**THE FRANCISCAN CHARISM**

***The Relevance of the Franciscan Charism Today***

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Jesus deliberately asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

Jesus’ provocative question helped all his disciples to examine themselves about their relationship to him and their and knowledge about him. And like any of us, the answer given was not a personal one but from what they had heard from others.

“But you, who do you say I am?”, asked Jesus.

When Jesus asked his disciples this question, he already had spent an amount of time with them. The disciples already had heard so many things from the mouth of Jesus. They had experienced many miracles, etc, etc. They knew who Jesus was, hence, this was not enough because their knowledge was superficial, that is, it was based on external experiences. Jesus, therefore, wanted to know more, not what they had seen or heard but rather what had been revealed by God in their innermost being.

St Francis of Assisi had to find his own answer about the identity of Jesus. He had to learn to grow in awareness of God’s presence in all created beings. His willingness to rediscover Jesus in all circumstances of life was a fruit of constant prayer and the search for meaning in life. His new way of life scandalized some but inspired others to join in his mission.

Francis’s extraordinary involvement in the life of the society in different forms and means was an authentic reflection of the Gospel that he was fully determined to live by. He did not invent anything new but rather he implemented it. St Francis’s new way of life had an impact on the society and on his fellow brothers who joined him. His charism was not only heard but also felt among communities.

It was a charism that developed from personal prayer, and from such prayer practical actions followed. “The deeds you do may be the only sermon some persons will hear today”, said Francis. Prayer was crucial to his life. As he continued to pray, the more he grew in the perception of who God is. He continued to discover the identity of the person of Jesus in his life. For Francis, both contemplation and action were his way of life.

In prayer, he realized what the world of his time was all about. Through prayer, St Francis was able to go beyond himself and began to focus on putting his prayer and faith into action. He entered into inner dialogue with God who speaks and cares for His people. His personal experience with God enabled him to recognize in all earthly things the working hand of the Creator – God.

In his ways, Francis tried to answer the question of Jesus: “But you, who do you say I am?”

Till to his final days on earth, Francis had illustrated through prayer, his writings, and through his own exemplary acts of discipleship, that the Franciscan charism can be a link between God and earthly created beings.

We find in St Francis’s prayer the true manifestation of a desire to live his life till the end with an attitude of humble service of God and neighbour. He has left us with a treasure, that of the Franciscan charism, which is hidden in the sacred scriptures.

What we need to do is only to contemplate the word of God, to review our relationship with God, to be open to learn every day, and to be eager to find our own ways to live our Franciscan spirituality, to make sure that our own Franciscan prayer is applied in all circumstances and experiences of life.

And yet, dying on his bed, St Francis of Assisi told the brothers, “Let us begin again, brothers, for up until now, we have done nothing”. “I have done what was mine to do, may Christ now teach you what you are to do”.

**WHAT DO PEOPLE SAY THE OFS IS TODAY?**

The Franciscan Charism will never be relevant for today’s secularized society unless those who have professed to live the Holy Gospel of Christ, be it in the religious life or in their secular state of life, are constantly aware of the need to listen to the voice of Christ. They continue to search for the meaning of their personal calling, first as Christians, then as Franciscans. “The essence of Franciscan spirituality is … Christ. Christ is the focal point of this spirituality…” (Benedetto Lino, presentation at XIII General Chapter OFS, in São Paulo, Brazil, 22-29 November 2011).

The apostles listened attentively to Jesus' challenging question with an open heart. Although it was only Peter who got a profound and meaningful answer, it was still with Jesus’ continuous insistence in not allowing them to tell anyone.

The Disciples were again drawn to Jesus by the impetus of faith. Jesus reinforced their continuous search for a relevant meaning in their following him.

Jesus enabled them to realize that it was not enough just to call themselves disciples; rather, that their discipleship had to affect others. Hence such effects had to be drawn from their embodiment of Christ’s teachings, from their thirst to witness the evangelical life with their own way of life, and from their willingness to renew their commitment to spreading the Gospel by their exemplary lifestyle.

“Today, people prefer to follow witnesses than teachers; and if they follow masters, it is because they are first of all witnesses.” (Pope Paul VI).

“What attracts is the testimony, not the words, which certainly help, but the testimony is what attracts and makes the Church grow”. (Pope Francis).

Today’s world is widely recognized as a secular world, that is, a world that has lost God. We, who still know and believe that God has never lost us, are expected to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

We are to make sure that the Gospel remains not simply as a good idea in eloquent speeches but rather as the real Christ, the source of life, and the fount from which we draw life.

The writings of St Francis should be not simply quoted phrases but a true rule of life that each Franciscan man and woman strives to live by.

