

Re : Workshop # 17: Commitment to the SFO

Excerpts from the CIOFS manual, section THE PROFESSION IN THE SFO

I. PROFESSION, A GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

The Brothers and Sisters called to the Franciscan life in the Secular Fraternity make their Profession during a specific celebration according to the Ritual proper to the SFO. This aspect is by no means insignificant, because the celebration constitutes the foundational moment of the identity of the professed, and is simultaneously the condition for a dialogue to take place in response to God's action. In fact, the consequences of the commitment a human being expresses by means of a promise derive from a prior commitment, that of God to man.

The celebration of Profession testifies to all of this, because it is God's action and a saving event: it is a moment when salvation reaches the faithful, enabling them to make a promise to live the Franciscan gospel life and producing in them particular effects of grace, by which they are deputed to specific tasks within the People of God. Only a person sanctified in the liturgical action, where (s)he fully experiences the immensity and force of God's love, can be capable of a loving response.

On the other hand, the celebration reflects the Church's understanding of Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order. The liturgy, in fact, is always a *confessio fidei*, since in it, i.e. in its enactment during the ritual action, the Church proclaims authentically its own faith in the mystery of salvation, which is actualised in and for the faithful.

1. The grace of Profession

...
Profession is a grace and gift of the Spirit. Not only is *the Holy Spirit the source of the vocation of secular Franciscans* (Const 11), since they are *urged on by the Spirit* to reach the perfection of charity in accordance with their own secular state (Rule 2); Profession also comes about by the working of the same Spirit.

«*Lord, watch over these your servants. May the Spirit of your love penetrate their hearts, so that your grace will strengthen them to keep their commitment to the gospel life.*» (Ritual II, 30).

2. Profession: an action of the Church

Profession comes about through God's intervention. But since God always acts through Christ ... it follows that Profession is simultaneously the action of Christ and of the Church, i.e. of the whole Body of Christ, Head and members.

3. Profession and Fraternity

...«*Profession, since it is by nature a public and ecclesial fact, must be celebrated in the presence of the fraternity*» (Ritual, Preliminary Notes, n. 13).

... Profession is made in the presence of the assembled fraternity, which accepts the candidates' request, since Profession is a gift given by the Father to that fraternity by incorporating new members into it. Grateful for the gift, the Fraternity is united to the prayer of those making profession, so that the Holy Spirit may bring to fulfilment the work He has begun.

...
Two key *fraternal values* of Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order emerge from the texts we have quoted.

1. It entails and produces *the entrusting of self to the Fraternity on the part of the candidate*. In Profession a covenant is established with the Brothers and Sisters, which can never be disregarded. The sacred bond of Profession, through which a perpetual commitment is established with God, (cfr. Rule 2; Const 42,2), has a number of fraternal sides to it which must be understood and lived precisely in the light of that —sworn pact || one has made with God.

2. With its liturgical foundation, Profession determines incorporation into a local fraternity and through it, into the Order.

4. Ministries in the celebration of profession

The action of the celebrating Church-Fraternity finds specific expression in a multiplicity of ministries, exercised by persons who are called to carry out particular functions in the liturgical assembly.

4.1 The Candidates

The action of Christ and of the Church is expressed in the *person of the candidates*, who make the act of profession by promising to live the gospel life. They are *baptised*...

The Candidates are or should (must) be *confirmed*.

...The Ritual expressly provides that the candidates for Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order must have already received the sacrament of confirmation, using language which shows not only a temporal succession between three events (Baptism- Confirmation - Profession), but above all points to an intrinsic linking of the saving events themselves....«*You have been made members of the People of God by your baptism, and strengthened in confirmation by the new gift of the Spirit, in order to proclaim Christ by your life and your words. Do you wish to bind yourself more closely to the Church?*» (Ritual II, 29 e).

4.2 The ministry of the Fraternity

The action of the Church is also made concretely visible in the presence of the *minister of the Fraternity*. This is clearly stated in the Constitutions and the Ritual...is also defined as a «witness of the Church and of the Order» (*Ritual*, Preliminary Notes, n. 17).

