

## USA 2015 OFS National Elective Chapter

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### Specificity of St. Francis' call

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#### Introduction

The story of any person can be told in different ways, depending on the lenses through which we look at the people, places, and events of that story. For the same reason, there are as many versions of a story as many are those who put it into words. I now present to you a short version, almost improvised, of the story that has inspired all of us here. Obviously, St. Francis' story also inspired me, some years ago, to leave my family, career, friends, and personal plans, for a larger family and a nobler purpose, filled with surprises, opportunities and challenges. Along this journey, the Lord has given me "a hundred times more" in brothers, sisters, friends, etc. His plans have been much higher than mine were.

Articulating some ideas about the fundamental aspects of Francis' call, that is, his experience of faith in Christ, it is not an easy task to do with depth and in a comprehensive way. However, it is also an opportunity to share some reflections on one of God's masterpieces of grace in the history of humanity. For over eight centuries now, Francis' story has touched the hearts of millions of people and he continues to refresh the desire for God and for a reconciled world in countless people – young and old, poor and rich, catholic or else, learned and simple.

For the sake of clarity and synthesis of such a rich story, I propose ten ideas that may help us to agglutinate the main elements of Francis' call as they have come to us through the Franciscan sources and other writings in the Franciscan tradition. At the same time, I will use some contemporary images to try to "picture" these ten aspects of Francis' call.

#### 1. From 'The Fast and the Furious' to 'The Passion of Christ': A call to conversion

When we look at Francis of Assisi, we tend to immediately admire his holiness and resemblance to Christ; we often focus on the 'end result' of his amazing journey of faith, filled with evangelical freedom and courage. However, it is very important to tell the story since the beginning so that we can better appreciate God's working in a young man's life, while he was seeking happiness and glory according to very human standards: dressing with luxury, partying often with his friends and even going to war in order to reach nobility.

When this road led Francis to failure, defeat in war, illness and imprisonment, he began to reflect on the course he was following, allowing his heart to listen to the voice of God, who invited him to set much higher and noble goals for his life: serving Christ and living according to the words of the Holy Gospel. Touched by God's grace, Francis' life began to change, slowly but surely, to become a true and lasting conversion to the poor and crucified Christ and his gospel.

This conversion was a profound and long-life process, an evangelical "*methanoia*", that is, a change of mind and heart, led by the Holy Spirit, who used different means to speak to the heart of this gifted young man, like the rain that moisturizes a fertile land. Francis prayed at the time thus: "Enlighten the darkness of my heart..." And the byzantine-styled Crucifix of the almost ruined

*San Damiano's* Chapel listened to him and responded with his transforming grace that enable the young Francis to fulfil a special mission; and a penitent was born!

## 2. From Repulsion to Inclusion: The transforming power of mercy

According to his *Testament*, one of the experiences that impressed St. Francis him the most was the bittersweet encounter with the lepers. In that encounter, he felt the power of mercy and compassion when he overcame his fears towards the ugly, the weak and the nasty.

By welcoming the lepers into his life and fraternal affection, he embrace the suffering Christ present in those who were not only physically ill but also excluded from the society of his time, the disposable people of his time! Touched by God's grace, he resolved to use mercy with those to whom he had felt repulsion until that moment. It was the same mercy that God had used with him when he was lost in his former vanity and God invited him to seek the real beauty of life.

By using mercy with lepers, the Testament explains that that which seemed bitter to his old self changed for him "into sweetness of soul and body"; he experienced with his whole being the sweetness of sharing Christ's compassion and mercy with those who needed them the most.

## 3. '*He ain't heavy, he's my brother*': "And the Lord gave me brothers"... and sisters

*"...the Lord gave me some brothers"* (Test II).

Francis was not called to a life of loneliness or isolation, but rather to live the gospel in fraternity. His vocation was one of renewing Jesus' gift: "...**you are all brothers.**" (Mt 23, 8)

And the Lord also called Clare and other ladies to live the gospel in contemplative prayer and fraternal poverty... Francis cannot be fully understood without the presence of Clare, even more so, he would not have been the same without her.

Then, through Francis convincing testimony of evangelical life and that of his first companions, the Holy Spirit attracted to Francis many who were already committed to diverse ways of penitential life – like the one he had embraced earlier in his conversion, and other people who wanted to live the Gospel more fully. Thus, the family continued to grow when a new reality began, the brothers and sisters of penance.

The gift of fraternity, which Francis and all his followers have experienced over the centuries, it is a precious gift flowing from Christ's new life, which is renewed in every generation to be lived and shared with others. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis wrote:

Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a "mystique" of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of **fraternity**, a caravan of **solidarity**, a **sacred pilgrimage**. Greater possibilities for communication thus turn into **greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone**. If we were able to take this route, it would be so good, so soothing, so liberating and hope-filled! **To go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us. To be self-enclosed is to taste the bitter poison of immanence**, and humanity will be worse for every selfish choice we make (EG, 87).

