a Franciscan spirit within the institutions themselves.

Among the ways Friars of the ESC seek to live out JPIC values are by advocacy for the poor, the desire to put *Laudato Si* into practice, and by fostering inter-religious cooperation. *Song and Spirit Institute* of St. John the Baptist Province in Detroit regularly hosts shared celebrations of Shabbat, Muslim dialogue circles, Buddhist meditation and Quaker (Protestant) services in its liturgical space. ESC Provinces have conducted and offered to others a number of retreats, workshops and study days on *Laudato Si*, including energy audits for buildings and properties. The Maltese Friars are conducting a Carbon Footprint Project to help raise energy use awareness among the Friars and to effectively reduce the carbon footprint of their friaries by thirty percent over three years. In Canada, friars are voicing concerns about ecology and development, and militate for the preservation and environmentally responsible use of land.

CONCLUSION - The Friars of the Provinces of the ESC, like all Friars since the day Francis of Assisi first heard the call to repair the Church, face an incredible diversity of challenges to their living and proclaiming the Gospel. Like all of the Friars of history, they are doing some things very well, while other things still mystify them. (How are we to really live poverty? How are we to reach young people?) They find that the more humbly they seek to engage the world, to be with the rich and the poor with the popular and the unpopular, the more they seek to be authentically faithful to their Franciscan charism in

its great richness and variety, the more they are following the call God has given them to be Friars for their time and place.

Photo: ESC members. (no photo credit)