**ST FRANCIS AND POPE FRANCIS** *Part Two*

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St Francis was known as God’s Troubadour, a singer of songs, a joyful saint. So much of his attraction and the attraction of the early friars was this spirit of joy. Francis states in Chapter 7 of the *Earlier Rule*

They must beware not to appear outwardly sad and like gloomy hypocrites; but let them show that they are joyful in the Lord and cheerful and truly gracious. (*Earlier Rule* 7.16)

It is not by coincidence that Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation is entitled ‘The Joy of the Gospel’. This is not meant to be an abstract joy.

An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral... let us recover that delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing. (E.G. 10)

In its moral message, its proclamation of ways of living that are conducive towards human flourishing,

rather than [appearing as] experts in dire predictions, dour judges bent on rooting out every threat and deviation, we should appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel. (E.G. 168)

St Francis’ way of life was a life according to the gospel:

The rule and life of these brothers is this: to live in obedience, in chastity and without anything of their own, and to follow the teaching and the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ. (*The Earlier Rule* 1.1)

Pope Francis challenges all who belong to the Church to live lives of fidelity to the Gospel. For him, the message of the gospel is not a proclamation of rules or dogmas.

Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. (E.G. 35)

It is, as it was for St Francis, to proclaim a message of peace. The message of the Gospel, the revelation of Trinitarian love, is the message of relational love. It does not entail keeping ourselves away from the world and its people, taking refuge in the comfort of privacy, enclosing ourselves behind walls or within bureaucracies, but contains the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others. This is the revolution that Pope Francis calls for,

The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summons us to a revolution of tenderness. (E.G. 88)

What is required if this to happen, insists the Pope, is that each one of us must undergo continuing conversion to the spirit of the Gospel. To cope with the present challenges confronting the Church, it is not sufficient simply to change Church structures.

Changing structures without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same structures will eventually become corrupt, oppressive, and ineffectual. (E.G. 189)

What good will it do if we change structures but do not change hearts, our own hearts first, so that when others look at our religious communities, whatever form they take, they shall see

“Authentically fraternal and reconciled communities”. (E.G. 100) All of us, as members of the Franciscan Religious Order, must examine ourselves when we hear him speak of his pain in sometimes finding bitter divisions and hostilities among those who profess through their vows the evangelical way of life. “Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?” (E.G.100)

In the past eighteen months or so, Pope Francis has preached and practiced an agenda for the Church which certainly shows the influence of his patron saint, a saint who was so instrumental in resurrecting the life of the Church within his own time. I believe that the influence of St Francis upon the Pope is reflected most strongly in his call for a change in attitudes. As mentioned earlier, changes in structures will be ineffectual unless there are firstly changes in attitudes. Perhaps this could be seen best in speaking of possible structural changes that might follow from believing that power is seen at its greatest in the exercise of mercy. Mercy draws one out of preoccupation with the self and the preservation of self-image towards concern for the other. It also entails a willingness to be taught by the other. Mercy signifies a change from looking inward to looking outward. Pope Francis is calling for reform of Church structures particularly in terms of moving away from centralization towards Collegiality, calling for the

“concrete realization of the collegial spirit.” (E.G. 32)

A centralized Church structure looks inwards and is concerned with self-preservation. Collegiality requires a looking outwards to the world and a willingness to learn from the other. In the book *The Church of Mercy*, a collection of his writings as Pope, he writes

Bishops and priests must walk with our people … There is another reason for this: because the people have a ‘nose’! The people scent out, discover, new ways to walk, it has the *sensus fidei* as theologians call it. What could be more beautiful than this? (*The Church of Mercy,* Chapter 5).

An effective moment from centralization towards a collegiality that incorporates the *sensus fidei* must be motivated by the conversion of heart that is involved in the exercise of mercy, this movement from looking inwards in order to preserve the self towards looking outwards to the need of the other.

All of this must come, as it did for St Francis and as it does for Pope Francis, from taking into our hearts the life of the Gospel. The form of life of St Francis was simply “... to follow the teaching and the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (*Earlier Rule* 1.1) For Pope Francis, the mission of the Church is to proclaim the joy of the Gospel and we best prepare to do this

[we best prepare to proclaim the joy of the Gospel] by contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it from the heart. (E.G. 264)

In his final Testament, St Francis urges his brothers to follow this form of life “simply and without gloss” (*The Testament* 39) – *sine glossa*. And so, with Pope Francis. Using the same expression as that used by St Francis, he urges us that when we have contemplated the gospel with love, let us live it “*sine glossa*”. (E.G. 271) To live the gospel *sine glossa* – maybe, that’s the challenge both Francises offer us, maybe that’s what it’s all about.