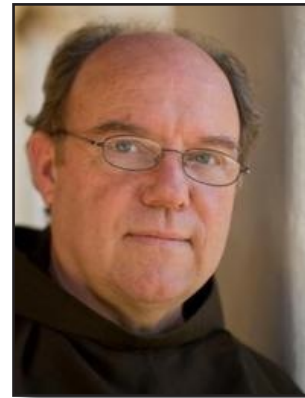


Reflections from the 2014 National Retreat  
with Br. Bill Short, OFM

## SEIZING THE FRANCISCAN MOMENT IN THE CHURCH TODAY

by Marie Thomas, OFS



### PART I - Introduction

We are in a unique Franciscan moment in history — why? We are living at a time when we have... a Jesuit Pope taking the name of Francis and living a very Franciscan life style, and the world loves him! Think about it! Why do they love him? He doesn't just talk the talk; he actually walks the walk. Don't just listen to him, although his talks are tremendous, WATCH HIM! Watch where he goes, who he goes out of his way to embrace, what he wears, etc.



One of the first places Pope Francis visited was San Damiano, where St. Francis heard the voice of God. Now, why would he want to do that? It was a private visit. He told no one and saw only the Franciscan friars who lived there — why? Because it was in this place that God said to St. Francis, “Repair my church.” Pope Francis realizes that he also needs to repair the church. You know the reasons; they’ve been all over the news: the reputation of the church damaged by the sex scandals, financial scandals right within the Vatican, etc.

Ponder in your heart and discuss the meaning of this with your friends: From the signs of the times — to the time of the signs! Images and gestures speak more loudly than words.

Today's challenge for the Secular Franciscan Order is to find ways to be visible and recognizable by our image. We need a consistent message. How can the members of the Secular Franciscans be recognized in the grocery? In church? In the restaurant?

Most people like to be in the center, the center of attention, in the center of things happening so they

are fully informed. They are the “in” group. But Pope Francis and St. Francis always go “to the edge.” That's strange, isn't it? Why be on the outskirts? What can you accomplish from out there? It is on the edge of society where you find the poor, the overlooked, the outcast, the shunned, etc. Now you step out on the edge and from that viewpoint, look toward the acclaimed “inner circle” of hierarchy. Find the edge... and look at the center. It looks different! You see things differently. You see things from that point of view.

To conclude Part I, I will leave you with one thought: *Make all people feel important, including your pastor and priests, your family members, all Franciscans, all strangers, every single person who crosses your path!*

### PART II - Peace and Relationship

We are an order of peace! That is not an option!

This part will be about Peace! But Br. Bill made it quite clear that we should preach PEACE by our deeds! Watch the facial reactions, the movements of the hands and feet, etc. People no longer trust language (maybe because of all the electronic communication that exists), but gestures are trusted because they do not lie and they are not hidden. How do you show peace with your gestures? Try smiling an honest smile. Your eyes light up! You are honestly loving that person and not just pretending to like him or her. It is not a polite “I must be nice to you,” it is an honest-to-goodness loving smile. If it's not inside; it won't show outside!

Joy speaks eloquently! Ponder that for a while!

True peace will always choose the person who is overlooked. Again, go to the edge as Francis did. If you cannot do this — you do not have Christ's true inner peace!

God's name is... RELATIONSHIP! He is not counting your good deeds, or the number of rosaries

you say, or whether you remembered to say the Divine Mercy novena, etc. No. He wants a relationship with you! How do you accomplish this? The same as with any person. Spend time with Him, talk to Him honestly, be with Him all the time! How? By being in His presence. If you have inner peace, you are in His presence. If you are upset, angry, annoyed or worried, He is not with you, because you pushed Him out. Take a deep breath and ask Him to return.

Pope Francis, as busy as he is, always saves time for prayer from 7:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. daily. You can be sure he is not just saying a rosary or the Liturgy of the Hours! Prayer is a relationship! The Pope and God are communicating... probably without using words!

Love drives out fear. I'm sure you've heard this before, but have you tried it? Are you afraid of a Franciscan brother or sister because she or he may verbally abuse you? Have you tried hugging them with an honest smile? Do it often! It may not change them, but it will certainly change you.

