**EMBRACING THE FUTURE WITH HOPE**

 **(Part 1)**

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When I was last in my home city of Brisbane, one day, walking down the street, I ran into a person I knew. I said, in typically Aussie fashion, ‘G’day, how’s it going?’ ‘Not well,’ he said. ‘You’re not well?’ I asked. ‘No, I’m not well. I went to the doctor this morning and told him I wasn’t well. He told me I didn’t look well. He did all these tests and then said, ‘Well, you’re not well. I’m going to have to give you these special tablets. And you’re going to have to take one of these tablets every day for the rest of your life.’ He gave me only three tablets!

Well, I hope that none of us is on our last three tablets, and that we have a brighter future than that. However, one thing is certain that for each of us there is a future ahead. The important question I need to ask myself is, how is that future going to be for me? Is it going to be a future where I shall fundamentally experience happiness, or will it be a future of untold misery? The answer to that question will come from what happens within me, from the fountain of my own spirituality. If the fountain has dried up, then there will be no life, and the three tablets will be all that it’s about.

I wish to focus on the type of spirituality that will help to guide me into a future that is, despite the inevitable pains and sorrow, one that is fundamentally life giving, one that will help me to be fundamentally happy.

Of course, my own personal spirituality is influenced by the customs, attitudes, and practices of the wider communities of which I am a part. In particular for me, they are the wider communities of Church and of the Franciscan community to which I belong. These do not determine my future, but they will be of influence. So, while the emphasis must be with what decisions I make about the future for my life, those decisions will take place within the context of these wider communities. So, it is also good to ask, what of the future for the Church and for my Franciscan community?

This was a question that must have dwelt in the heart of St Francis. For Francis and his earliest friars, the years of 1219 to 1221 were fraught with tension, resistance, confrontation, and resignation. Signs of this were evident in the gathering of all the friars in 1220 which has come to be known as the Chapter of Mats.

Francis came to this Assembly disturbed, even angry, for he felt that the fraternity that he had founded was beginning to spin out of his control and was drifting away from the cherished ideals of the earliest years. In the *Assisi Compilation,* 18, we find an account of how certain ‘wise and learned’ brothers urged Cardinal Hugolino, present at the Chapter, to try to persuade Francis to hand over the leadership of the Order to these same brothers.

Francis took the Cardinal by the hand and led him to the brothers assembled and spoke to them in this way: ‘My brothers! God has called me by way of humility and showed me the way of simplicity. The Lord has told me what he wants: he wants me to be a new fool in the world. God did not wish to lead us by any way other than this knowledge; but God will confound you by your knowledge and wisdom.

Soon after, Francis resigned his position as Minister General. We might assume that for him, the future seemed bleak. It did not really prove to be such. Having resigned to others his role as functional leader, he continued to serve in important ways as the Order’s spiritual or charismatic leader.

Until the day of my death, I will not cease to teach the brothers by example and deeds to walk in the way that the Lord showed me, and which I showed them and taught them. (*Assisi Compilation,* 106)

I think this can make us pause and reflect on our own attitude to what we have done as friars. We are all tempted in one way or another to build up our own little empire – or a grander empire, depending on circumstances! And we can feel angry and upset when our little empire is threatened, when circumstances appear to indicate that it might be taken away from us. My own security is threatened, my self-image had depended so much upon this empire that I had built. But remember the words of the *Nineteenth Admonition*, ‘Who I am before God, that is who I am and nothing more.’ Francis now had the challenge of making that even more real in his life. Is the Order his possession or is it God’s possession. And might God’s way not necessarily be his way – even for a saint as great as Francis. I cannot know this for certain, but what I am challenged to do is to place all that I have done into the hands of God, and trust. Trust, the fundamental religious attitude, is so often the most challenging. In many ways, this is the challenge of Franciscan poverty, living *sine proprio*, without possessing anything.

And if I do find in life that my work, to which I have given so much of my life, is taken away from me - it may simply be the effects of the passing years - I can take inspiration from Francis that my vocation is not taken from me. As I said last month, my primary vocation is to be the person God has created me to be, and to seek to do this by living my own commitment within the Franciscan way of life into which God has called me.

Ponder for a moment this passage from St Clare’s *Second Letter to Agnes*:

But because one thing is necessary, I bear witness to that one thing and encourage you, for love of Him to whom you have offered yourself as a holy and pleasing sacrifice, that you always be mindful of your resolution, like another Rachel always seeing your beginning. (10,11)

The figure of Rachel had long fascinated Christian writers. St Jerome analysed her name in terms of its derivatives, ‘seeing’ and ‘beginning.’ Hence, Rachel becomes the one who is able to ‘see the beginning,’ to hold on to one’s initial vision. Augustine interpreted Rachel as the one with sharp vision. To face the future successfully, we need to be people of vision, and I clarify my vision by seeing again my beginning. This was so with St Francis. In the Second Book of Celano’s Life, the book which covers just the last two years of Francis’ life, Celano writes,

He burned with a great desire to return to his earliest steps (seeing his beginning), rejoicing in **hope** because of his boundless **love.**

May we seek to rediscover and continue to live that original dream, so that, as Francis did, we can continue to walk in the way that the Lord showed us. *(to be continued)*