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RENEWING THE CHURCH: THE FRANCISCAN CHARISM, THE CHALLENGE OF POPE FRANCIS AND OUR TASK AS SECULAR FRANCISCANS

In the 13th century gospel conversion lay at the heart of the vigorous lay penitential movements of the time. This conversion was rooted in Christ as a change in values and behavior. Francis himself wrote about his early life as a 'life of sin.' It was replaced by a life of penance, imitating the apostles who, in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, shared their goods and identified with the poor Christ by caring for the poor and those in need. The medieval penitents lived in a world where alongside the old landed gentry a new and wealthy merchant class appeared. We are not surprised to learn that the new merchant class was soon engaged in the same legal issues as the landed gentry -- ownership, power, politics and prestige. Francis was born into that world and left it to join the 90% not similarly born. Very quickly Francis began to build a different social system to the one he had left behind. This social system was rooted in the gospels and was strongly affected by a concern for each person especially the poor and the outcast. The name that increasingly characterized the Franciscan movement (including Clare) was the 'Penitents from Assisi' who left behind established social values for the sake of a deeper relationship with God and to attend to the human needs they met. Penance exchanged material wealth for the riches of Christ.

There were lay penitential movements before Francis. The Beguines in Flanders come to mind as does Peter Waldo from whom the Waldensians take their name. There were also the Humiliati. There were differences among them but they were often married people, families, sharing some form of community life, prayer and dedication to the poor. The skills by which they maintained their livelihood and that of their families were put to the service of the poor. Pope Innocent III seems to have favored these movements, granting them a certain formal, canonical legitimacy by extending to them a *propositum*, a kind of memorandum of understanding regarding the penitential form of life.

But there were tensions within the penitential movement as the contrast between, eg., the Penitents of Assisi and the Cathars (sometimes called the Albigensians) suggests. The issue lay over the nature of the true Church which must be poor, holding all goods in common in the spirit of the apostles. By contrast the medieval Catholic church and her clergy were too concerned to accumulate wealth and property. Thus the Cathars broke with the church to become a heretical sect rejecting both hierarchy and the sacraments. In the view of not a few this may have served broadly to destabilize the penitential movement.

In the face of this history Francis appears as a lay penitent who valued penance, charity, humility, service, prayer, fasting, and restitution of goods acquired unjustly. In his *Letter to the Faithful* (together with the *Later Exhortation*) Francis provided the 'Third Order' its foundational document with its description of doing penance in one's life as a lay person. It acknowledges the life of God in the soul that leads one to new ways of choosing and acting that are the worthy fruits of penance. He goes on to say that those who do penance love God and neighbor, resist temptation, receive the eucharist and abide authentically in their conversion. The first movement for a penitent does not consist in choosing

penitential practices or ascetical norms but in a movement of the heart that leads to change in one's life. One counts here Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli, la signora Pressede, and the married couple Luchedio and Buonadonna from Poggibonsi. The first impression of the Penitents of Assisi is of a large and varied group embracing all levels of society, extending even to royalty, eg., Elizabeth of Hungary, the queen consort of Thuringia. She is a patroness of the Third Order. Rose of Viterbo must be mentioned here as well as Angela of Foligno in both of whom the ascetical life was highly developed. At first the Penitents of Assisi were not particularly well organized and did not take vows. Together with Elizabeth the queen consort mention must be made of Louis IX, King of France whom the friars minor educated when he was the dauphin. The King's life as a penitent was consistent with the whole movement. Mention can be made of Ivo of Brittany who was both a magistrate and a Franciscan lay penitent and, somewhat later, Raymond Lull, a married secular Franciscan. The Church has canonized the married couple Delphine and Elzear who, in a long medieval tradition, lived together a spiritual marriage. This celibacy within marriage was viewed as a form of penance whose fruitfulness shaped the orthodoxy of the penitential groups.

