**ST FRANCIS AND POPE FRANCIS** *Part One*

Paul Rout OFM

Shortly after his election, Pope Francis spoke of why he chose the name he did. He remarked that some people were uncertain if his chosen name referred to St Francis Xavier, or St Francis de Sales, or St Francis of Assisi. Wishing to clarify this, he told of how during the conclave, he was seated next to his friend, the Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes. “When the matter became dangerous”, he said, “he comforted me.” When it became clear the cardinals had elected him Pope, he said that Cardinal Hummes “embraced me and kissed me and said, ‘Don’t forget the poor’. And that struck me... the poor... immediately I thought of St Francis of Assisi. Francis was a man of peace, a man of poverty, a man who loved and protected creation.” That was when he chose the name Francis.

Where do we see the qualities of Francis of Assisi expressed in the life and teaching of Pope Francis? At the heart of Francis’ spiritual life was the experience of mercy. We find him writing at the very beginning of his Testament, written a few months before he died,

While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed a heart full of mercy towards them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body.

What is at the centre of Francis of Assisi’s conversion and his subsequent way of life is this ‘heart full of mercy’. In his encounter with lepers, Francis experienced mercy. To experience mercy is to be drawn out of oneself, away from focusing upon self and one’s own self-image to be drawn through compassion to focus upon the need of the other. It drew him along the path where he finally made his commitment to put God first and not self, through living out the values of the gospel. He says later in his Testament, “The most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel.” It is this experience of mercy which lies at the heart of Francis’ life of continuing conversion.

The experience of mercy also lies at the heart of Pope Francis’ teaching. His personal motto, *Miserando atque Eligendo* translates as ‘By Having Mercy and by Choosing Him.’ In his address to Brazil’s cardinals and bishops on 27 July 2013, he addressed them with the words,

We need a Church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of wounded persons in need of understanding, forgiveness and love.

The Church, he constantly insists, is called to be a missionary community that has ‘an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the Father’s infinite mercy.’ (E.G. 24) Mercy is the greatest of all the virtues and Pope Francis, quoting Thomas Aquinas, associates it with the greatest exercise of power – ‘through mercy God’s omnipotence is manifested to the highest degree.’ (E.G. 37) The expression of power and authority within the Church ought not be power understood as domination or control over others but power as the practice of mercy.

Francis chose to live in poverty. He sees it as something desirable.

Holy poverty destroys the desire of riches and avarice and the cares of this world. (*The Salutation of the Virtues* 11)

He expressed his poverty by living among the powerless ones, expressing the attitude of Christ who came not to be served but to serve. In Chapter 9 of the Rule of 1221 he urged the brothers,

You must rejoice when you live among people [who are considered to be] of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside. (*Earlier Rule* 9.2)

The phrase ‘live among’ implies familiarity and relationship. The brothers were not to see themselves as a class above the poor, they were to **‘live with’** those to whom they ministered and their authority was to be derived from this experience of familiarity and relationship.

Pope Francis follows the path of Francis of Assisi in calling for the priority of outreach to the poor.

To whom should we go first? When we read the Gospel we find a clear indication: above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked.” (E.G. 48)

When one has experienced mercy, one is drawn beyond self to show charity and compassion to the other. The Gospel has an essential social dimension and this is emphasized in *Evangelii Gaudium* where the Pope devotes an entire Chapter, Chapter 4, to ‘the social dimension of evangelization’.

We cannot be locked up in a Church and silence the message of St Francis of Assisi... Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor. (E.G. 183, 187)

Francis, the poor one, was also Francis the man of peace. He regarded humility as an essential element of peacemaking, as we find in Chapter 3 of *The Later Rule*.

I counsel, admonish and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ, that, when they go about the world, they do not quarrel or fight with words or judge others; rather, let them be meek, peaceful and unassuming, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming. (*Later Rule* 3.10)

And in *The Salutation of the Virtues*

Holy Humility destroys pride. (*The Salutation of the Virtues* 12)

St Bonaventure saw humility as the greatest of all the virtues of St Francis. I wish to reflect more upon this notion of humility at a later time. But it is evident that Pope Francis stresses – and practises – humility.

We have to be humble, but with real humility, from head to toe.

The Arsenal Football Club manager, Arsene Wenger, met Pope Francis recently when he travelled to Rome for a Match for Peace. He commented,

Meeting the Pope was an experience I did not want to miss. I am a Catholic and the invitation was something that I accepted a long time ago. On top of that, it was a game for peace and multi-religion understanding. The Pope is a great person to meet because he shows humility and he has a word with everybody.

In November 2013, he urged priests

... exercise your ministry in humility and mercy. (Pope Francis speaking to priests).

His pectoral cross is not made of gold but is a simple cross of iron. He lives not in the Papal Palace but in Casa Santa Marta, the Vatican residence which accommodates visiting clergy and laity. Vatican workers are among those with whom he celebrates Mass each morning. In his speech, he is simple and direct, he speaks not always according to official scripts but appeals to the heart and people flock to hear him, especially the young. One could say that he is down to earth - and the root meaning of ‘humility is ‘earth’.