...Consequently the priest in the celebration of Profession is a: *witness*, who attests and manifests the presence and action of the Church; *guarantor*, who reassures the Church regarding the suitability of the candidates; *one who ratifies*, or confirms the promises in the name of the Church.

5. The gift of the Spirit in the celebration of Profession

... the Ritual of Profession states:

—By her public prayer *the Church entreats* the help and grace of God for them. *She imparts her blessing over them, and accompanies their commitment or profession* with the Eucharistic sacrifice (Preface, n. 9).

...In the liturgical action of Profession in the SFO the Holy Spirit is invoked, just as He is in the Eucharist and the other sacraments, in religious Profession, in the Consecration of Virgins, etc. ...

For this reason, while Profession is the action of a particular ecclesial community, constituted Those making profession are the privileged beneficiaries of this presiding function of the presbyter. As we have already shown, the act of Profession is the making explicit of a specific liturgical ministry, it is a priestly action proper to a baptised and confirmed person, but one which is brought into being by the active presence and action of the presbyter.

6. Profession and Eucharist

Through the presbyter the *Church associates the promise or Profession with the Eucharistic Sacrifice*. The Ritual gives special attention to this aspect, prescribing that the —Rite of the Promise to live the gospel life, or Profession || is —to be celebrated during Mass || : no other form of celebration is envisaged.

To celebrate Profession within the Eucharist expresses the *sacrificial dimension of self-giving* inherent in the Profession of the gospel life in the Secular Franciscan Order. In Profession, manifested in the presence of the Fraternity and the Church, the true nature of the candidates as priests and victims is made manifest. They, by promising to live the gospel life, make themselves entirely available to God and place their own bodies (persons) on the altar of Christ's sacrifice as a holy victim pleasing to God.

7. Baptism and Profession

... The primary element emerging from this fundamental statement in the Rule, is the relationship between Baptism and Profession, from which flow the relationships of the Secular Franciscan with the Church. Both the Constitutions and the Ritual insist on this Baptism-Profession relationship.

The Constitutions, in n. 42,1, state:

«Profession is the solemn ecclesial act by which the candidate, remembering the call received from Christ, renews the baptismal promises and publicly affirms his or her personal commitment to live the Gospel in the world according to the example of Francis and following the Rule of the SFO».

-«The nature of commitment to the gospel life is: *the renewal of one's consecration and promises made at baptism and confirmation*» (14 a); - We here present ask to enter this fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order, so that we may live more intensely and faithfully the grace and dedication of our baptism by following Jesus Christ according to the teachings and example of St. Francis of Assisi. (*Ritual I*, 12); it is clear that the legislative and liturgical texts of the Secular Franciscan Order recall the reality of baptism to the hearts and minds of secular Franciscans. It is both a grace and an *inestimable gift*, which produces a consecration;

- *sacramentally configures a person to the paschal mystery of Christ who died, was buried and rose again;*
- *making him/her a living member of the Church-People of God.*

Commitment to live out one's baptism, in principle required of all Christians, arises for secular Franciscans after profession as a result of a liturgical action and a saving event, which have an impact upon baptism itself.

It seems to me therefore possible to say that although baptism is —one

7.1 The Memorial of Baptism

Indeed, we say that Profession is by nature the “*renovation* of the consecration and promises of baptism || and in the very act of making it, the candidate declares that (s)he intends to *renew his/her own baptismal promises*. It is as if they wanted to affirm that through Profession they intend to *call to mind* the consecration and promises of Baptism.

...In this sense, to «call to mind. . . also means enabling the Sacrament from which the new life draws its origin to renew one's life in the present. To «call to mind» implies a rediscovery of the reality and meaning of Baptism, owning it once more, bringing it back into the heart and mind (the origin of the word «*remind*»), in other words, to the centre of one's vital interests.

7.2 Enactment of Baptism

Profession therefore involves a particular way of *revitalizing* the sacrament of Baptism and giving it new vigour. In fact the Ritual (Preface, n. 1) speaks of the —inestimable gift of Baptism || which —is *manifested* in them *and activated in an ever fuller and more fruitful way*”.

