

Joy of the Gospel:

More than just another happy face!

April 25, 2015

Convivenza – Secular Franciscans Gathering

Introduction

On March 13th 2013, early in the afternoon I was in the middle giving a lecture to 200+ medical students. There was some disturbance in the amphitheater. I stopped and asked if there was something not clear. A student stood up, adjusted the little black yarmulke on the top of his head, cleared his throat and very distinctly said, “Dr. Pravetz, habemus papam.” There was applause. And then another said the pope’s name if Francis.

The *Joy of the Gospel* is the title Pope Francis has chosen for the first major document of his pontificate, putting down in print the happy spirit of encounter with Christ that characterizes every public appearance he has made so far.

I recently scoured “Fully Mature with the Fullness of Christ” looking for specific references to joy. There were hardly any, and these were oblique references to joy. FUN is a good program, but it is all business.

There is one line in the Pope Francis’ exhortation that I found amusing. He was referring to the fact that when people look at the members of the church that they often see “sourpusses.” I think that, if we are to be true to the call of the Holy Father, we need to look at ourselves in a mirror; it may just be possible that at one time or another we Franciscans have appeared so; maybe just a little!

This morning I will not talk about all the points of his exhortation, rather will extract thematic elements that I think speak to our call as Franciscans. I will make particular reference to the “style” in which we live our apostolic life and minister in the world. Our way of life, mirroring the poor man of Assisi, is characterized by doing. We are used to preaching wordlessly, which is one of the themes in the pope’s exhortation.

First let’s put *Joy of the Gospel* into context.

Evangelii Gaudium is the Pope’s vision for a missionary Church. A church whose “doors should always be open”. The Pope speaks on numerous themes, including evangelization, peace, homiletics, social justice, the family, respect for creation, faith and politics, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and the role of women and of the laity in the Church.

Looking back into our order’s beginnings, most of the early Franciscans remained with their families, in their homes. They were called “penitential’s” by contemporaries. This large part of the Franciscan movement was not directly founded by Francis nor did it begin as an officially sanctioned lay alternative to his form of vowed religious life. But as Franciscanism expanded, the friars directly inspired without actively promoting, the growth of the lay penitential movement, eventually partnering.

Regardless of their differences, whether they were vowed or not, women or men, they all looked to the historic Francis of Assisi for their spiritual inspiration and sought to embody the Franciscan call in their own lives. Most of these people did not write an impossibly complicated book of theology for future generations, rather what they left was a distinct style for Gospel living.

They radiated the freshness of joy to everyone they encountered. This is their legacy centuries after they are gone. Their lives are an easy read, and so is yours. It's out there, and people watch.

Pope Francis, who constantly keeps the media's attention with his desire to embrace and share his faith with everyone he meets, now urges us to do exactly the same. To "recover the original freshness of the Gospel", as he puts it, is through a thorough renewal of the Church's structures and vision (he even calls for "a conversion of the papacy"). The Church should not be afraid to re-examine "customs even if they may have deep historical roots".

The way I see it is that there are one of two postures many of us assume:

1. "We've never done it this way before."
2. "We've always done it this way before."

Either one of these could be considered the "Seven Last words of the Church."
Such postures could also be considered frivolous or blunted.

In strikingly direct and personal language, Pope Francis appeals to all Christians. He calls for a "revolution of tenderness;" his revolution involves opening hearts each day to God's love and forgiveness.

Pope Francis says that our interior life cannot become caught up in our own interests. If it does, he warns, "there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor." As we open our hearts, the Pope goes on, so the doors of our churches must always be open and the sacraments available to all.

He repeats his idea of a Church: "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets." This kind of Church is better than one caught up in a slavish preoccupation with liturgy and doctrine, procedure and prestige.

"God save us," he prays, "from a worldly Church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings!" (***We've always done it this way before.***)

I would add another prayer as follow-up. "God save us from fraternities who deny that they may be superficial." Perhaps they protest too much. Do some Franciscan fraternities fear that if they check below the surface they may find it vacant or nothing of substance at best? Is the fear a reality?

Urging a greater role for the laity, the Pope warns of “excessive clericalism” and calls for “a more incisive female presence in the Church”, especially “where important decisions are made.” *(We’ve never done it this way before.)*

Returning to his vision of a Church that is poor and for the poor, the Pope urges us to pay particular attention to those on the margins of society, including the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly, migrants and victims of trafficking.

Ah! These may sound familiar, because they are for sure recurrent themes at so many of our Secular Franciscan fraternity meetings.

A quick look at many of the themes about which *Joy of the Gospel* focuses could suggest elements and items for “mission statements” for each of our local Fraternities. I’ve scoured the internet looking for examples of missions statements. Pope Francis points to promoting peace, justice and fraternity, patient and respectful dialogue with all people of all faiths as well as people who have none. Better relations with people of other faiths he sees as indispensable ways of promoting peace and combating fundamentalism. Couldn’t these be included in our statements of mission?

By the way, I recommend formulating a Fraternity mission statement as an ongoing agenda item for regular, formation and on-going formation meetings. More on this later this morning.

