These reflections were developed by two Secular Franciscans in the Atlantic area of the Regional Fraternity of Eastern Canada, Doug Hagen and Sherrill Guimond. In a shorter form, they were presented at an Area meeting, and then, these texts became the basis for one of the retreats hosted by St. Francis of Assisi Fraternity, Cornwall, PEI.

We are using the version of the Beatitudes found in Matt 5:1-12.

**Eighth Beatitude – Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

Since we are all God’s children, it does seem silly to fight and quarrel and cause dissension. This only tears down the human family. Rather, we are called to side with the Prince of Peace, to work to settle disputes, to root out violence, to forgive and show compassion. We are to be those who unite, not those who divide; those who cooperate, not those who compete; those who build bridges, not those who erect walls. The Risen Lord says, “Peace be with you” (Jn 20:19). His followers must have this same message.

*Refer to ..second book of the Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano, pg.262, par.93)*

To stand up for what is right, especially in the face of mockery, rejection, and verbal and even physical abuse, is to stand with Jesus Christ and help him carry his cross. Jesus never promised us a rose garden; he did promise us eternal happiness united to the Blessed Trinity.

Sister Helen Swift tells us in her book, “How Blest You Are”, that if we really take seriously what Jesus said in the first seven Beatitudes, the 8th Beatitude comes as no surprise. One has only to look at what happened to Jesus to know the results of living his message. Jesus is advising us that the one who lives the Beatitudes will be insulted, slandered and, in general, treated like the prophets of old. The disciple of today too must accept the fact that there is still a tie between living and preaching the Good News and suffering persecution.(pg. 75)

Sister Swift also tells us that Jesus is telling his disciples and us that the more we resemble him, the more that we will be treated just as he was treated. If we belonged to the world we would be accepted and praised but since we belong to Jesus, we can expect the same treatment he received. Somehow we find this very difficult to accept Jesus’ answer. We keep looking for the rewards of goodness in this life, forgetting what happened to Jesus and so many of his true followers down through the centuries. Sister Swift tells us that Jesus knew how difficult it would be for us to realize the blessedness of being persecuted, so he gave us some practical examples. He showed how his disciples must live differently than those who have no faith. The person who tries to see persecution as an opportunity to be like Jesus and be more deeply inserted into the Kingdom is the person who sincerely lives the Beatitude. Jesus tells us we must pray for

those who persecute us just as he did as he hung on the cross, “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).(pg.77-78)

There is a real link between this last Beatitude and the message, “How blest are the peacemakers.” To be a peacemaker implies taking action for the Kingdom, proclaiming the message of Jesus. Anyone who has tried to be true to this call of Jesus knows that it leads to persecution. Priests, sisters and lay leaders of Christian communities are arrested and tortured everyday because they proclaim the Good News of God’s love. (pg. 79)

Jim Forrest, in his book, “The Ladder of the Beatitudes” asks do we believe that “this eighth beatitude is only for our ancestors or those living in countries where persecution continues?” (pg. 142) If we start noticing the image of God in the poor, if we begin to oppose those activities that cause suffering and bloodshed, no matter how meek and merciful you are, you may find that getting into conflict can happen here and now. In this beatitude, Jesus assures us that getting into conflict for following him is something we should receive as a major blessing. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven…” (Mt 5:12)

Fr. Fernanda Ventura in his dossier on “Evangelized to Evangelize” writes that in this final beatitude we are faced with reality for one who bases their life on this set of principles – persecution, insult, lies, and slander will be their travelling companions.

David N. MacNaughton writes in his book, “The Beatitudes for Today” that Jesus has outlined the qualities each one of us must possess in order to be a Christian. A Christian must be humble, repentant, meek, righteous, merciful, pure and a peacemaker. Jesus tells us that when we display Christian virtues in our own lives, we can expect to receive the same kind of treatment that he received. (pg. 54-55)

Martin Luther said that, throughout the course of human history, 3 things have preserved and strengthened the Church and allowed her to witness mightily for Christ: teaching the Gospel faithfully, praying diligently and suffering with earnestness.