By the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) there is an effort to regulate juridically the various penitential groups in terms of clothing, prayer, fasting and the sacraments. The provision against swearing solemn oaths or carrying weapons is especially noteworthy as it would affect the legal procedures of the court and the sense of justice in society. This could bring the penitents into conflict with the public authorities not least in the time of the Crusades. It was perhaps inevitable that the first Franciscan Pope, Nicholas IV, would provide a Rule for the Third Order in the form of *Supra montem* issued in 1289. It seemed to put the penitents under the jurisdiction of the friars minor and this was (to my mind correctly) resisted. In any case the word 'Catholic' was added to the penitents' name and these provisions may reflect the concern, mentioned earlier, that there were forces at work that could destabilize the movement, pulling it toward heresy and into schism.

There were other tensions as well. The increasingly canonical organization of the penitents and even their absorption into other forms of religious observance threatened their autonomy. There is a lot of energy around this development but the forms it finally assumed are recognizable in the Secular Franciscan Order today – a Rule, a novitiate, formal profession, regular monthly meetings to foster community. Secular Franciscans are organized as fraternities on local, regional, national and international levels and are to be found not only within the Catholic Church but the Anglican and Lutheran churches as well. There are about 1.5 million Seculars today. The momentum represented here is vigorously found in the Church of Vatican II and in the 50 years since during which the Secular Franciscans have thoroughly updated and have embraced their role in the contemporary Church with the historically distinctive OFS emphasis on poverty, minority, penance, conversion and contemplative prayer. Today the OFS live a lay life in the church together with secular institutes, the *St Egidio* community, the *Focolare* movement, *Commune e Liberazione*, third order Carmelite and Dominican communities to mention a very few indeed. Taken together these contemporary lay movements are an impressive fruit of the Council's invitation to the universal holiness of the Church rooted in our common baptism.

In these past 50 years the legacy of the Council was a subject of debate, perhaps even argument. Early on as a young bishop, Pope St JP II wrote an extensive and learned commentary on the documents of Vatican II. But as pope he did not frame to everyone's satisfaction the relationship between the Vicar of Peter and the college of bishops. Collegiality and subsidiarity were ecclesial principles looking for a home. This was particularly evident in the periodic synods where the principle of collegiality was not vigorous in favor of deferring to the Vicar of Peter. The global appointment of bishops called into question a system that seemed to promote and repeatedly identify very cautious men for that office. The emeritus pope Benedict saw himself as in the spirit of Pope St John Paul II. One result of this cautious mentality is the current English translation of the Mass. It is not the fruit of a broad consultation of a variety of people. In English the translation sounds wooden and latinized. It prefers the passive voice whereas English prefers the active voice. It leans toward the periodic sentence whereas English prefers a simple sentence.

Then just over a year ago, on March 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio stepped onto the central balcony of St Peter's and was introduced to the world as Pope Francis. We recall the moment with its extraordinary simplicity – taking as his own the name of the poor man from Assisi, the pope dressed sparsely in his white cassock waving a bit nervously, the request for his flock to pray for him as he bowed his head toward us, his confession that he was a sinner toward whom God has shown a great and tender mercy, his first Holy Thursday in the *mandatum* when as pope he washed the feet of young offenders in prison among whom were two women, one of them a Muslim. In these gestures one senses something has changed. In the spirit of the Council which, as its first order of business, addressed the mystery of the church in *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Francis speaks often of the Church. He makes two points: a Church that is poor and a church that is sent to the world. He likens the Church to a 'field hospital' that cares for the grievously wounded and he speaks of the priesthood as good shepherds who have on them the smell of their sheep. The theme of mercy is never far away. In a compelling insight St Bonaventure wrote that he saw in St Francis's life an 'excess of divine mercy.' The Pope would concur seeing the priesthood as a ministry of mercy to the people of God and the Church herself an example of maternal love. He sees in the Good Samaritan a mercy that accompanies, lifts and heals the neighbor – a striking parable of the 'excess of divine mercy.'

