

BEING FRANCISCAN

(No.2)

Most High, all powerful, good Lord, Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honour, and all blessing. To You alone, Most High, do they belong, and no human is worthy to mention Your name. Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility. - Saint Francis. The Testament.

THE WAY OF FRANCIS

One Franciscan writer has said, “If anything specific can be observed about Saint Francis, it is his great concern to desire *nothing* specific.” Francis’s spirituality was simply to “observe the Gospel.” Yet because he was a unique and attractive personality, the Church gained a unique charism called Franciscan spirituality. The great Franciscan emphasis is on the fact that God is love. Every Christian believes this. Franciscans choose to emphasize it as Saint Francis did.

ELEMENTS OF FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY

To live the gospel according to the spirit of Saint Francis:

- in communion with Christ poor and crucified,
- in the love of God,
- in brother / sisterhood with all people and all of creation.
- Participating in the life and mission of the Church,
- in continual conversion,
- in a life of prayer – liturgical, personal, communal,
- as instruments of peace.

GOD IS GOOD

God’s goodness embodies the fundamental principle of Franciscan spirituality. This is the reason for all spiritual activity, the first and last answer for all problems. This is the idea that must move a Franciscan before any other idea. God possesses all the goodness, beauty, happiness that the human mind can imagine – and infinitely more than we can envision. God is infinitely, eternally, unimaginably good. God is infinite love.

THE FRANCISCAN HEART

The first emphasis of Franciscan spirituality is the realization that God is love. The second is that Christ is our brother in God’s love, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Francis rediscovered the plain truth of the Gospels: Christ is not only God; he is human. The Gospel life is simply to love as Jesus loves, as a human, knowing that it is God’s love pulsing within us. The Secular Franciscan Order offers a particular community of people among whom we can be helped to experience and witness to this Francis – and Christ – like love.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

We follow Saint Francis in the divine “ups and downs” of life. Every day is “up” – letting the vision of faith see the beauty of God’s love saving the world, letting him reveal the world of the human Christ., Every day is “down” – giving up a selfish use of the world by dying to selfishness in all its disguises: dying to revenge and greediness, cruelty and lust, laziness and bossiness. Thereby we live through another “up” – another rising with Christ to richer, deeper, more joyful companionship with him. Death and resurrection every day is prosaic as Nazareth, painful as Calvary, glorious as Easter Morning.

REVERSAL

Francis loved the lepers and desired to identify with them in poverty. This was the mandate of his rule. In it he articulated a literal application of Jesus' words in the Gospel to sell all possessions and serve the poor. The short document Francis composed in 1209 known as the "primitive rule" (it is now lost) was written "in simple language including words from the holy gospel" and in effect turned the concentric circles inside out. The rule by implication put leper and other outcasts at the centre, reversing the prevailing hierarchical order governed by the Church. Francis' identity with the social fringe could have been seen as tantamount to a call to revolution against the Church – indeed some of his later followers interpreted his teachings this way. But in truth the only revolt Francis had in mind was to invite the outcast in from his isolation on the edges and place him front and centre in the family of God. Francis took seriously his identity with the leperes and demanded that all his brothers likewise embrace it.

Francis' aim was to take his rule to be confirmed by the supreme authority, the pope. So, the following summer, Francis and his small band set out for Rome to meet the pontiff with the hope and intention to gain papal approval to live the life outlined in the short rule. In those days heresies with a penitential bent were developing rapidly, and the Church was winnowing them out as much as possible. Francis wanted papal approval for his infant order so that it would be clear beyond any doubt that what he proposed was not heretical or in violation of the orthodox teachings of the Gospel. On the contrary, he was asking the Church to affirm that his rule was in fact a positive and authentic assertion of Christ's teaching. But at the same time, the only way he could gain credibility and the moral authority to teach was to win the approval of the sole governing authority of things Christian – the pope himself. This meant that the Curia had a very fine needle to thread.

SOME THOUGHTS ON BEING FRANCISCAN

By Wendy Bryce, OFS
(Palmerston North Fraternity)

I didn't know that I was being led slowly throughout my entire life, towards the town of Assisi, in Cumbria, Italy, where there is a sense of moving back in time to when Francis was there, walking, standing upon the earth, and yet touching the heavens. My experience was so profound and life changing....

Francis said, "the whole world is our cloister", and my journey eventually led me back to Hawke's Bay, imbued with the love, the main charism of Francis - and towards the ultimate meeting of the Secular Franciscan Tradition, which completed me in everything I had previously sought to find, in my non-Catholic experience of life, and from then on, remaining in love, as Jesus of Nazareth said, to his disciples - "A new commandment, I give unto you, that you love one another..." Fraternal love, which extends outward to the whole of creation, I strongly believe, is the essence of Being Franciscan that leads to 'the peace that surpasses all understanding'. For the rest of my life, I hope to cultivate, and nurture this charism, so that when I die, I will have done what is mine to do.

Sources

To Live as Francis Lived, by Foley, Weigel & Normile (2000)

A Mended & Broken Heart, by Wendy Murray (2012)