8. Relationship with the Church

The Christian's fundamental relationship with the Church is established by Baptism, since Baptism incorporates into the People of God, which is the Body of Christ, the sons and daughters engendered by water and the Holy Spirit. Profession gives rise to a new relationship with the Church, or rather, the basic baptismal relationship, renewed and perfected in confirmation, is made —stronger || and —closer || . As is said in the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order:

«They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been *united more intimately with the Church* by profession...” (*Rule 6*).

9. Witnesses and instruments of the Church's mission

...«They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as *witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words*.

Called like Saint Francis to rebuild the Church and inspired by his example, let them devote themselves energetically to living in full communion with the pope, bishops, and priests, fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity». (*Rule 6*)

II. THE COMMITMENT OF PROFESSION

10. Consecration

The formula of Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order reads:

« I, N.N., by the grace of God, renew my baptismal promises and consecrate myself to the service of his kingdom» (*Ritual* II,31). Prior to that, the Preface to the Ritual states:

«The nature of commitment to the gospel life is: the renewal of one's consecration and promises made at baptism and confirmation. This means *dedicating oneself to God* through his People with all the consequences flowing from it, up to the present moment, in order to live in union with God and to hold firm to his plan of salvation, *by means of a consecration that is to be lived in the world*» (14a).

In itself the value of consecration lies in its descending dimension: the person *is consecrated, receives consecration from God*, who draws him/her to Himself and transforms him inwardly so that he/she is able to live the demands of a superior world.

11. Profession, Purpose, Promise

Now we come to the meaning of the terms *profession* and *purpose*, or *intention*, and of the expression *promise to live the gospel life*, found in the Rule, the Constitutions and the Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order. They indicate the effort and commitment Secular Franciscan take on when they make profession.

12. The value of Profession in the SFO

...enables us to list the constitutive elements of the profession of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. It involves: *a)* an obligation contracted before God; *b)* the commitment to observe a form of life or Rule; *c)* definitive incorporation into the Order.

13. The promise to live the gospel life

...a first definition of Profession might be this: it is a personal *commitment*. The Rule, Constitutions and Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order are full of references to this commitment.

...the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves *to live the gospel in the manner of St. Francis* by means of this rule approved by the Church». . (Rule, 2)

Therefore, from the moment of profession onwards, it is the gospel which inwardly specifies the life of the Secular Franciscan and commits him/her to the observance of the gospel: profession implies *«the will to live the gospel»* (*Ritual* 14b).

14. After the manner of St Francis

... What is promised is to live the gospel after the manner of St Francis, following in his footsteps and according to his example and the instructions given by him, which today are gathered together in the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order.

The constant concern to underline the fact that Secular Franciscans intend to live the gospel *after the manner of St Francis* and by means of *this Rule* authenticated by the Church (*Rule* 2; *Const* 1,3; 8,1), is by no means fortuitous.

Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order therefore has this essential structure: the life of Secular Franciscans depends on the gospel, mediated by the inspiration and experience of Francis of Assisi, who from the beginning of his conversion took it as his rule of life and action.

For him, life was to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. He never intended to issue rules for his companions or followers, whether religious or secular; he simply put forward a style of life, one that flowed from the gospel.. Consequently, in his writings, Francis speaks more of «life» than of a Rule

«This is the *life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*», which Brother Francis asked the Lord Pope Innocent to grant and confirm for him»: (*Rnb*) and when he says Rule, he sometimes puts Rule and life together (cfr *Rb*).

For Francis the Rule is only the gospel, to be lived and observed literally and in its entirety. The saying of the SFO Rule derives from this: —The Rule and *life* of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, following the example of Francis of Assisi» (*Rule 4*).

In conclusion, Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order, as a promise to live the gospel in the manner of St Francis, aims to put before us the radical, light-filled and joyful style in which Francis listens to the gospel and commits himself to live it.

