

"La Novitas Franciscana" Part II

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The Novelty Of Francis: Mission And Testimony

How did Francis influence his world and give new life to gospel living, examining his call to *rebuild the church*?



Francis was immersed in God's love. He found solace in the words of Scripture that confirmed this love – words that are familiar to us all, but words that became the new core of Francis' being, the core of our Franciscan way of life:

...Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. John 3:16 - NAB

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. John 15:9 - NAB

He also came to understand the relational aspect of the Trinity of Persons:

The Father and I are one. John 10:30 – NAB
This much have I told you while I was still with you; the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will instruct you in everything, and remind you of all that I told you. John 14:25-26 NAB

Francis desired to be intimately connected to Jesus. So he answered Jesus' invitation to enter into this relationship:

... My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act upon it. Luke 8:21 NAB

But how does a man of the thirteenth century become brother and mother to God? In the *Exhortation to the Faithful*, the Prologue to our Rule, Francis gave flesh to these relationships.

We are spouses, when by the Holy Spirit the faithful soul is united with our Lord.

Earlier Exhortation – Francis of Assisi: Early Documents – Vol 1, The Saint, Armstrong/Hellman/Short, New City Press, NY, 1999, page 42

Francis chose to trust in God because Jesus chose to trust in his Father in heaven. He chose to sleep in the open spaces, because the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head. He chose to spend solitary time with God because Jesus went off to pray. Could anyone have been more united to Christ? He was graced to suffer with his Lord through the holy stigmata.

And the life I live now is not my own: Christ is living in me. Galatians 2:20 NAB

... we are brothers to Him when we fulfill the will of the Father who is in heaven. Ibid- page 42

Francis' every desire was to please God. His paraphrase of the Our Father speaks of the unfolding of God's will in his life:

*That we may love You
with our whole heart by always thinking of You,
with our whole soul by always desiring You,
with our whole mind by always directing all our
intentions to You,
and by seeking your glory in everything,
with all our strength by exerting
all our energies and affections of body and soul
in the service of Your love and nothing else;*

A Prayer Inspired by the Our Father - Ibid – page 158-159

We are mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through a divine love and a pure and sincere conscience and give birth to Him through a holy activity which must shine as an example before others.

Earlier Exhortation – Ibid – page 42

Francis definitely wanted to give his life to God. The monasteries of his day rivaled the nobility for land and wealth. Men went there to give their lives to God, but also to escape the influences of the world. Francis did not see this as his calling. He did not run from the world. He stepped out into the world to complete the Father's will:

*and may we love our neighbor as ourselves
by drawing them all to Your love
with our whole strength,
by rejoicing in the good of others as in our own,
by suffering with others in their misfortunes,
and by giving offense to no one.*

A Prayer Inspired by the Our Father – Ibid – page 159

Francis recognized all persons as being created in the image of God. As such, all deserved the respect that Francis would offer God.

Francis revered the goodness of all people. People followed him. They wanted to know what inflamed him. He shared with them the freedom he found in the Gospel and invited them to join in his newfound freedom.

Francis welcomed into his family all who wished to follow the gospel life. Even more deeply, he invited them into a relationship with the Trinity. They were to be children of the Father, and the spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. They were temples of the Holy Spirit. In the same way, Francis invites us into relationship with the Persons of the Trinity.

His service was not limited to the poor outside the fraternity. Francis was very conscious of the needs of his brothers. One night a brother was so hungry that he could not sleep. He cried out: *“I am dying, brothers, I am dying of hunger.”* *At once that extraordinary shepherd got up, and hurried to treat the sick lamb with the right medicine. He ordered them to set the table, although filled with everyday fare. Since there was no wine - as often happened - they made do with water. Francis started eating first. Then, he invited the rest of the brothers to do the same, for charity's sake, so that their brother would not be embarrassed.*

The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul (Thomas of Celano 22) – Francis of Assisi - Vol 2 – page 259

Service was an important element of Francis' vocation. Jesus himself remarked that he came to serve not to be served. Francis had the great example of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. It is important to the Franciscan way of life. Nowhere is this more evident than in the name he chose for the order – the Order of Friars Minor – the Order of Lesser Brothers. This name established their readiness to serve everyone.

From humble roots, the Franciscan movement grew. Francis traveled through villages and towns, always preaching the gospel message of repentance, of turning one's mind and heart back to God. Again, persons of all classes wanted to change their lives. They wanted to take the message of the gospel and live it. They wanted to follow Jesus. Francis' message reached not only single people, but married people as well. They were not free to sell all their belongings and become itinerant preachers. They asked Francis what to do. Francis promised he would discern a way of life for them also.

We are the descendants to the first laypersons to follow Francis and our Rule is the embodiment of Francis' promise...

As his life drew to a close, he desired to empty himself of all earthly things. In the Testament, he recounted:

- *And the Lord himself led me among (the lepers) and I showed mercy to them.*
- *And the Lord gave me such faith in churches that I would pray with simplicity in this way and say: “We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, in all Your churches throughout the whole world and we bless you, because by Your holy cross You have redeemed the world.”*
- *Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church...*
- *And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.*
- *The Lord revealed a greeting to me that we should say: ‘May the Lord give you peace.’*

The Testament – Francis of Assisi – Vol 1- page 124-125

Francis realized the movement of the Spirit throughout his life. Wherever he had taken a radical stance, he never claimed any credit of his own. He referred all good back to God. For those of us who are called and choose to live this Rule of Life, Francis imparts a blessing in the name of the Trinity.

And whoever observes these things, let him be blessed in heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father, and on earth with the blessing of His Beloved Son with the Most Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, and all the powers of heaven and with all the saints). And, as far as I can, I, little brother Francis, your servant, confirm for you, both within and without, this most holy blessing.

The Testament – Ibid – page 127

My brothers and Sisters, Francis was immersed in God's love. We are also called to immerse ourselves in God's love. We have professed to live the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. We are called and choose to live this Rule of Life. So, let us begin with a sincere heart by remembering the words of our brother, Benedetto Lino, SFO, Presidency Councilor:

In reflecting on the “novitas” we can obtain light to understand and deepen our roots to verify and renew the deep motivations of our being Franciscans and reinforce the impulse and determination to carry out the mission with generosity to fully satisfy the expectation of the Church and of God.

I speak with urgency, my brothers and sisters, we must live it out in our everyday life and if not now, WHEN?