He has set out his views briefly in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG). It is his contribution to the new evangelization which has been going on now for a few years. The Pope often speaks of evangelization in terms of a missionary spirituality. The primary reason for evangelization is the love of Jesus Christ which we have received and encountered and which has affected us, changing us at a deep level. The experience of Jesus leads to conversion which is a fundamental change or reorientation at the level of what we embrace as true and affirm as worthwhile. In conversion it is faith that embraces what is true. We see with the eyes of the heart. In our turn Jesus sends us as a good neighbor, a Good Samaritan to others. What do we bring to others? First, we know our gifts and these gifts help us to discern our calling or vocation. St Paul calls them charisms. So among us Paul says there are apostles, prophets, evangelizers, pastors, prophets, teachers, healers, administrators, wisdom figures, some with the grace of discernment, others with the charism of faith, others who can work miracles. Compassion is found among us, hospitality, generosity. Some of us work well with our hands,

some are creative, some are comfortable in the daunting space of the kitchen (!), some of us are good at sport, others are scholarly and professional. Many will discern in themselves and in each other a number of these charisms. Many gifts, one Spirit; many ministries, one Lord; so much giftedness but one God who enables all these gifts in each one of us (1Cor 12:4-6). All these gifts conspire to build up the body of Christ by proclaiming the Good News of the Lord Jesus and this Good News, lived out in service to others, attracts people to the Church. In this work we learn to listen well as a person makes explicit one's desire for truth, for justice, for God. In the Pope's words we become living sources of water. We are able to say with St John 'we speak of what we have seen and heard.'

Evangelizing is a formation, a process of formation as the Gospels clearly show in the lives of the apostles. One advantage of being Franciscans lies in our formation and particularly in our continuing formation. What does this formation embrace? Here the Pope speaks of prayer as contemplation. In our formation contemplation names our encounter with Christ as the Word of God. This means an attentive and intelligent reading and hearing of Scripture in a tradition of *lectio divina*. The Pope speaks here out of his Jesuit tradition of contemplation in speaking of the five human senses (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting) that in grace become what Ignatius called spiritual senses. These spiritual senses envelop the Scripture, entering especially into the parables, and produce in us a strong sense that we are being moved and deepened in our understanding of creation and in our affection for it. It produces in us a sense of peace or what Ignatius called consolation, a growing love of God and of all things in God. Contemplation tends to confirm in us that we are on a right path. This encounter with the Word in Scripture can take place in a variety of settings but its chief place, the jewel in the crown, will be the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. Growth in contemplation goes hand in hand with growth in holiness or union with God especially in the Eucharist where risen flesh is food for tormented or sick or sinful flesh, that risen flesh which on the cross canceled the legal claim against us. Pope Francis remarks that we shall be judged on how we have drawn close to suffering flesh, to suffering humanity.

Secondly our formation as Franciscans will help us encounter an old and persistent spiritual problem called in Greek *acedia*. It is a condition of being listless, tired, worn out, wearied, tense, frustrated, fatigued, sad, even bored regarding our witness to Jesus. Evangelizing comes up against our expectations, our desire to protect our comfort zone. Jesus invites us away from control and calculation toward faith, humility, simplicity – and risk. He invites us to put out into the deep. Peter obeyed this invitation and realized that he was a sinful man. In that excess of divine mercy he was forgiven. His *acedia* was healed. He took a risk. The people who lowered the paralyzed man through the roof toward Jesus below took a risk. The woman 'who loved much' and who made her way into Simon the Pharisee's house in order to acknowledge Jesus took a risk. In this way He frees us from our fear of being unsuccessful, to be seen to fail. Instead we embrace the fundamental truth that in Him we are forgiven and healed, a truth in which we grow and mature and let go of expectations. So the best devised programs and timetables don't work. OK...but what is the Lord doing? This is the gospel pattern of being pruned and formed as an evangelist who takes a risk for Jesus, stepping out of that comfort zone. The Pope adds don't give in to pessimism or discouragement. Above all keep a sense of humor.

Thirdly, our formation as Franciscans brings a distinctive temperament to evangelization. It is our poverty that expresses itself in gentleness, hospitality, welcome, inclusiveness, befriending. With

