***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**February 2023**

**YOUNG PEOPLE JOINING?**

Are there any young people joining the Secular Franciscan Order anymore? This is a question I frequently hear in my travels as a National Spiritual Assistant in Australia. There is often a hint of despair in their voices and sadness in their eyes.

But what is it that forces Secular Franciscans to ask this question? I think all of us know the answer. As Franciscans, we have something beautiful and needed in our crazy, godless world. We are heirs to the vision of Francis of Assisi – Herald of the Great King. Do we want to keep that vision alive? In order to keep it alive, there must be someone to follow after us so that we can pass it on to them. It has been so long since any younger secular person has given us a second look, that we wonder, “What will happen to us?” A real pessimism can creep into our fraternities. We tend not to do anything but bemoan the fact that we are getting older.

The fact remains that young people are still attracted to Francis and, through Francis, to the Secular Franciscan Order. If fraternities are not getting inquiries from young people, maybe it is time to take a long, hard look at ourselves, and be brave enough to ask some tough questions.

To ask these questions, we need to re-examine what originally attracted young people to Francis in the Thirteenth Century. Namely, what was his simple approach to the Gospel Life?

1) For Francis, all people were his brothers and sisters and he showed this by his approachability and openness. In our world of fear, suspicion, and alienation, this brotherhood is still very attractive in our world today. There is a crying need for AUTHENTIC INTIMACY.

2) Francis accepted people where they were but did not leave them there.

Francis challenged them to become the best person they could possibly be, with God’s Grace after the pattern of the Son of God. Our first challenge as Secular Franciscans is to ask ourselves: How approachable and open are we to others? Do people see us and our fraternities as people who are willing to share our lives and our journey with others? Or do they see us as closed in upon ourselves and unwilling to grow into the fullness of Christ?

3) Francis had a freedom of spirit. St Francis saw that the emptiness of the gross materialism of his day was not for him. He saw that he needed to be able to move around unencumbered in order to be an instrument of God’s Love. He, therefore, espoused radical poverty as a means of freeing himself for the Lord’s service and as a means of experiencing the love of God that he preached. Although, as Secular Franciscans, we are not obliged to observe a radical poverty like Francis, that spirit of poverty must still motivate us to adopt a simpler form of life, a lifestyle that shows detachment from what society tells us we must really have in order to live a meaningful life. We live in a consumer world that tells us to take, take, take! Do our fraternities give witness to the possibility of happiness without all sorts of things? Do we, as individuals, witness to the same?

4) People are also attracted to Francis’ relationship with God. They see in his spirituality a newness, a captivating freshness. All that Francis was and is flows out of his relationship with the Most High God. The world we live in offers little to answer the deep questions of human existence, and there is again a felt need for a relationship with someone beyond themselves. The image of Francis praising the God who reveals himself through: “Mother Earth”, “Brother Sun”, “Sister Moon”, “Brother Wind”, “Sister Water”, even “Sister Death”, offers a real alternative to the cynical pessimism that is so present in the world we live in.

How do people view us followers of this most charismatic little man – The Poverello? Are our fraternities sources of inspiration for people in need of a new way of relating to the Divine? Do people see us as a needed oasis in a rather sterile and barren desert, or just as more sand? If we are to offer the real alternative that Francis offered to the people of his age, we must strive to renew our own commitment to prayer, allowing the Spirit of God to pray IN and THROUGH us. Our relationship to God, the source of all we are and all we have, must take on a renewed place in our individual lives and in the life of our fraternities. In this way, we will be able to offer support to others that seek to deepen their walk with the Lord.

5) Francis was always a messenger of peace, God’s Peace. In today’s world, our roles as Franciscans stand at the forefront of our vocations. We are sent as messengers of peace into a world of fragile hopes and broken promises. We need to understand that true peace is possible only when all people are recognized and treated as brothers and sisters who are children of the same Father. But, as with charity, peace begins at home, in our fraternities, and in our families.

As Secular Franciscans, how do we view our life together? Do those looking in from the outside see us as treating one another as brothers and sisters or as strangers and enemies? The cliché, “actions speak louder than words”, is valid, not only in our fraternities but also in the public square. We must, like Francis, be peacemakers in word and action. This should be our primary apostolate and witness, but often we like to sit back and let someone else do the work of peacemaking while we are content to talk about it.

The Church has gifted us with our Rule - Gospel to life and life to Gospel - that attempts to instill in us the same spirit that enlivened our Father, St Francis. Through this Rule of Life, we are called to answer the challenge that the world today issues to us – to be people who mean and live what they profess to believe. The Rule calls us to become vibrant, enthusiastic, and alive once again, to be bearers of the Good News that God is present and active in our world and at work through us who are firm believers in his Son Jesus Christ and faithful followers of his servant, Francis.

This is what people who come to us are looking for, whether we are faithful to this Rule of Life and to the Spirit of St Francis who continues to move among us. We won’t have to ask, “Are there any young people joining the Secular Franciscan Order?”, because we will know the answer. We will see the answer in living persons.

Fr Anthony Fox OFM Conv

National Spiritual Assistant OFS - Australia