

In The Trenches

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There are little bracelets that are very popular with Christian youth movements that bear the initials WWJD. The letters stand for “What would Jesus do?” and they are little reminders that as Christians our actions should always reflect the faith and love we have for Jesus. Our TAU crosses are symbols of our particular Spirituality as Franciscans and I have heard many times from fellow Franciscans the words “What would Francis do?”

To be truthful though, I have to admit that I have not asked the question WWJD since I was an adolescent just getting to know Jesus and I have never asked myself WWJD. Now, as I sit here trying to piece together thoughts about *The Way of Life* Chapter of our rule, I wonder why I don't.

I think the main reason is that WWJD implies that **if** Jesus were here he would do something, instead of me. And WWJD is a question I have always imagined that Francis would not want any of us to ask. When he was dying, Francis did not tell us to do what he did when he was here on earth. Instead, he so completely trusted God to guide us that he left us with this tender, hopeful wish. “I have done what is mine to do, may Christ teach you what you are to do.”(2Cel214) He did not say, “may Christ teach you what he would do, or may Christ teach you what I did.”

The message here is twofold. One point is that WWJD is not an inappropriate question for adolescents to ask. It is indeed, essential for them to know what Jesus did in his time and to apply these actions to their life. Any of us who have ever exerted influence over the development of a child has taught lessons by word and example with the desire that in a bind they might ask, “What would Dad do” or “What would Aunt Sue do?” Developing minds and hearts thrive on example and need role models.

The second point is the same as the first point. WWJD is an appropriate question for an adolescent but not for an adult. As children grow through adolescence to adulthood they naturally develop their own ways of responding to the world around them. Respond is after all the route of the word responsibility. As adults, we can no longer look to our parents to act on our behalf. We must act on our own behalf and respond to our vocations and our crises and our relationships, as we are able.

As I ponder this thought, I am well aware that the Catholic Church, the Secular Franciscan Order included, have many adolescent members of all ages. There are many members of our church who are elderly, who were formed as Catholics and as Franciscans when the clergy made the rules and the people simply obeyed them. Some of these members have consistently refused to even acknowledge that change is going on all around them and have missed out on some of the finest gifts the church has to offer. There are members in their 40's and 50's who fall into two main categories of adolescents. There are those who want to fall back into the church of their youth who want nothing more than to mouth the rituals of their childhood and forget the challenges of Vatican II, and those who

took the changes made by Vatican II and have abused them to serve their own agenda of rebellion and dissent.

If we are to be adults in the church, we cannot ask WWJD. If we are adults in our church and in our faith we know what Jesus would do because we have allowed Jesus to teach us through prayer and Scripture. The question we must ask now is “What must I do?” If we are adult Franciscans we also know what Francis would do, but he did what was [his] to do and left us to find out from Christ what His will is for us.

The question WWJD or WWFD won’t work for us. If we are elderly adolescents, we probably will confuse this with the question, “What would Father do?” or “What would Father tell us to do?” If we are baby boomers who are still smarting from the wrenching changes that took place in our church during our young adulthood, we may color our response to WWJD with our own sentimental desire to return to the old ways, the ways of thinking and acting that bring us the comfort of our youth. And if we are members of the sixties revolution we may be sorely tempted to answer that question with another question born not of a desire to be like Jesus, but of a desire to make Jesus be the way we want Him to be. We may not even realize it but we may be asking, “What would I like Jesus to do?” or “What do I think Jesus ought to do?”

If we are Catholics of the generation that is marrying and rearing young families now, or are in high school and college now, we are floundering. The question WWJD is very important to these young Catholics because the adults in their church are so few. Everywhere they turn these young people hear a different philosophy, even a different theology. Many of them have parents who have abandoned their faith or at best do lip service to it because they themselves have no idea what they believe. Many of them are leaving the Catholic Church for the Evangelical churches, not because they hate the Catholic Church, but because they do not know it.

The challenge we face if we are to take chapter two of our rule and integrate it into our life until it becomes our Way of Life, is an adult one. We must put aside childish ways and behave as though we really believe what we profess on Sunday morning. We must take risks and be willing to suffer for our faith. We must sacrifice ourselves for the good of others and love without condition. We must set no limits on God and unite ourselves with God in prayer every chance we can. We must long for and open ourselves to receive God’s powerful grace especially in the sacrament of Eucharist and thrive on the Bread of Life. We must convert, minute by minute, day by day, always repenting for missed opportunities to love, always seeking the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we need so much to do what we must do. Our way of life is not spelled out for us. Our rule does not deny us our adulthood. On the contrary the living of our rule requires our adult response. Our responsibility as adult members of the faith is the same as our responsibility as adult members of our society. We must form the next generation and teach them to live as adults in this world, in this our beloved church. When we see a young member of our church seeking an answer to WWJD, let us pray that they find it by looking at us.