Convivenza means living together or co-existence and it is in this spirit that we meet once a year to reflect on the meaning of this in our lives. In doing so we are affirming that all of this is about more than you and me holding hands. We come together with a task, and today’s task to examine Gospel joy.

Out of the many areas we read in *Joy of the Gospel*, I will contextualize five areas that relate directly to our embracing the rule of the Secular Franciscan life.

In each of these we will find gospel joy:

1. Encountering Jesus
2. Hospitality
3. Minority
4. Peace and justice
5. Preaching (Evangelizing)

You, me and the Poverello

I go to the free performances of Shakespeare in the Park with my colleague, Father Michael. He goes over to Delacourt Theater early in the day and gets on line for our senior tickets. We then enjoy the performances in the evening. Shakespeare is something like Brussels sprouts or Scotch: it is an acquired taste. But when savored, you find that it becomes like an old friend.

We can fold ourselves into his literary genius portrayed in real time and marvel that the incident's he depicts are just like our own lives, only quirrier. (Then again, maybe not so much!)

Speaking of quirky, there are people and events of Franciscan history, which are iconic to us as an order, fraternity and individual follower of the poor man of Assisi. Of course it starts with the Seraphic Father himself. He was a saint; is it possible to become a saint like him? Many people think so, lots of saintly people have tried, people like you.

Immediately after the events at San Damiano, Francis got serious about his life's plan; just as serious as are you. There were a number of memorable but eccentric events that followed his séance with the cross, like when he stripped naked before his father and placed his clothes at the feet of the bishop of Assisi. It was then that his life of joy started to unfold. He literally started singing the praises of God and nature.

In his day, religion was serious, God was a stern judge and life was violent. So, when people encountered anyone as happy as Francis, they assumed that that person must be either sinning or he was nuts.

Francis was filled with a holy joy, a joy that infected all who came in contact with him. He came in contact with good people, lots of them. And so do you . . . often.

I'd like to now point out those areas in which we can find Gospel Joy and Franciscan Joy.

1. Joy found in encountering Jesus

"The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus." This is the way that the pope begins *Evangelii Gaudium*. He develops the theme to assist in proclaiming the Gospel in the contemporary world:

- "I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come."
- It is a heartfelt appeal to all baptized persons to bring Christ's love to others, says the pope. Thus we find ourselves "permanently in a state of mission."

If we say "we've always done it this way before," we'd be ignoring the Pope's invitation to "recover the original freshness of the Gospel". If we live by, "we've never done it this way before," we will not find "new avenues" and "new paths of creativity" and we will continue to enclose Jesus in "dull categories" and never encounter him.

Style matters my brother and sisters. If we, as Franciscans, insist on bringing the gospel to the world, and the entire world continues to see us as jovial, pink cheeked, cookie jar like friars or roller-skating nuns, somehow the prophetic aspect of Franciscan charism of joy becomes turned around and is lost as a comedic farce.

The pope is spot on; we need to find “new avenues” and “new paths of creativity.” He says there is a gaping need for “pastoral and missionary conversion, which cannot leave things as they presently are.” We must become “more mission-oriented”. And our mission as Secular Franciscans is to bring the joy of the Gospel . . . with style.

2. Joy found in hospitality

A sign of God’s openness is “that our church doors should always be open” so that those who seek God “will not find a closed door”; “nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason”. Of course the pope is referring to real doors, but as secular Franciscan’s there are the “virtual doors” of our own personality and fraternity. I’m going to leave this thought to your roundtable discussion challenges.

3. Joy found in minority

Pope Francis repeats that he prefers “a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church ... concerned with being at the center and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.”

Minority and humility is a constant, haunting call to our Secular Franciscan fraternities:

- The Pope speaks of the many who “feel superior to others” because “they remain [stubbornly] faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past”.
- Pope Francis scolds those who have “an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel has a real impact.” All of such stuff is superficial and about which he prays, “God save us from a worldly Church with superficial . . . trappings!”
- As I mentioned earlier, Francis says that there is a need for “still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church”, in particular “in the various settings where important decisions are made.”
- Secular Franciscans must “step up to the plate” to flirt our bruised, hurting and dirty church.
- The Pope “Demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected ... cannot be lightly evaded”.
- The young should “exercise greater leadership”. Where are they in our fraternities? Why not?

4. Joy found in peace and justice

“Let us offer some sign of peace.”

As I mentioned earlier, when coming together in spirit of *convivenza* we cannot be satisfied by a time-tired and shop-worn exchange around the fraternity table. We’re not just supposed to hold hands and affectionately offer a sweet sign. Rather, we called to make noise, noise that may disturb the *status quo*.

Yet, cautious peacefulness surrounds us. This is not good. People are being silenced and it is anything but peaceful. We cannot dare sit back and unconcerned by this annoying peaceful silence.

With regard to the theme of peace, the Pope affirms that “a prophetic voice must be raised” against attempts to “silence or appease” the poor, while others “renounce their privileges”.

