

In All Things, Be Kind

As I reflect on my tenure as your Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Animator, I can lean into a few virtues that have guided this journey – compassion, empathy, and mercy, just to name a few. The one virtue I settle in on the most is kindness – or, what I call “mindful kindness” – being kind on purpose, with great intentionality and grace. Being kind is not the same as being nice. Being nice can encompass actions like using courteous language, offering compliments, and generally creating a positive and amicable atmosphere in interactions. However, being nice doesn't necessarily imply a strong emotional connection or the same level of altruism as kindness does.

Kindness is the quality of being considerate, compassionate, and benevolent towards others. It involves showing genuine concern for the well-being and feelings of individuals, often through acts of generosity, empathy, and helpfulness. Kindness can manifest in various ways, such as offering a helping hand, expressing words of encouragement, listening attentively, or performing selfless deeds without expecting anything in return. It's a fundamental aspect of human interaction that promotes understanding, cooperation, and a sense of community.

Being nice would have meant that Francis merely stepped over Brother worm; but Francis was kind as he picked Brother worm up and moved it to the side of the road so as to not be trampled by others. Being nice would have meant that Jesus healed and went no further. When Jesus healed, there was a true encounter with the person – he stopped, he asked, he listened, he was moved, he touched, and more often than not, he instructed. Kindness involves a holy and deliberate encounter.

One of my favorite quotes says: ***“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.”*** I want you to look at the person to the left and to the right of you. And smile. Those are your family members, and they are fighting a battle you know nothing about. It does not matter what the battle is or how great or small it may be – it's their battle and they are walking through it. Hopefully by Chapter's end, you will learn of at least one battle that you can keep in your prayers.

Our Holy Rule tells us to “seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in our brothers and sisters...” (Art. 5); that we are called to “conform our thoughts and deeds to those of Christ” (Art. 7); and “to follow the poor and crucified Christ, and witness to him even in difficulties and persecutions” (Art. 10). Article 12 reminds us “to set ourselves free to love God and our brothers and sisters.” And as the Apostle Paul so eloquently tells us in his letter to the church in Corinth: *“Love is patient, love is kind!* Nowhere does Paul tell us that love is being nice. He says *love is kind.* And, it is not a suggestion!

Kindness is not merely a superficial gesture; it possesses the capacity to transform lives. A kind word, a supportive action, or a genuine smile can uplift someone's spirit, providing a glimmer of hope amid the darkness. Scientifically, acts of kindness trigger the release of feel-good neurotransmitters such as dopamine and oxytocin, leading to improved mood and reduced stress levels for both the giver and receiver. By acknowledging the battles others are fighting, we create an environment where people feel valued, understood, and less alone.

That quote also encourages the cultivation of empathy – the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. When we recognize that everyone has their own struggles, we are more likely to approach interactions with an open heart and an empathetic perspective. This shift in mindset fosters deeper connections and meaningful relationships. Empathy enables us to offer genuine support, even if we haven't experienced the exact same struggles as someone else. It bridges the gap between differences, fostering unity and mutual understanding.

Your words, your tone, your demeanor, your smile or lack thereof, can be the difference between someone joining us or not, someone loving or fearing, someone living or dying. And remember, we too are the someone who is also fighting a battle and I am sure we all want and need empathy, compassion and understanding in those dark and difficult moments.

Kindness possesses the remarkable ability to break down barriers that often divide us. In a world where differences in culture, background, and beliefs can lead to misunderstanding and conflict, the recognition of shared battles offers a common ground for connection. When we choose to be kind, we transcend these divisions and create a space where people can interact without judgment or resistance. In turn, this can lead to the dismantling of prejudices and the promotion of inclusivity.

Justice, peace and the care of God's creation is not the only place where kindness must abide. Be kind in your formation sessions because those are the tender souls who God is calling to a holier way of life. Be kind in your dealings with those troubled and troubling fraternities and fraternity members. They too have a grain of truth and are graced and loved by God. Be kind to your council members – they walk this journey with you and may not be as strong, as diligent, or as dedicated as you would like them to be.

The impact of kindness is not confined to individual interactions; it has the potential to set off a ripple effect that reverberates throughout society. When we show kindness to others, it inspires them to do the same, creating a chain reaction that spreads joy and positivity. As Franciscans, we are called to be instruments of peace, in our Order, in our Church, and

in our world. Being instruments of peace does not mean we merely put out the fires of chaos and contention. It means we set the world ablaze with love, joy and the light of our Most High God.

It has been my utmost honor and joy to serve you as your Animator these past ten years. But as you can see, I am not dead yet! I will continue to invite you to walk together on this holy journey of faith, trusting in the divine seed in everyone we encounter, until that journey leads us home to our heavenly Kingdom where we will join with that magnificent cloud of Franciscans witnesses – professed or not, vowed or not – who have walked a path that knows nothing but the peace of God, the love of God, the joy of God and the unending grace of God.

May the Lord continue to grant you peace and the spirit of kindness be with you always!