

# Celebrating the Franciscan Charism

By Teresa V. Baker, SFO  
National Formation Commission Chair



Photo by Frances Wicks, SFO

During the year 2009, we will join with all members of the Franciscan family to celebrate the primitive Rule, those gospel passages that Francis and the early friars took to Pope Innocent III, seeking approval for their new way of life. It is not so much the words of this Rule that we celebrate, but its spirit, the charism that is found therein. Again, defining charism Bishop Joseph Galante, formerly Undersecretary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life: states: *A religious charism is an intensely personal reading of the Gospel resulting in an inner enlightenment that changes the way a person relates to God, to self and to others. This new way of relationship is so powerful that it has the potential to attract others who sense in them-selves the same desire and capacity to read the Gospel in this "new key."*<sup>1</sup>

How are we to read this "new key?" First and foremost, we are not called to relive Francis' life; we are called to discern our own gifts and how we can use them to "repair God's house." We are called to live an evangelical life, one that stems from the example Jesus left us in the Gospels.

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<sup>1</sup> "Renewing Religious Life," unpublished lecture, as quoted in *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi & Her Form of Life*, Margaret Carney, O.S.F. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 226.

Exactly what is an evangelical life and how does it differ from an apostolic one? There are apostolic orders founded within the Church that are guided by a specific apostolic activity. Examples would be the numerous congregations of teaching brothers and sisters, or those communities that have the care of the sick as their vocation. Our vocation is not defined by specific activities to perform, but by our BEing present to the activities of the church and the world where we find ourselves. When someone asks us about our Franciscan life, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Do we answer by sharing the ministries that fill our time? We often define ourselves and the living out of our Franciscan vocation by what we DO. But this is not the charism Francis left behind. *For Francis, the only "work" that is fundamental to his way of life is to imitate Christ and to make that experience of Christ available to others. Evangelical life focuses on what we are, not what we do<sup>2</sup>.*"

By our promise to live an evangelical life, we take up Christ, the Book of Life. GC #10 states "God, poor and crucified," victor over death and risen, the greatest manifestation of the love of God for humanity, is the "book" in which the brothers and sisters, in imitation of Francis, learn the purpose and the way of living, loving, and suffering.

How do we take up the life Christ portrayed for us? We are not to imitate the circumstances and activities of the Lord nor of Francis; rather, we must become aware of the life of Christ as portrayed in the Gospel accounts and translate these messages into our own lives and the circumstances within which we find ourselves. So we begin, as did Jesus, with prayer. We are to ask the guidance of the Spirit in our lives that we be open and available to see what others do not see, to hear what others do not hear, to be present when others are too busy. We are to BE Franciscan. We are to BE persons of the gospel message. Think of it for a moment, when did Jesus set up a soup kitchen; where did he set up a medical clinic? He didn't. He remained present to his world and shared the grace of God with all whom he met. To some it was a kind word, to others a challenge to live a better life. He was open and present to whatever circumstances surrounded him. This was the "new key" Francis found in the Gospel accounts. This is the key we take up this year in celebration.

Yet, as for Francis, there are no specific recipes for us. As he lay dying, Francis remarked *I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours!* So how do

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<sup>2</sup> *Franciscan Prayer*, Sr. Ilia Delio, OSF (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), 6

we discern what is ours to do? We begin with prayer, asking Christ to teach us what is ours to do and the grace of the Holy Spirit to carry it through, remembering in all that we do to give honor and glory to the Father. We look to the various components of the charism that are mentioned in our Rule and pray for the wisdom and insight to act upon them, not by particular tasks we think need to be performed, but by opening ourselves to the possibilities God has placed in our lives. Often times as we walk out the door in the mornings, we go with a set agenda. **If we are so tied to the agenda, it becomes the driving force for our day rather than the opportunities God places before us.**

Besides being aware of this foundational point of our Franciscan charism, how else might we celebrate? For those of you who have already adopted a way of celebrating the charism this coming year, kudos to you. To those fraternities that are still seeking ways, the National Formation Commission offers these monthly topics for your consideration:

