**LOOK TO THE PAST WITH THANKS**

**(Part 2)**

Paul Rout OFM

Pope Francis, during his visit to Poland, said that Pope St John Paul II always impressed him, due to his vivid sense of history. Whenever he spoke about a people, he started from its history, in order to bring out its wealth of humanity and spirituality. So then, as a friar, I need to immerse myself in the history, the memories, of my own Franciscan community. In doing this, it is important to keep in mind the words that the Pope added:

There are two kinds of memory: good and bad, positive, and negative. Good memory is what Mary shows us in her Magnificat when she praises the Lord for his saving works, while negative memory keeps the mind and heart obsessively fixed on evil, especially on the wrongs committed by others. (To Polish leaders in Krakow, 27 July 2016)

For each of us, our lives as friars probably contain memories both good and bad, positive, and negative. I need to examine everything but, without denying the negative, to focus on those memories that were positive, that allowed me to continue in my commitment to the Franciscan way of life despite hardships, and which have brought me to where I am today. Inner happiness is where I am at peace with whom I am today. Being locked into negative memories can only destroy such peace. Like Mary in her Magnificat, praise the Lord for his saving works. Reread our own history, even our own failures, and rather than trying to ignore them or being depressed by them, begin to learn from them.

In many ways, learning from our failures is what is given to us in the Japanese Zen art of Kintsugi. When a bowl or a precious vase or teapot falls, we tend to become annoyed and then throw them away. It remains a negative experience. But there is an alternative. By repairing what has been broken, the Japanese practice of Kintsugi enhances the breaks and so gives a new lease of life to our broken vase or bowl. It becomes even more refined and precious, thanks to its scars. Kintsugi uses a precious metal – liquid gold, silver, or lacquer dusted with powdered gold – to bring together the broken pieces and at the same time enhance the breaks. Using this technique, it’s possible to create beautiful works of art, each with its own beauty and story, thanks to the unique cracks formed when the object breaks, as if they were wounds that leave different marks on each of us.

Remember that after the Resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the Twelve, Thomas identified him by his wounds. The wounds did not disappear, they were an inextricable part of his way to glory.

Each of us, as we confront our past, its failures and mistakes, should realise that the negative experiences of our lives are exactly what make each one of us unique and precious. It is then that I shall be able to accept those words from Isaiah, no need to worry about the past, no need to be obsessed about what was done before. It is then that I can open my eyes and my heart to welcome the new deed that God is doing for me. To use the words of Pope Francis in his homily on the 24th World Day of Consecrated Life:

Reread your own history and see God’s faithful gift there: not only in life’s grand moments, but also in your fragility and weakness, in your insignificance. (1 February 2020)

Pope Francis has given us some sound advice as to how we may best engage in this constructive and creative remembering of our past experiences within the Franciscan community. It is important to remember our history, he says, because it helps to preserve our identity as a community and also to strengthen our common sense of belonging and our unity. But it is to be much more than simply telling stories from the past that may get a laugh. This may be part of it, but we need much more than that. It means to recall the high ideals, the vision and the values that fired the hearts of those who inspired us to join this religious community. If your memories of past members of your community are in any way similar to mine, there will be a richness and diversity of experiences to draw upon in order to see how the Franciscan charism has been lived out over the years, the creativity that emerged as friars attempted to express the charism with the difficulties that were encountered, and how these difficulties were overcome.

We will probably also remember examples of what the Pope terms inconsistency, when what was said or done, either by others or by myself, was not in keeping with the ideals of the charism. Yet even manifestations of human weakness can be instructive and can act as a summons to conversion. We need to remember, as St Paul did, the spiritual value of those experiences of human weakness:

The Lord has answered me, ‘My grace is enough for you’: for my power is at full stretch in weakness. It is about my weaknesses that I am happiest of all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For it is when I am weak that I am strong. (2 Cor 12.9)

What was so often stressed in my early years of Religious Life was perfection, which was often equated with perfection in acting in certain ways. Mistakes, weaknesses, were frowned upon – we were given Refectory culpas! Yet, no one is perfect but God alone, weakness is an inevitable part of the human condition. If I am not willing to admit and to accept that I have my weaknesses, then I am attempting to be God – and that is the original sin of Adam and Eve, the sin of pride. Recognition of and acceptance of our weaknesses can lead us to place our trust not in ourselves but in the power of God working in us. Remember the words of St Paul, “I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me.” (Phil. 4:13)

 In your remembering, remember the extraordinary results that God has worked in all ages, even by means that seemed most insufficient. It is good to remember this, if I am despondent or weighed down with a sense of my own insufficiency.

To conclude, with the words of Pope Francis, this reflection on remembering our past.

Memory makes us draw closer to God. The memory of that work which God conducted in us. I give you this simple advice: Memorize it! What’s my life been like, what was my day like today or what has this past year been like? It’s all about memory, our memories of the beautiful and remarkable things that the Lord has conducted in the lives of each one of us. (*Santa Marta* 21 April 2016)