**Monthly Spiritual Message**

March 2021

**“THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL: FRANCIS TO FRANCIS”**

**Part Two**

As we continue our reflection, we find ourselves in the Season of Lent.

To be a Christian requires “Conversion”. You do not choose to be a disciple of Jesus Christ without a decision to follow him and to undergo the change that this involves.

Conversion is an ongoing choice that unfolds over time through prayer, repentance, forgiveness and seeking God’s will. Each of us has to make a personal decision to live for Christ, and we must keep making choices to grow in faith.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “Christ’s call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. The second conversion is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church.” (CCC1428)

Pope Francis mentions a particular event that changed his life’s direction when he was 17. On September 21st, 1953, the Feast of St Matthew – also the first day of spring in Argentina, a day of celebration for students – he suddenly felt that he should go to confession. A practising Catholic, he stopped at his parish church on the way to the Festival, and a priest he did not know unexpectedly appeared and heard his confession.

Pope Francis describes two things about this experience that had a great impact on him.

The first was his sense that the priest was there waiting for him, which enabled him to perceive that God is always there, first waiting to forgive and to be with us. He came to the priest for forgiveness and healing. God the Father watches over each of us with great love.

The second experience was that after that confession, he says “I felt something had changed. I was not the same.” The Pope said, “I heard something like a voice or a call. I was convinced I should become a priest.”

In all of this, it was the compassionate way in which God called him. This became a source of inspiration for his own ministry.

With the young Francis of Assisi, his conversion occurred, and his vocation was revealed, over an extended period of time. It unfolded in many steps. This is also the experience of many Christians.

Jesus, speaking to Francis from the Crucifix at the Church of San Damiano, told him, “Rebuild my Church”. It was a critical moment in his conversion, but his movement toward God certainly did not end there.

Francis’ earthly life is summed up in the opening to his Testament: “When I was in sin.” The decision to repent and do penance for his past sins can be seen as the first step of his conversion to become a serious, intentional follower of Christ.

For St Francis, conversion or turning to God meant turning to the Church, for in Catholic theology the Church is the Body of Christ, the visible presence of Jesus in the world.

Pope Francis continuously speaks about conversion as a powerful encounter with Jesus. For St Francis, this was his encounter with the leper. Like St Francis, we are also challenged to go out and live our faith, serving those on the edges.

The structure for Francis’ conversion can be seen like this:

a) Conversion is God’s initiative; b) Enter into a personal relationship with Jesus; c) The response is to believe in and follow Jesus by turning away from sin and believing in the Gospel; d) To be attentive to God’s direction; e) To act upon what God has revealed or the direction that God has given.

Francis experienced an interior restlessness, a search for direction in his life. He turned to prayer.

I can imagine St Francis saying these words to Pope Francis: “Put yourself in the presence of God. Aided by his word, go forward to what he desires.”

As Francis was touched by God’s grace, undergoing a decisive conversion, prayer became more central to his life. Francis’ followers were attracted to him because of his fervour in prayer, and they learned from him.

Francis had deep devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist. The richness of the experience of God in prayer is also evident in the life of Pope Francis. He said: “The moment when I most savour the religious experience, however long it may be, is when I am before the Tabernacle.”

Nothing teaches us more about who a person is than how a person prays. It is like a window into the soul. The prayers that St Francis wrote are fervent, exuberant and heartfelt, filled with pure love and exaltation of God.

We see many of the same qualities in the prayer of Pope Francis. His humility before God became evident on the night he was introduced as Pope, when he asked the people to pray for him and to pray over him before he imparted his first papal blessing.

The decision to lead the people in the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Glory be was very much in the spirit of St Francis, who not only used the prayers of the Church, but went out to the people to meet them where they were.

Pope Francis frequently prays publicly for others. He makes it clear that this is an essential service he is called to do, especially for the sick and the needy. The Pope has described prayer as a mixture of “courage, humility and service”. It certainly takes courage to be persistent in prayer.

Like St Francis, the Pope’s focus on prayer is often on giving praise and thanks to the Lord for who he is and for his goodness. He gave us a straightforward prayer that he said we should offer daily: “Holy Spirit, make my heart open to goodness, make my heart open to the beauty of God every day.” He also said: “Prayer is union with Jesus.”

Another common thread in the prayer of both these men is the imitation of Jesus in his poverty. St Francis chose to be poor because Jesus embraced poverty. It was also a response to his teaching. St Francis and his followers found joy in being poor. They embraced a change of status.

Living poverty for St Francis was not just an idea that he had, or something he decided to do because others were doing it.

St Francis heard the particular words of Jesus from the Gospels and he obeyed in faith. The poor life also brought St Francis peace and, above all, freedom. It was not a deprivation but a positive act of trust in God, and a share in the sufferings of the Poor Christ.

Pope Francis was asked by children: “Where do you find hope?” He replied: “In the poor Jesus, Jesus who made himself poor for us.” There is a witness value in the way we live, and living a poorer life is part of that witness. We must have personal contact with the poor as we assist them.

The Pope also appealed for a reform of the world’s economic and political systems, so that the poor are no longer oppressed by policies that do not see their welfare as a priority.

Conversion to Christ must be lived out in a deep communion with others. One by one, others, who observed St Francis and his humble work, joined him. Again, in his Testament, St Francis wrote: “The Lord gave me brothers!” He also spoke of poverty, common prayer, obedience, and manual labour.

He did not have a plan to attract followers or to form a religious group. What emerged reflected his own call and character. The friars lived like Francis, following as literally as possible the teaching and example of Jesus, above all, by a poor and humble lifestyle.

St Francis was a compassionate and merciful father to those who followed him, and he preferred to lead by example rather than by legislation. His example resonates in the life and teaching of Pope Francis who emphasizes that community is at the heart of God’s plan.

“What is God’s plan?” he asked in a General Audience. “ It is to make all of us a single family of his children, in which each person feels that God is close and feels loved by him and feels the warmth of being in God’s plan.”

Like St Francis, Pope Francis puts these words into action, frequently reaching out personally to others, as we saw when he embraced and kissed a man severely disfigured by tumors on his head and neck.

Pope Francis continuously denounces sins against charity, especially sins of speech and judgment. “Gossip”, he said, “is destructive to the Church.”

He asks us to leave behind individualism – the inclination we have to retreat into ourselves. Knowing God’s mercy and forgiveness, we as Christians can in turn extend God’s love to others.

Both St Francis and Pope Francis point out areas where the faithful occasionally have failed in communion with one another. The call of every Christian is to show mercy, compassion, and forgiveness to those within the body of believers, as well as to those in need on the outside.

St Francis was the first to convict himself of sin against unity and charity. We are all challenged at times to live in communion with others, following the example of Christ.

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