We are often quick to see the faults in others, but we fail to see our own. If we criticize others, we may actually possess that fault, because we tend to notice the things that are a priority in ourselves. If we criticize someone for being greedy, it may be that you yourself are greedy, or you would never have noticed it!

Fraternity Ministers are actually pastors —they must care for their flock. In your fraternity, put the people who are on the periphery into the center. Give every single member of the fraternity something to do: write birthday cards, start the meeting song, distribute the prayers, etc. Every single member in the fraternity has a talent that must be utilized and not put under a bushel just because they can't accomplish it "the way you would do it."

Sheep are not dumb. They recognize the Master's voice and follow it. Christ left the 99 and went after the one who strayed because He loves each one, and each and everyone is important to Him. Ministers, do not leave any of your members stranded and alone. Love them!

I will end Part II with the saying, "Love with an open heart at the center of unbearable tension." React ... with LOVE!

### **PART III - Poverty and Prayer**

Being spiritual does not mean we must accumulate virtues. It is just the opposite. Being spiritual means

we must be in a **PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP** with Christ —big difference! If we are concerned with accumulating virtues, we are looking at ourselves and patting ourselves on the back, or looking at ourselves and getting discouraged because we seem to be getting nowhere.

Poverty is not just giving stuff up. Just giving up stuff leads to puffing ourselves up into thinking we are "good." Oh look how good I am. I have nothing. I gave it all away. This, my brothers and sisters, is not poverty; it is Spiritual Pride and is worse than doing nothing at all.

We don't just give UP —we need to give TO... someone who needs it. The measure of our generosity is not what we give up but "What is the need of my neighbor and how do I fulfill it?" We should have what we need and avoid excess.

1. St. Francis went through three stages in his spiritual life, which are reflected in the prayers he composed:
  - 1) One of his first prayers at San Damiano was his prayer before the crucifix: "Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart, and give me correct faith, certain hope, a perfect charity, etc...." You all know it. We always say it at the beginning of Initial Formation. It is a "gimme" prayer.
  2. Later his Paraphrase of the Our Father reflects his thinking more widely of others, of community: "...enlighten them, enflame them, fill them with happiness, etc."
  3. In his final stage, St. Francis composed "The Canticle of Brother Sun," which is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving, because he knows God knows everything, loves everyone, and he trusts God totally to be in control of his life. Francis gives up control of his life and gives that control to God.

Similarly, we should go through three stages:

1. Look at Christ crucified.
2. Let Jesus look at you!
3. Christ will draw you into Himself.

Begin by gazing at the Crucified. His eyes are open. Look at Him. Just spend time looking at Him.

We don't go through these three stages simply because we want to go through them. God is in charge of all of this, but He can only do what we allow. If we are

not open to Him, He will not force Himself on us. We must go to Him with open minds and open hearts!

Let us be forgiven and be recreated in God. Like St. Francis and Pope Francis... let your attitude remain peaceful. Stay in God's loving presence so you will always react with love.

#### PART IV - Care for Creation

Many saints performed miracles with animals, but it was always to benefit someone. St. Francis was different. St. Francis treated animals with respect, without performing any kind of miracle. The animals did not benefit anyone; for example, the Sermon to the birds — they did nothing but sit.

Most of the world's creatures obey the will of God. The birds fly and chirp, the fish swim, the bears growl, all of creation obeys God's will — man is the only exception!

Nature's inherent value is related to the first born — Christ. Since Christ is God's son and we are God's children, we are all brothers and sisters of Christ.

On the Feast of St. Joseph in 2013, Pope Francis prayed that St. Joseph protect all creation as he did Jesus and Mary, and bring the warmth of hope to all of creation.



We sin against creation when we hurt it or destroy it because creation is good! I repeat— we are hurting something good, just like the criminals we see on the TV or read about in the papers!

Let me leave you with this final thought ... Become agents of His love and mercy. Be a guardian of creation, because people can sometimes forgive — nature never can. Like Pope Francis and St. Francis: React with love!

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