#### 4. God's 'G.P.S.' (Global Positioning System): Following the Way of Christ

Before we go on a journey, we usually like to know where we are going to and how to get there; using a road map was very critical for those driving; nowadays it is much more common to use the G.P.S.

Francis did not know where his path of conversion was leading him up to. He was wondering how God wanted him to express the love he was feeling growing in his heart for Christ and others, until the day when he listened to the gospel reading at the Church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, in which Jesus sends his disciples to preach (perhaps on February 1209, on the Feast of St. Matthias). According to Thomas of Celano, after the Mass was over, St. Francis humbly asked the celebrant about the meaning of the gospel passage, and:

“The priest explained it all to him thoroughly line by line. When he heard that Christ’s disciples should not *possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, nor to have shoes nor two tunics*, but that they should preach *the kingdom of God and penance*, the holy man, Francis, immediately *exulted in the spirit of God*. “**This is what I want**”, he said, “**this is what I seek; this is what I desire with all my heart!**” The holy father, *overflowing with joy*, hastened to implement the words of salvation, and did not delay before the devoutly began to put it into effect what he heard. [...] For **he was not deaf hearer of the gospel; rather he committed everything he heard to his excellent memory and was careful to carry it out to the letter.**” (1C IX, 22)

St. Francis’ Testament refers to this discovery in a different, but complementary way: “*And after the Lord gave some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according the pattern of the Holy Gospel.*” (Test 14)

The essence of St. Francis’ vocation was following Christ, living according to his example and teachings, “to the letter”, in evangelical poverty, as an itinerant preacher of the good news of God’s kingdom and of the call to conversion!

#### 5. Finding the Real Treasure: Embracing Jesus’ Poverty and Humility with Joy

An important element of Francis call to live according to the gospel was following the humility and poverty of Jesus. This heartfelt and profound choice of Francis cannot be understood without the discovery of the hidden treasure of the kingdom of God: “*The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field*”. (Mt 13,44)

For Francis, Christ’s poverty and humility were inseparable. The incarnation of the Son of God made a profound impression in Francis’ heart and mind. He embraced the poverty and humility of Christ because it was an essential part of his vocation to be the “Herald of the Great King”, adopting an itinerant way of life, after the example of Jesus and his apostles. Humility and poverty were signs of his conforming to Christ in his heart and in his actions. “*I know Christ, poor and crucified*” (2C 105).

Humility and poverty were the path to follow, a treasure that he and his brothers were to protect, a flame of freedom that they were to keep burning: “*Let all the friars strive to follow the humility and poverty of Our Lord Jesus Christ...*” (RegNB, IX).

Francis intentionally embraced a way of life marked by humility and submission to God’s will, as a minor or lesser brother and that he wanted his friars to embrace was one motivated by the poverty and humility of Christ (“I, Friar Francis, your **lesser** servant...”).

His choice did not originate from a mere sociological concern, but Francis wanted to be a true sign of the gospel values, many times in direct opposition to those of the world.

*“Let all the friars, in whatever places they have stayed among others to serve or work, not be chamberlains nor chancellors nor preside in the houses in which they serve; nor let them receive any office, which generates scandal or “is detrimental to their soul” (cf. Mk 8:36); · but let them be **lesser** and subject to all, who are in the same house.” (RegNB, VII).*

The story on Francis’ true and perfect joy reflects the way Francis dealt with the great pain and sufferings caused by his sickness and the challenges within the Order. He learned to endure the hardest frustrations with patience, serenity and fidelity to the Gospel, renouncing to human pride, anger, and to power over others.

## **6. ‘Hard Workers needed’: Go, and Rebuild my (falling) Church**

- a. *“Francis, go and rebuild My Church, which as you can see, is falling into ruin.”* (cf. 2C 10; and St. Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, II, 1)

First, Francis took these words literally and rebuilt, as a penitent, three small churches. On time, he realized that the Lord had given him a much wider and tougher mission, but also an awesome and beautiful one. Through his testimony and preaching, Francis was invited to renew the face of a weak and decadent Church, at not only the institutional level, but also inviting all to a true evangelical conversion. Other penitential and groups seeking the Church renewal went progressively out of the communion with her; instead, Francis and his companions were faithful to the Church and put themselves at her service of evangelization.

### **b. Faith in the Churches (Test I).**

At the same time, for Francis, nurtured by the Catholic theology, the temple is important as the place where the community gathers to worship God, who saved us through the cross of Jesus.

*And the Lord granted me such **faith in churches**, that thus I would pray simply and say: · We adore Thee, Lord Jesus Christ, and for all Thy churches, which are in the whole world, we also bless Thee, because by Thy Holy Cross Thou has redeemed the world.*

### **c. Sacramental life, the presence of Christ in the sacraments**

- i. The centrality of the Eucharist in Francis’ faith and life. (cf. *EpCler I*)

*For we have and see nothing corporally of the Most High Himself, in this age, except the Body and Blood, Names and words, through which we have been made and redeemed “from death to life.” (1 Jn 3:14)*

- ii. Faith enabled Francis to see the presence of Christ ministering through human beings, in spite of human limitations.