Trevor Huddleston, in his book, “Dying We Live”, contains letters written by prisoners in German concentration camps awaiting death. Their testimony supports the truth contained in this 8th Beatitude, which is that God is never closer to us than when we suffer for him. One letter was from a 22 year old Canadian born in Saskatchewan who was shot by a firing squad. In his final letter to his mother he wrote: “I have travelled a road that I have never regretted…I am

not old, I should not be dying …the time is short, I cannot properly explain it, but my soul is perfectly at rest.” (David MacNaughton’s book – The Beatitudes, pg. 60-61)

James Howell tells us in his book, “The Beatitudes For Today” that “as we sort through what the Beatitudes mean for us today, we need to pause, take a deep breath, and reflect on the truth: if we absorb Jesus’ words, if we walk in his way, if we try to embody his words and stick closely to him in the real world, we will suffer.” And what Jesus invites us to see is that when we join him, we become people of hope. Hope dawns when we have discovered the pearl of great price, the one true path of life. (pg. 88)

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of this higher value of the truth when he marched on Selma in 1965, : “I can’t promise you that it won’t get you beaten or get your home bombed…but we must stand up for what is right…If you haven’t discovered something that is worth dying for, you haven’t found anything worth living for.” (James Cone – Martyrdom Today, pg. 76)

The final beatitude is the longest. Christ singles out the prophets as models. The prophets classify sins against the poor as acts of disobedience to God, who does indeed regard us as responsible for each other. After Cain killed Abel, he said to

God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The implications of the story go beyond one person striking a deadly blow. Because I am my brother’s keeper, whatever I do or fail to do that contributes to the death of another makes me an accomplice in murder.

Fr. Michael Crosby tells us in his book, “Spirituality of the Beatitudes” that we live in a society today wherein affluence has choked off God’s word in such a way that Jesus’ promise of having foes within “one’s own household” seems all too evident. Persecution and misunderstanding are not to be expected only from members of one’s own family and former friends. It can be anticipated from society itself. Assured that this very persecution will be certain and a sign of God’s presence and reign with us, Fr. Crosby states that we have no need to worry how we should respond to such powers as we read in Matthew 10:19-20 “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time;” (pg. 178-179).

Isaiah 61:1 tells us: “the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me … he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”

Richard Rohr tells us that in this text from Isaiah, the prophet describes the coming Servant of Yahweh. It is precisely this quote that Jesus first uses to announce the exact nature of his own ministry in Luke 4:18-19. In each case Jesus describes his work as reuniting things that have in any way lost their divine state, or been marginalized or demeaned by society. Rohr tells us that God justifies things “By restoring them to their true and full identity in Himself.” ( taken from Rohr’s “Related in the Spirit, posted online Dec, 16,2012 Richmond Mennonite Fellowship)

Matthew was trying to tell us that those who hunger and thirst to experience justice and to manifest it in a just lifestyle within a seriously unjust society must be open to the very real possibility of rejection and persecution. The world’s reaction to Jesus and his faithful commitment to live the Beatitudes will be the same response his disciples can expect …” A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master…if they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!” (Mt 10: 24-25).

The eighth beatitude addresses the persecution that a Christian must endure in this life while following the example of Jesus. The life of the Christian may be a fulfilled and happy life; but it is no bed of roses either.

The following reflection by Mother Teresa shows up on the wall of Shishu Bhavan, a children’s home in Calcutta operated by the Sisters of Charity. The eighth beatitude shows that persecution is normal for the Christian:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Do good anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you help them.
Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you’ve got and you’ll get kicked in the teeth.
Give the world the best you’ve got anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God;
It was never between you and them anyway.

“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Baptism itself makes the call part of everyone’s universal call to holiness. This call demands an entirely new way of “seeing” how everything in the universe must be in relationship for the common good; how everything in the universe is meant to be at the service of the holy. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

Micah 6:8 tells us: “This is what the Lord God Yahweh asks of you; only this: That you act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.”

Having been empowered in this blessing, we are given not just a new name but two names that express our beatitude – “You are the salt of the earth” – “You are the light of the world.”

The beatitudes start with the idea of placing our complete confidence in God (poverty of spirit). They conclude with the lesson that those who live and lead by these beatitudes are likely to be criticized, ridiculed or even persecuted for the sake of righteousness. The outcome of the first and last beatitude is the same: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” .

Living the Beatitudes on this limited planet will ultimately bring us wisdom’s reward, “…Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34).