

FRANCISCAN LIVING

JOY: THE FRUIT OF LOVE

By Francine Gikow, OFS

This summer a visiting Nigerian priest came to say Mass at the church I attend. He began each liturgy by asking us the same question: “Are you happy?” At first, the congregation did not know how to respond, but eventually we tentatively responded that we were happy. “Good!” he exclaimed. “You should be! God is present right here! He is with you!” From then on, we knew that we had to acknowledge that we were happy, but he never relented asking us the same question until we were *enthusiastically* responding to his question.

This frequent exchange started me thinking. Instead of “happy” I began to substitute the word, “joyful.” So I started asking myself (and others of my Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters) if I/we were truly joyful.

St. Francis was joyful. Franciscans, on the whole as an order, are considered joyful. But why is joy so important for us?

It all goes back to being in love. Being married for 41 years, I remember that God reveals Himself in relationship — especially in the marriage relationship. I think back to the heady days of early love — never spending enough time with each other, expressing our thoughts, desires and words of caring and love. Thinking constantly about each other, doing things for the other, being consumed with “being in love” all made us joyful, exuberant and so filled with love that it spilled over into everything we did. Fr. Dan Horan’s book “Dating God” hits the nail on the head.

In her Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague, St. Clare also describes to a relationship with God in marital terms as

*“Queen and Spouse of Jesus Christ:
...so that She might cling with all her heart to
him
Whose beauty all the blessed hosts of heaven
unceasingly admire,
Whose tenderness touches,
Whose contemplation refreshes
Whose kindness overflows
Whose delight overwhelms,
Whose remembrance delightfully dawns...”¹*

Clare’s expression of her love to her Spouse is a feminine expression of the same love Francis tried to put into words in his Praises of God:

*“You are the holy Lord, God.
Who does wonderful things.
You are strong, you are great.
You are the most high. ...*

*You are our sweetness, You are our eternal life: Great
and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful
Savior.”²*

But this description was not enough for Francis, so he attempted to express the sublime:

*“All- powerful, most holy,
most high, and supreme God:
all good,
supreme good, totally good,
You Who alone are good...”³*

As you reflect on these prayers of St. Francis, what strikes you? Stay with that thought or insight for a while. Bring it to God and rest in Him. Let the Spirit of God lead you. Think about the enthusiasm, gratitude and love that Francis tried to form into words. Let your own heart rise with gratitude, love and enthusiasm to God. Praise Him, love Him, and desire to imitate Him.

Francis could not describe God with any more superlatives than in his prayers. He could not say enough about his Love, or praise Him adequately with thoughts too high for words! Many of Francis’ prayers, praises and blessings attempted to describe the many facets of God but still fell short of the full grandeur of God.

Francis, a poet, was at a loss for words in praising God, but when words failed, contemplation took its place: “...for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints...”⁴

Like Francis, we too, can be at a loss for words about our experience of God. That’s OK, because through the Spirit we can carry the joy of our God to others. We don’t need words — our behavior brings credibility to our message. In fact, words can many times hinder our message! What is our message? It is simple! Our God is a great God and He loves us and we love Him! There is such joy in this! Spread the JOY!

¹ 4LAg: CA:ED, 54-55

² PrsG: FA:ED I, 109.

³ OFP: FA:ED:I, 162.

⁴ Rom 8: 26-27. (RSV Catholic ed.)