

Opening Prayer by Sherri Bandera

Most High and Holy God, we begin by quieting our minds, setting aside our personal agendas, acknowledging that true change starts within us. Before we step into the public square, help us to look past our own biases so we may see the world as You see it—moving from a place of reaction to a place of response, rooted in a love that excludes no one. Grant us the clarity to recognize the sacred dignity in every person we will encounter at protests, vigils, marches and in all spaces where we are called to public witness. Help us to stay centered when confronted and to respond to tension from a space rooted in nonviolence. We ask for the grace to stand firmly in the margins, in solidarity with those who are excluded and ignored. In these spaces of tension, grant us the courage to be a grounded, peaceful presence—responding with love and never with retribution, refraining from violence of any kind, physical or spiritual. Following the path of St. Francis, help us to embody the Gospel in the streets, building bridges where some may see barriers. May our presence be a steady witness against apathy and a source of calm to those who are fearful. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, let us bring pardon; and where there is division, let us embody unity. May we go forward stepping lightly and with unswerving feet, trusting that the universe is on the side of justice. Let our lives be a living testimony for peace as we work together to build a community of kinship and belonging, here and now. Amen.

Internal Preparation for Witness in the Public Square by Merwyn De Mello

- **Rooted in Contemplative Prayer:** practices that cultivate inner grounding, spiritual alignment, and expanded awareness of global human suffering and solidarity.
- **Embrace a path of Nonviolence and Simplicity:** commitments to respond to conflict with love, reduce attachment to materialism, and engage in practices such as fasting to clarify intention and discipline responses.
- **Cultivate an open heart of a "Ministry of Presence":** fostering attentive, compassionate presence in situations of trauma and brokenness, embodying nonviolence through both resistance to injustice and openness to dialogue, healing, and reconciliation.



Franciscan Values in the Public Square by Carolyn Townes, OFS

When Franciscans step into public spaces for justice or peace, we are not simply protesting. We are bringing a spiritual presence shaped by the Gospel and by the witness of Saint Francis of Assisi.

Our goal is not to defeat others but to witness to another way of being.

▪ **Peace (Nonviolence in spirit and action)**

This is the anchor. Rooted in the life of Saint Francis, peace isn't just "not fighting" – it's an active, courageous commitment to:

- de-escalate rather than inflame
- speak truth without hatred
- embody calm in the midst of chaos

Your presence itself becomes a kind of quiet resistance: *We will not mirror the harm we oppose.*

▪ **Minority (Humility and solidarity, not dominance)**

This shapes *how* you show up. To live as "minor"—as Francis taught—is to:

- stand *with*, not above
- listen before leading
- resist the urge to control or overpower

It keeps your witness grounded in service rather than ego.

▪ **Fraternity (Radical dignity for all)**

This is what keeps your heart from hardening. Franciscan fraternity insists:

- no one is disposable
- no one is outside the circle of care
- even in protest, we do not dehumanize

It's what allows you to stand firmly for justice *without creating new enemies.*

Strategies or Skills When Witnessing in the Public Square by Merwyn De Mello

▪ Staying centered – Managing one’s internal state before engaging others

Managing one’s internal state is the starting point for effective public witness. Practices such as mindful breathing, emotional awareness, and intentional grounding create the capacity to respond rather than react. This inner stability enables individuals to embody respect and dignity, setting the tone for every interaction that follows.

▪ De-escalating tense situations

From a centered presence, engagement with others becomes more constructive. De-escalation involves active listening, acknowledging emotions, and maintaining non-threatening verbal and physical communication. These practices lower emotional intensity, foster trust, and open space for dialogue, even in charged situations.

▪ Moving as a community rooted in peace

When individuals who are internally grounded and skilled in de-escalation act together, they form a coordinated, peace-centered presence. Through shared norms, mutual support (such as buddy systems), and collective practices like silence or song, the group amplifies a calming, stabilizing influence. This unified approach strengthens safety, reinforces shared purpose, and advances a culture of peace in the public square.

Franciscan Strategies When Witnessing in the Public Square by Carolyn Townes, OFS

▪ Arrive grounded, not rushed

Before you even step into the space:

- Take a few quiet breaths
- Set a clear intention: *peace, dignity, presence*
- If you pray, offer the moment ahead

Be prepared inwardly before acting outwardly. It makes everything that follows more rooted.

▪ Be a “non-anxious presence”

When emotions rise, people look (often unconsciously) for someone steady and calm. You can:

- Keep your voice calm and measured
- Slow your movements
- Avoid getting pulled into reactive exchanges

▪ Use “dignity language” in real time

Have a few phrases ready that gently redirect without shaming:

- “Let’s keep this about the issue, not the person.”
- “We’re here for justice *and* dignity.”
- “Can we say that in a way that keeps everyone human?”



REMEMBER TO TAKE A
FRANCISCAN PAUSE...

Personal Integration: Guided Reflection Questions - Carolyn Townes, OFS

1. *How am I being invited to embody peace, even in the presence of conflict?*
2. *Where do I feel tension, anger, or fear within me—and how can I hold it with awareness rather than let it lead me?*
3. *What would it look like, right now, to honor the dignity of every person I encounter—including those I struggle to understand?*

“Carry one of these questions with you as you go – let it guide your presence.”

Commissioning Prayer by Carolyn Townes, OFS

Holy and Loving God, You have called us together in spirit, and now you send us forth in witness. Place within us the peace that does not yield to anger, the courage that does not depend on force, and the love that refuses to let anyone be cast aside.

As we step into public spaces, steady our hearts so that we may respond, not react.

Guard our words, that they may speak truth without harm.

Guide our actions, that they may protect life and uphold dignity.

Make us instruments of your peace –

calm in the midst of chaos, gentle in the face of hostility, and steadfast in the pursuit of justice.

Help us to remember that every person we encounter is worthy of respect, compassion, and care.

Walk with us, O God, in every step, every silence, every word.

And when we return, gather us again in wisdom, healing, and hope.

We go forth in humility, in solidarity, and in peace. Amen.