**January** – Gospel living as our way of life

**February** – Trinity and the love of God that sustains us

**March** – Conversion and the penitential life

**April** – Eucharist and our connectedness to the Church

**May** – Mary as our Mother and model

**June** – Prayer as the soul of all we are and do

**July** – Fraternity as our gifted place of growth

**August** – Love as total giving to the other

**September** – Creation as God's gift to us

**October** – Peace and Joy as hallmarks of our interior life

**November** – Simplicity in this world of consumerism

**December** – Humility and Poverty in imitation of Jesus, our way to the Father

Choose readings or other focusing activities that are compatible with the given topic from the writings of Francis or from one of his biographies. Set up a small ritual service to take place at the beginning of your gathering. For example, in January when commemorating Gospel life, enthrone the Gospels in a prominent place throughout your meeting. Choose a way to reverence the Scriptures. For April, when you focus on the Eucharist and our connectedness to the Church, you might want to participate in a Holy Hour. Afford everyone in the fraternity an opportunity to participate in the planning. Keep in mind that the goal of this celebration is to share with each other how the particular aspects of the charism are lived out in the lives of the brothers and sisters.

In a different venue, we also offer petitions to be added to your Morning and Evening Prayer:

### **Sunday - Creation:**

MP: Recognizing Christ as the New Morn, we ask that we become more aware of God's presence this day through the wonder of creation, we pray to the Lord

EP: As we give thanks for this day, we ask the grace of caring for all of God's creation by using the goods of this world responsibly and wisely, we pray to the Lord...

### **Monday - Fraternity:**

MP: Grateful for all fraternities throughout the SFO world, we ask that they truly be those privileged places where we may meet God in each of our sisters and brothers, we pray...

EP: In thanksgiving for this day spent in the love of the Lord, we ask the grace to continue to labor to make our fraternities places of prayer and compassion, we pray to the Lord...

### **Tuesday - Peace:**

MP: For all persons of good will, that they feel peace, think peace, and do peace, in order to be true instruments of God's peace to our world, we pray to the Lord...

EP: As we continue to grow in peace and love, may we be transformed into messengers of God's peace, we pray to the Lord...

### **Wednesday - Poverty and Joy:**

MP: For Secular Franciscans, that as we delight in God's gracious goodness to us, we might share holy joy with God's world, we pray to the Lord ....

EP: Called to follow the Son unreservedly, we ask for the ability to turn from the allurements of this world in order to turn ourselves toward God, we pray to the Lord...

### **Thursday - Prayer Mission to Church and World:**

MP: As we were baptized into the Church and joined more fully to her by our profession, may we be faithful witnesses to her mission in the world, we pray to the Lord...

EP Francis called the world his cloister; may we who chose to follow his "new key" of Gospel living consecrate the world to our heavenly Father through our presence in it, we pray to the Lord . . .

### **Friday - Life of Penance and Gospel Living:**

MP Called to live a penitential life, we ask the wisdom to understanding that this call to penitence is itself a gift, we pray to the Lord . . .

EP Jesus set forth the Gospel as our way to follow the Father's will in our life; grant us the grace to be true to this path, we pray to the Lord...

### **Saturday - Mary and her Son:**

MP: Francis embraced Mary as our protectress and advocate of the Franciscan family; may we follow her example of living completely in the will of the Father, we pray to the Lord...

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EP: Jesus came among us to share the love of the Trinity with us; may we always be witnesses of his love to all we meet, we pray to the Lord...

In whatever way you choose to celebrate, remember that we are all called to be members of this one Franciscan family. I appreciate this description of family that a friend once shared with me. *Family are those persons who share your hopes and dreams; rarely do members of the same family grow up under the same roof.*

May we all, members of the First, Second and Third Orders relish the hopes and dreams of our father Francis and bring them to fulfillment in our lives.

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