each other we can draw strength to move away from a life of bias and decline. Poverty gives us the words, perhaps the poetry, to express our own lives as a narrative of how I have fallen in and out of love with the Lord. Poverty invites us to be creative, to see differently, to hope in a barren landscape. Poverty sees the excess of divine mercy in my life and in yours. It is not for a moment distracted by the pretense and posturing of power, arrogance or wealth. Poverty recognizes this as posturing because poverty knows such a person is afraid of one's mortality. We rejoice in the great humility and love by which God took on our humanity in Christ. We cherish the Incarnation of the Word. We cherish Our Lady in whom the Word became a human being. This appropriation of Poverty is the gift of the fraternity to each other. In the life of the fraternity we together affirm that in His Incarnation Christ is committed to us, to our world. He encourages us in the challenges we face. He urges us to a spirit of hope because He has overcome the world. Christ leads the way in living His life as a poor man among the poor and insignificant. He identified with the least as their brother. Look, He befriends tax collectors and sinners...He eats and drinks with them. Francis stands foursquare here. The little poor man of Assisi befriends every creature as we can see in his Canticle – let every creature praise the most high and glorious Lord for the excess of His mercy. Poverty is never separated from humility and joy. They keep company. And together they evangelize.

Fourthly, our formation as Franciscans allows us to grow in the Lord, in his grace. The love of Christ has brought us to conversion, to a process of life growth and of gospel formation. It points a path in Christ but *not* an easy one. In his gospel, eg., St Luke illumines the path. In his chapters 9-18 Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem and increasingly he turns his attention away from the crowds and toward the Twelve – the first evangelists. So we read: 'Meanwhile when the crowd gathered *by the thousands so that they trampled on one another*, {Jesus} began *first* to speak to his disciples (Lk 12:1).' The sayings and teaching that now unfold are among the *hardest sayings* of the Gospel. Eg., Jesus says He has come not to bring peace but a sword, to cause division. He urges them to detachment and freedom – sell what you have, give to the poor. Where your heart is there will your treasure also be. This teaching invites to freedom that separates me from whatever distracts me from evangelizing – expectations, self-interest, control, preoccupation. Then this freedom invites me to abandon myself to the Father – how much more will your Father give the good Spirit to those who ask him (Lk 11:13)? In place of anxiety we are invited to trust – Seek first his Kingdom...and all things shall be given you (Lk 12:22-23). The Father has counted the hairs of your head. These hard sayings are fitted in a framework in which Jesus predicts the cross three times.

The Twelve resist. We're in good company! 'While everyone was amazed at all He was doing, He said to His disciples 'let these words sink into your ears – the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.' But they did not *understand* this saying; its meaning was *concealed* from them, so that they could not *perceive* it. And they were *afraid* to ask Him about this saying.' This is an extraordinary verdict on the obtuseness of the Twelve. This resistance is part of a pattern of their fear and incomprehension regarding Jesus – 'The son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected...killed...and rise again. Jesus spoke this openly.' We can conclude that the training of an evangelist is an arduous task in which we can resist the Lord. Let us follow Peter in particular. Jesus is tough on him – 'Get away from me Satan! You do not think as God thinks but as men do.' But Jesus does not give up on him – 'Simon,

Simon, Satan has asked to sift you (singular) like wheat but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail and when you have repented you must strengthen your brothers.’ But Peter will betray – how can betrayal keep company with strengthening your brothers? Peter collapses interiorly. In the arraignment before the Sanhedrin Peter follows *at a distance* because ‘I do not know the man.’ We can see ourselves here – engaged in evangelizing we find we have arrived at an impasse in which we no longer know what the Lord wants or asks of us. Peter’s weakness lies in the fact that he sees the Gospel as a privilege, something Peter owns and which he may dispose of in his own strength and not as a gift that he must seek humbly and constantly before the Lord. Peter sees the task of evangelization as his, something he owns so to say rather than as a gift to him. As a result his fall is deep, bitter and heartbreaking. But at this rock bottom Peter will learn that the Gospel is God’s free gift, the salvation God freely grants the sinner. If we accept this truth we shall have the right attitude as an evangelist. In that right attitude we allow ourselves to be upset by God’s plan because it is His plan, not ours, His Gospel, not ours, His salvation, not ours. The shrill and piercing cockcrow denounces Peter’s sin. And in that remembered din Peter came to see himself as he really is – loved by Jesus who knows Peter completely. This is the Good News of the Gospel in which Peter stands and in which he was now able to strengthen his brothers. Peter comes to illustrate the interior disposition by which we enter into the Lord’s freedom, detachment and breadth of vision regarding the Good News of the Kingdom. This interior disposition, this freedom, is the result of being forgiven. In this Peter is similar to St Paul who came to value nothing and to account all as loss and rubbish as long as he may be found in Christ, sharing His suffering, being formed in the likeness of the Lord’s death in which lies the promise of eternal life.

