



Graced beginnings

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Like Jesus, Francis found a different way, bridging the gap between the depository of Faith (Church) and the place where the Gospel could really bear fruit (the margins of society).

In April of 2009, we will gather in our fraternities, hopefully, to celebrate 800 years of Franciscanism. We might use this occasion to re-dedicate ourselves to our original profession of the Gospel way of life, and again ask if we have dared to live the Gospel.

In 1209, Francis began a journey that both showed him what was his to do and also attracted countless followers to his new way of life, his *Propositum Vitae* (1209).

Francis was certainly a man of his times, aware of the effects of war and greed and how they destroyed the fabric of society and people's lives. His answer was imitation of Jesus and the doorway for entering was the door of Poverty (Lady Poverty). Embracing her was his way to remove the obstacles and attachments that can water down true Gospel living. Even the existing religious houses of his day were embroiled in wealth and the affairs of state, and for him this was not the way.

So what is the difference?

After surveying the rules of many of our religious orders, I found marked similarities of all striving to be more Christ-like, loving and of greater service to those in need. Yet each focused their energies differently, for some, it is by preaching and defending "Right" faith and doctrine, others through work and prayer, and others still through sound teaching and education.

For me the greatest difference between us is directly in our Rule. It's not about ministry at all; it is purely and simply about observing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, for a Franciscan, it is not about doing (an Apostolic movement), it is about becoming (being Gospel, Being Jesus, an Evangelical movement). For Francis, the Gospel was not Matthew, Mark, Luke or John; the Gospel is Jesus. We are called in every age to discover in the Gospels, the person of Jesus and from His example, discover what is ours to do today.

I do not, for a minute, believe that Francis ever intended to found an Order. In fact, it would seem he resisted it for most of his life, seeking not structure, but a brotherhood of equals who simply loved the Lord enough to risk caring for each other and all those that society deemed broken, un-needed or un-worthy. Francis sought not to chastise the Church he loved, any more than Jesus sought to undermine Judaism. Like Jesus, he just moved outward, to the edges and bottom of society, where truth could be heard and where the broken people were open to hear and be loved. Like Jesus, Francis found a different way, bridging the gap between the depository of Faith (Church) and the place where the Gospel could really bear fruit (the margins of society).

Though the brothers did, eventually, wrestle the Movement from Francis and embrace a more formal Rule and clerical structure, the underlying current of fraternity was never totally extinguished. A brotherhood or fraternity, not based on class, position, status or any other marker important to society, but a fraternity based on seeking the little portion, the place that society frowns upon, but from which God exalts!

Have we become too main-stream to live the adventure of the Gospel? This April of 2009, as we gather in our fraternities, we might again ask Brother Leo's question "Why after you?" If running after Francis also causes us to fall into the waiting arms of the Lover, and allows us to experience our own belovedness, then we have a wonderful legacy to keep alive and vital. If not, then 2009 might begin the journey of re-discovering what is ours to be.

**Attention Formation Ministers:
Make plans to attend the
National Formation Workshop
Our Lady of the Snows
Belleville, IL
May 28-31, 2009**