*“Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, **such faith in priests who live according to the rite of holy Roman Church because of their orders** that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them.” (Test 6)*

## **7. Dancing to God/s Music: The Spirit of the Lord and his Holy Operation**

- a. The history of the Church cannot be understood without the active presence of the Holy Spirit. Consider, for instance, the early Church...
- b. Francis' life cannot be understood without the work of the Spirit either: "let them attend to that which they ought to desire to have above all, the Spirit of the Lord and His holy operation" (RegB, X)
- c. The General Minister that guides the whole Order (cf. Celano, *Vita Secunda*, CXLV, 193).

## 8. A Special Mother for a Special Child: Francis' Sublime Love for Mary

- a. Virgin made church, chosen and consecrated by the Trinity.

In his *Salutation to the Blessed Virgin Mary* [SalBMV], Francis introduced the term "Virgin made church", and the idea of Mary chosen and consecrated by the Trinity:

*Hail Lady, Holy Queen, Holy Mary Theotokos, who are **the Virgin made church** · and the one chosen by the Most Holy Father of Heaven, whom He consecrated with His Most Holy Beloved (dilectio) Son and with the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete; · in whom there was and is all fullness of grace and every good. · Hail His Palace; Hail His Tabernacle; Hail His Home. · Hail His Vestment; Hail His Handmaid; Hail His Mother · and hail all you holy virtues, which through the grace and illumination of the Holy Spirit are infused into the hearts of the faithful, so that from those unfaithful you make them faithful to God.*

- b. *spouse of the Holy Spirit:*

Francis' Marian antiphon from the *Office of the Passion of the Lord* [OffPass] clearly shows his peculiar devotion to the Virgin Mary, wrapped with expressions of his time, but also with an insightful Trinitarian view and patristic elements:

*Holy Virgin Mary, there is none like unto Thee born in the world among women, · **Daughter and Handmaid of the Most High**, the Highest King, the heavenly Father, **Mother** of Our Most Holy Lord Jesus Christ, **Spouse of the Holy Spirit**: pray on our behalf with St. Michael the Archangel and all the Virtues of Heaven and all the Saints before Thy Most Holy Beloved Son, the Lord and Master. — Glory to the Father. As it was.*

- c. **Poor and humble Mother of Christ**

In his Last will written for St. Clare, Francis wrote:

*I, tiny Friar Francis, want to follow **the life and poverty of Our Most High Lord Jesus Christ and of His Most Holy Mother** and to persevere in it until the end; · and I beg you, my ladies, and I give you counsel, that you live in this most holy life and poverty always. · And guard yourselves very much, lest by the doctrine or counsel of anyone you retreat from this in any manner forever (UltVol).*

## 9. Francis' Extended Family: Brother Sun, Sister Moon and all creatures

- a. **Children of the same Father – universal kinship**

*May Thou be praised, my Lord, **with all Thy creatures** (cf. Tob. 8:7), especially mister brother sun, of whom is the day, and Thou enlightens us through him. And he is beautiful and radiant with a great splendour; of Thee, Most High, does he convey the meaning.*

**b. Francis' interreligious dialogue**

In the thirteen year of his conversion (1219), during the Crusades, Francis visited Melek-el-Kamel, "the Sultan of Babylon", to preach the gospel and as a messenger of peace. Francis impressed the Sultan by his piety, faith, and peaceful presence.

**c. The example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology**

*The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled. What is more, Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness. "Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker" (Wis 13:5). (LS 11-12)*

**10. Setting the World On Fire: Our Convent is the Entire World**

a. Called and sent by Christ

*"You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father". (Mt 5:13-16)*

b. A missionary spirit, sent to do and preach penance (conversion) and to announce peace!

*"Go, my dear brothers," he said to them, "two by two through different parts of the world, announcing peace to the people and penance for the remission of sins. Be patient in trials, confident that the Lord will fulfil His plan and promise. Respond humbly to those who question you. Bless those who persecute you. Give thanks to those who harm you and bring false charges against you, for because of these things and eternal kingdom is prepared for us." (1C XII, 29).*

c. A desire for martyrdom, a true and mature witness

*On the sixth year of his conversion, burning in fervent desires for sacred martyrdom, he wanted to visit Syria to preach the Christian faith and penance to the Saracens and other gentiles." (1C XX, 55)*

**Questions for dialogue in groups**

1. What is one of the aspects of Francis' call that is more meaningful to you?
2. How did you understand your Franciscan vocation when you discovered that God was calling you to be a Franciscan?
3. What aspect of your Franciscan vocation do you think God is calling you to strengthen and why?