In all circumstances of life, “motivated by the dynamic power of the Gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls ‘conversion’.” (OFS Rule 7)

Unless Franciscans take seriously the question of Jesus, “Who do you say I am?”, and the words of St Francis of Assisi, “Let us begin again…”, there will always be the risk of spiritual stagnation.

Jesus’ provocative question, if taken seriously, can take away all sorts of spiritual stagnation. In the case of the OFS, such stagnation is probably caused by a stagnant fraternal lifestyle.

Often, fraternity meetings are no longer schools of prayer and service to the Order but rather are turned into a place of the pursuit of egoistic interests, power, and domination.

Jesus is no longer the centre of the Fraternity meetings but, rather, the local, regional, or national minister is. Fraternities are no longer places to learn how to be an instrument of God’s love within the Fraternity and outside in the world.

Some Fraternities become stagnant because they are totally submerged in the success and accomplishment of their local Fraternity and barely have time for self-evaluation.

They can’t hear the question of Jesus, “Who do people say I am?” What the other Fraternities say about this particular Fraternity, what those who are not even Franciscans say who they are? Do they know you as Secular Franciscans who have a specific vocation or one of those Catholic charitable groups? Who do people say you are?

What is it that makes your vocation specific? “It is specific only because your call contains in itself an element of exemplarity, a model, a unique way of following Christ: This is the true, unique specificity of your vocation that distinguishes you and unites you: to be total Christians like Francis.” (Benedetto Lino, *loc.cit*.).

The OFS members live in a very diverse and constantly changing world in terms of Christian values. They are constantly confronted by many social, political, environmental, economic, and cultural issues, a world that seems to be lost in individualism and consumerism, a world in which human life has lesser dignity. And it is exactly in such a hostile environment that they are called to make the right choices and are able to help others to regain strength and courage to change their lifestyle.

Pope St John Paul II, in his address to the OFS, said, “The Church expects from the unique Franciscan Secular Order a great service to the cause of the Kingdom of God in the world today. She wants your Order to be a model of organic, structural, and charismatic union at all levels, so as to present yourself to the world as a "community of love". From you, Secular Franciscans, the Church awaits a courageous and consistent witness of Christian and Franciscan life that aims at building a more fraternal and evangelical world for the realization of the Kingdom of God” (22 November 2002).

They shouldn’t fear to take bold stands against all those issues that are contrary to Christian values. OFS members shouldn’t be content in fulfilling just a minimal requirement of fraternal life without making efforts to allow your fraternal life to have an impact on the life of those outside the Fraternity.

The life in fraternity should never be about locking yourselves in, inward-looking, like the disciples for the fear of the Jews after the death of Jesus. Your fraternal meetings have to be a place to encounter the living and active Christ, a place from which you are empowered to bring Christ to others, a place where you are driven by the Spirit of Pentecost. You are no longer closed in, but mission oriented.

“Secular Franciscans should always act as a leaven in the environment in which they live through the witness of their fraternal love and clear Christian motivations. In the spirit of minority, they should opt for relationships which give preference to the poor and to those on the fringe of society, whether these be individuals or categories of persons or entire people; they should collaborate in overcoming the exclusions of others and those forms of poverty that are the fruit of inefficiency and injustice.” (OFS General Constitutions Art.19)

In fact, each Fraternity ought to welcome the Spirit of renewal which can help the Fraternity to transcend the juridical boundaries of the different fraternity levels, to enjoy a universal brotherhood.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that your local Fraternity isn’t important. What I am trying to say here is that the Secular Franciscan has to have a sense of belonging to the Order and not just to your particular Fraternity. “A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ” (OFS Rule 13) This kind of approach can help all OFS members to promote the building of fraternity among peoples. It can help them to strive to promote the Franciscan concept of universal kinship.

**THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE OFS IN A SECULARIZED WORLD**

The real social impact that Secular Franciscans can have in a secularized world today depends on their daily responsibility to have a spiritual check-up list whereby each member is able to begin anew a vigorous pursuit to relive the Franciscan charism that is integral and inclusive.

The OFS is overwhelmed by the increasing number of its elderly members, the diminishing number of Fraternities, and the shortage of spiritual assistance.

All these issues tend to derail their focus onto the mission entrusted to them by the Church, especially that of proclaiming Christ by their life and words in society. The members should be seen more both in Fraternities and in the world.

The OFS Rule clearly says: “from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel” (OFS Rule 4). It is also fair to say: from the life of the Fraternity to the life in the world of politics, economics, justice, and peace, socio-cultural and environmental matters.

The emphasis on the fraternal life should never distort the fundamental way of living the Franciscan charism in the world. Rather, the fraternal life should be a resource from which all OFS members are able to know and serve Christ through their brothers and sisters in the world.

