**LOOK TO THE PAST WITH THANKS**

 **(Part 1)**

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On the 21st of November 2014, Pope Francis issued an *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People* on the occasion of the year of Consecrated Life. In this letter, he held together these three aspects of human experience, past, present, and future, when he spoke about the aims of Consecrated Life:

1. Look to the past with thanks
2. Live the present with passion
3. Embrace the future with hope.

So, let’s focus now on looking to the past with gratitude, and remember our personal and communal past.

Memory is so much more than simply recalling facts from the past. St Bonaventure speaks of memory as that which is able to hold together, creatively, the past, present, and future. Memory constructively reflects on the past and in this way can provide me with a sense of awareness of who I am in the present. It serves to make me more intensely aware of who I am at this present moment and so helps to guide and inspire me as I move towards the future.

The past began with the day I was born. The moment of my birth is definitely the most important moment of my existence until now. It is when ‘I’, this individual me, came into the world. Think on that for a moment, not the birth of anyone else but my birth. Of course, we cannot remember the moment, but we can relish its significance. At the moment of my birth, someone precious and unique came into the world. There was never another person born who was or is, or indeed will be, just the same as me. The process of human birth is not to be identified with the manufacturing processes of a mass production factory. God has gone to enormous trouble and care to make each individual unique and precious. We can each day join with the Psalmist and pray ‘O God, you knit me together in my mother’s womb – I thank you, O Lord, I am wonderfully made.’ (Ps 139)

Fundamental gratitude is gratitude for the very fact of my existence. I did nothing to deserve to be born, life is totally gift and the proper response to a gift is true gratitude that grows into wonder and appreciation of the uniqueness of who I am.

This deep appreciation and respect for our individuality (not individualism) lies at the heart of our Franciscan spirituality. It was certainly at the heart of St Francis’ spirituality.

Think of that first Christmas Crib at Greccio. Francis organised this living Nativity scene to help people see, in real life and in their own time and place, what the love of God looks like (Celano, *The Life of St* Francis, 84-86). In the scene at Greccio, we see the generous love of God made concrete, but also the marvellous capacity of the individual human person – even a helpless baby – to communicate that love. God chose to use the means of our very humanity to communicate the great divine love for us.

*The most high Father made known the Word of the Father in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb He received the flesh of our humanity and frailty.* (*Later Admonition and Exhortation*, 4)

God joined with creation in an individual human person. Francis stood in awe of this, and it was the basis for his tremendous devotion to the Feast of Christmas.

*He affirmed it was the Feast of Feasts, when God was made a little child and hung on human breasts.* (*Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 199)

‘God hung on human breasts’ - note the intimacy of the relationship between God and creature.

Francis thus understood that humanity is good and sacred and that the image of God is found in **all** humans. Each and every human person – and that includes each one of us – has an innate dignity and worth.

*Consider, O human being, in what excellence the Lord God has placed you, for he created and formed you to the image of His Beloved Son according to the body and to his own likeness according to the spirit.* (*Admonition* 5.1)

We can speak of Franciscan spirituality as a Eucharistic spirituality. Hence, it is a spirituality that is fed by remembering. A Eucharistic spirituality is not one that we simply turn on when we celebrate the Eucharist. It is a spirituality for all aspects of our lives.

In one of his homilies, Pope Francis described the Eucharist as a remembering and insisted that this has implications for the life of each of us. Just as the Eucharist focuses on our remembering what we had imbibed – ‘Do this in memory of me’ – so we need to look back and store in our memories all the key moments and signs of God’s presence in our lives. We must remember both the great things done by God as well as the obstacles and rejections, because God accompanies us and is not deterred in his plans for us by anything that we can do.

It’s good for my Christian heart to memorize my journey, my personal journey: just like the Lord who accompanied me up to here and held me by the hand. And the times I said to our Lord: No! Go away! I don’t want you! Our Lord respects our wishes. He is respectful. But we must memorize our past and be a memorial of our own lives and our own journey. We must look back and remember and do it often. ‘At that time, God gave me this grace and I replied in that way, I did this or that… He accompanied me.’ In this way we arrive at a new encounter, an encounter of gratitude. (Pope Francis, Santa Marta, 21 April 2016)

The Eucharist is the model for all of our prayer – as Pope Francis commented: “This is to pray - to pray is to remember in God's presence because our story is the story of God’s love for us.” (Santa Marta, 10 July 2014)

 In remembering in God’s presence, we might rediscover those moments of grace that have led us to where we are today. It may have been a crisis, a sickness, or an encounter with another who challenged and inspired us. Whatever the circumstances, in our remembering, treasure these moments of grace. There, indeed, God is to be discovered.

 For most, if not all of us, our memories would have been shaped within the wider Christian context of family, parish, and church. The Christian values we had imbibed would have stretched our vision of things. In the midst of this Christian community, we met at some time our Franciscan community. There was something about this encounter that gave me a vision that must have spoken to my heart. Within my heart the vision was refined, eventually to become that which my heart longs for and desires more than anything else. (“This is what I desire, what I long for with all my heart” – St Francis). So, in my remembering, perhaps I should reflect on what it was about this vision that so captivated my heart, as against alternative visions, good as these may be in themselves.

*(to be continued)*

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