The greatest evangelist of all of course is Jesus. His power is seen in his Passion and Death, His suffering and humiliation, the violence and shame to which He was exposed. When He was crucified, weak and dying, He was exposed to the most bitter temptation – if you are the King of the Jews save yourself. Come down from that cross and we shall believe. They are temptations because they share a certain view of an all-powerful God. If he came down from the cross then everyone would believe in an obviously powerful and successful God. But no one will believe in a God who accepts death out of love for us. In this Jesus represents a change from the view of a domineering, demanding, impatient God who seeks us for his own ends. We all stand in this gap where Peter had stood between our expectations of real power and Jesus. To a cheering crowd shouting save yourself, show your power, demonstrate to us you are master of all things, Jesus only shows how to serve, how to be Eucharist. Every evangelist leads by service to the Eucharist. All He has to show for His Passion and Death on the cross is the salvation of a thief caught, convicted and sentenced to death with Him. In the course of those seven last words the thief is brought to faith in Jesus, even calling him by his first name – Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom. Before our eyes the thief passes from death to life. In His Passion the effect of Jesus the evangelist touches just one man and him a convicted criminal. One man? And him a thief? Why waste evangelical power for such a meagre result? But there is a connection – a lost thief, a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. Each of those parables is concerned with the one rather than the many. God rejoices over the found sheep, the found coin, the found son, the found thief. God rejoices over each one no matter how least or marginal or unimportant – indeed there is joy among the angels in heaven.

Let me attempt some conclusion. The Order of Secular Franciscans is rooted in the late medieval penitential movements exemplified in Our Holy Father St Francis. These penitential movements focused on conversion that led to a way of life that was an alternative to medieval feudal society in its commitment to penance or making changes in one's life and in its solidarity with the poor. The fruit of this conversion is evangelization and the present emphasis of the Church on the New Evangelization indicates a noteworthy continuity with our Franciscan roots of 800 years ago.

Evangelization begins by asking us, "What gifts has the Lord given you?" We spoke about them in connection with St Paul's teaching regarding charisms and we saw that all charisms are for the building up of the Body of Christ and for the well-being of our neighbor. But the major emphasis which we took up after the break has to do with the importance and value of our Franciscan formation in the fraternity. That formation gives a methodical and disciplined structure to our role as an evangelizing fraternity. First, Franciscan formation develops in us prayer as contemplation. The object of contemplative prayer is God and the Word of God in whom we encounter the salvation of God. Contemplation sees, hears, touches and tastes Jesus of Nazareth in Holy Scripture and especially in the Liturgy of the Word of the Eucharist. Secondly, Franciscan formation prepares us to deal with acedia or the fatigue that can come to us because we fail in some program or project in the service of evangelization. Here we saw the importance of taking a risk for the Lord. Some risks miscarry. Sometimes our own unconverted attitudes get in the way – my expectation as to what should be done or what should happen, my desire to control the process of evangelization and its outcome. Thirdly, Franciscan formation shapes in us the fruitfulness of our Franciscan poverty to which the Incarnation of the Savior has given birth. Fourthly, Franciscan formation helps each of us and as a fraternity to grow in Christ. Here we took St Peter as an example of growth in Christ that embraces our growth from darkness to the ever increasing and beckoning light. Finally, Franciscan formation centers evangelizing on Jesus as the greatest evangelist. Not that he was particularly successful – when He began in the synagogue at Nazareth they wanted to kill him and in his Passion and Death He manages to save one person who was a convicted thief. Jesus shows us that it is love and not success that characterizes evangelization in which we witness to the world with Mary Magdalene that we have seen the Lord. Or with John the beloved apostle: '*We declare to you...what we ourselves have seen with our eyes...touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life...we have seen it and testify to it and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father...we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us...that our joy may be complete (1Jn 1:1-4)*'. These are the words of John the evangelist and of the apostolic company of evangelists and of the Church that evangelizes.

Thank you.

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