The Franciscan charism is embedded in Scripture, so if Scripture has an impact on our lives, our life in turn should have an impact on the society we live in. The life of the OFS members should be that of giving flesh to the gospel vision of those who seek to know and love God.

People want to see and find in the Secular Franciscans the real joy of brothers and sisters who not only profess the gospel life, but whose own life is fully interpreted from gospel perspectives.

The Franciscan charism has to be seen in ordinary circumstances of life, not only in the Fraternity meetings. “The world is our cloister”. Religious and secular Franciscans alike are all invited to live our Franciscan charism, not behind the walls of the Fraternities but in the world at large.

The Fraternity should equip members with fundamental tools: by empowering its members with the knowledge of their founder, helping each member to realize that God’s call is personal but also for the benefit of others, with ‘love of God and neighbour’.

It is in the Fraternity that each member learns to appreciate the brothers or sisters as they are, to live in harmony with others, and to embody the gospel life not only for oneself but also for others.

To forgive and embrace others, to bring peace among the quarrelling brothers and sisters. This gospel image should not be confined within the local Fraternity, but it should be an image that is portrayed beyond the boundaries of the local Fraternity into the world.

The Franciscan charism is still relevant although not by itself. The world needs the fruits of that devotional, prayerful, and careful reading of the Gospel.

People need to hear not only about the caring, merciful, and loving God, but they need also to experience God’s mercy and caring love through those who have encountered God.

To produce good fruits, one has to develop a personal relationship with God through individual prayer. The more one develops personal prayer and remains faithful to it, the more one is capable, with the help of God, to realize that one’s personal prayer should be driven into action towards all sorts of social injustices, be they in the Fraternity or in the world.

‘Prayer is connected to actions and work’. In many different ways, St Francis had shown us that prayer is in fact a sort of action. “St Francis constantly meditated on the Lord’s words and never lost sight of his works” (Benedetto Lino, *loc. cit*.). “Actions speak louder than words” “They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love…”

There are many brothers and sisters who are no longer able to attend Fraternity meetings, the so-called “isolated brothers and sisters”, who are missing such love in action from their secular Franciscan brothers and sisters. “Who do you say I am?”, Jesus continues to ask. Are they isolated from us or have we isolated ourselves from them by forgetting to visit, or call, or write messages to them? “I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

“Charity begins at home.”

The Covid-19 has even worsened the situation. There are more isolated brothers and sisters than before. Secular Franciscans in particular are once again taken back to reflect on the meaning of their Franciscan charism, that of learning from Jesus Christ whom St Francis imitated and learned how to care for the isolated lepers of his time.

Undoubtedly, St Francis had his own ways of how to put his faith and love into action. St Francis did not do something else than what the Gospel, Christ himself, asks everyone to do. Now is our time to figure out how we can put the message of the Gospel into action in such very challenging times of Covid-19. In times such as these, all OFS member are called to enkindle once again the healing spirit of Jesus among suffering people.

 “Uniting themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed his will into the Father’s hands, let them faithfully fulfil the duties proper to their various circumstances of life. Let them also follow the poor and crucified Christ, witness to him even in difficulties and persecutions.” (OFS Rule 10).

It is a time in which Secular Franciscans need to find out how they can be a point of reference in such an ailing world. However, they cannot be a point of reference unless they view their Franciscan charism as a gift that must be lived, appreciated, and shared with all people. “The Secular Franciscans, like Francis, are called to fulfil their very function as a signal, to be a sure point of reference for a 100% integral Christianity, without confining themselves to the restricted sphere of their respective Order, of the family and of the Church.” (Benedetto Lino, *loc.cit*.).

When the gift of the Franciscan charism is treasured and is kept alive, our actions will always make others understand who we are as Franciscans. Actions say who we are, words say what we believe and love.

Do you believe that, by embracing wholeheartedly your Rule of life, you can still inspire people to become better citizens? In the secularized world, there are people who are still searching for people who can inspire them to live a better life. They still consider St Francis of Assisi and his spirituality as a contemporary and attractive way of life.

Do they need to travel to Assisi to experience such spirituality? Actually not! Because in all corners of the world there are Franciscan brothers and sisters who should give them first-hand experience of what the Franciscan charism is all about, not through lectures but by real life. Then they can go to Assisi to relive the experience.

People are looking up to Secular Franciscans as true heralds of peace, fidelity, and respect for life. Despite a continuous decrease of religious values in so many parts of the world, Secular Franciscans are still expected to be a beacon of hope in a such a hopeless world.

The question is: Are the Secular Franciscans still aware that they are bearers of freedom, promoters of human dignity, peace, unity, harmony, love, etc.?

“Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith” (OFS Rule 15).