For the construction of a society “in peace, justice and fraternity” he indicates four principles:

1. “Time is greater than space” What he means is that we must be satisfied with working “slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results”.
2. “Unity prevails over conflict” The unity he is talking about is “a diversified and life-giving unity”.
3. “Realities are more important than ideas” He warns to avoid “reducing faith to rhetoric”.
4. “The whole is greater than the part” He points to “globalization and localization”.

5. Joy found in preaching (evangelizing)

Pope Francis concludes with more than a nod to “spirit-filled evangelizers.” These are the people who are “fearlessly open to the working of the Holy Spirit” and who have “the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition”.

These are “evangelizers who pray and work,” all the time knowing that “mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people”:

A few quotes should suffice.

1. “Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others”.
2. “In our dealings with the world, we are told to give reasons for our hope”
3. “Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary”
4. “If I can help at least one person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life”.

As Secular Franciscans, we have a unique preaching form. No pulpit is typically involved.

Whatever the mode, Pope Francis implies that any form of preaching should always be positive in order always to “offer hope” and “does not leave us trapped in negativity”. This should be a measuring stick for the spirit of our fraternal gatherings.

The approach to the proclamation of the Gospel should have positive characteristics: “approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome, which is non-judgmental”. This is something that Secular Franciscans can incorporate into the spiritual life committee’s as a form of exploration of possibilities. Exactly what do spiritual life committee’s do anyway? Rather than just hear what others are saying, it is imperative to investigate how the fraternities can insert themselves into the local communities and do things this way.

Franciscan “style”

People find your and my lives and an easy read. They watch what you’re doing, and how you minister. They are very perceptive. They can see right through to your soul. When they perceive something genuine, they find something beautiful and are filled with joy.

There are many watching, especially young people. But we can only be seen if we are out there (wherever that is) to be seen.

You must be a Franciscan hidden in plain sight – a topic for table challenge later.

Franciscan giants hidden in plain sight

I have to make a public confession. After I read the obituaries in the morning Daily News, I read my horoscope. I don’t believe them, but I read it anyway. Oh, actually I do believe it when I agree with it. Still, I suspect that we all have a preternatural hunger for advice about reading signs of the time, even if they be Zodiac signs.

I'll end with a sample of Franciscans hidden in plain sight:

People throughout history look for advice. Some people in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century turned to Angela of Foligno in the same way Americans turned to Abigail Van Buren in the twentieth century: they wrote letters. For this reason, Angela of Foligno could be called the "Dear Abby" of the late medieval Italy. And write she did; many letters; to many good people. It was her style of ministry and it worked.

We read of many early Franciscan women and men of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries who, while doing their work, wept, doubted, but continued to pray and they held on. These can be our role models today, especially in their perseverance in a counter-cultural embrace of voluntary poverty, life of faith and interaction with beauty of the world and society.

Rose of Viterbo was a Franciscan street preacher. She was born around 1233 a few years after Francis of Assisi died in 1226. She died in 1251 at the age of eighteen. Rose was a preacher, teacher and an effective ecclesiastical spokesperson against political adversaries. She embodied the Franciscan charism of simplicity, and yet the public way in which she expressed her faith was edgy. She pushed the envelope of social expectations of ministers of the church.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, after Francis and his friars had established a mendicant form of spirituality that was lived and preached in the streets, lay people (including for a time girls and women), dared to break from social conventions and for them this charism was their public expression of faith. And people listened

Margaret of Cortona's call came when her husband was suddenly and brutally killed by robbers and she was stripped of all the social and economic comforts. That's when Margaret's life suddenly embodied the core of Franciscanism: poverty. But at that time, Margaret's poverty was not the poverty espoused by the Poverello; rather Margaret's poverty was not something she wanted. She was born around 1247 in Laviano, a small town in Umbria. As a young woman she became the mistress of a nobleman from Montepulciano. They lived together for nine years and had a son together. They lived together as common-law husband and wife without public scandal. And that's when St. Margaret got her call.

While Francis himself had voluntarily renounced the wealth and social support of his middle class life, Margaret was thrust into this precarious position involuntarily. She was a woman whose husband provided her with everything she needed. Or so that's what everyone thought. They were right that he provided quite well for Margaret, but it turns out that she had no legal and sacramental bond of marriage to the man. And Margaret found herself without right to inherit, so she was left without financial support after he was killed. Franciscan's embraced her in her need and she saw the freedom that these medieval "Florence Nightingale's" exuded in public ministry. She subsequently took up the cause of searching for joy in the lives of people who were suffering injustice.

I close with two thoughts:

1. The Pope urges us not to be discouraged because of scarce results or failure. He says that the opposite - fruitfulness “ is often invisible, elusive and unquantifiable”
2. It may have sounded like I am proposing that our Secular Franciscan life-style of ministry should be revolutionary and come across like gang busters. The pope recommends that we look to Mary; if we do so, we will come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness.

All of this my brother and sisters is style and it will bring the Joy of the Gospel.

Matthew A. Pravetz, O.F.M.