15. Gospel life for discipleship or “following Christ”

The Ritual combines the *following of Christ* with the gospel life, because the purpose of observing the gospel is precisely in order to follow Christ. This in fact is the charismatic insight of St Francis: for him, *to follow Christ* depends on the observance of the gospel. Indeed, it was through the gospel that Francis came to know Christ personally, in the same way the Church does when, guided by the Holy Spirit, she recognises Christ in the gospel and welcomes His words and deeds with faith.

...For Francis, what it meant to follow Christ became something extremely concrete: it meant following *Christ’s poverty*, following *Christ’s humility*; following the *life of Christ*; following the *precepts of Christ*; following the *doctrine of Christ*; following the *will of Christ*; following the *goodness of Christ*; following the *spirit of the scriptures*; following the *Good Shepherd*; following in the *footsteps of Christ*. This last expression had a particular importance for Francis.

As for Peter, so also for Francis, *to follow Christ* did not mean repeating the events and gestures of the Lord’s earthly life, but rather to structure the whole of one’s life on the set of evangelical demands, sharing in and imitating the action of God, who emptied Himself to the point of dying on the cross for the salvation of the world.

...

16. Discipleship: to be moulded by Christ

...Francis had one dominant thought, one unquenchable desire, one constant intention: *to become totally conformed* to Christ. Discipleship in love has no other purpose except to «christify» the whole person. It is entirely geared towards *transforming the lover into an image of the beloved* (*LM XIII, 2*) ...How often, when he sat down to eat, hearing or speaking or thinking of Jesus, he forgot bodily food || (*ICel 115*).

It was thus that Francis achieved full conformity with Christ.

17. Christ. The Book of life

«Uniting themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed his will into the Father's hands, let them faithfully fulfill 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».

The Rule is echoed by the Constitutions, which take up the Bonaventurian theme of Christ as the Book» of life. Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order commits «a person to study in the school of Christ, who is «the book of Wisdom, written from within the heart of the Father, since He is the art of almighty God; it was written externally, when it became flesh». (St. Bonaventure).

Indeed:

"Christ, poor and crucified", victor over death and risen, the greatest manifestation of the love of God for humanity, is the "book" in which the brothers and sisters, in imitation of Francis, learn the purpose and the way of living, loving, and suffering. They discover in Him the value of contradictions for the sake of justice and the meaning of the difficulties and the crosses of daily life. With Him they can accept the will of the

Father even under the most difficult circumstances and live the Franciscan spirit of peace, rejecting every doctrine contrary to human dignity || (Const. 10).

In conclusion, for Secular Franciscans, to follow Christ is to be conformed to Him; it means to carry out the commitment involved in the profession to observe the gospel in the manner of St Francis by living all the demands of the gospel to its very depths, to the very end, including death, and thus to open oneself to receive the promises proclaimed by the gospel itself.

18. Profession in the SFO and the evangelical counsels

...Secular Franciscans do not take vows, but the life-project of the Secular Franciscans enshrined in the Rule and Constitutions propose for them a kind of ascetical way by which they can live according to the form, or mould, of the holy Gospel: the way of the «evangelical counsels», so that they may be obedient, poor and docile to love.

... In fact, all the Lord's disciples are called to the perfection of charity; all must welcome the commandment of love. The evangelical counsels find their natural context within that commandment, within the unlimited spheres in which love can be exercised, so that love takes on the character of a need or requirement. The gospel counsels serve to express a more intense thrust of love, which translates into concrete choices in everyday life that go far beyond the limits of a precept: «no-one could fulfil the precept of charity if (s)he did not wish to love God more than (s)he does» (St Thomas).

However, here we cannot fail to point out how the teaching of the Rule and Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order about the evangelical counsels is structured around the classic triad of obedience, poverty and purity of heart (cfr. Rule 10-12; Const. 10; 12,2; 15).

... Hence we can see how the three counsels are founded upon the gospel beatitude of poverty, and why the Poverello characteristically uses a certain terminology, because all is *expropriation*, all is to do with living a poor men and women. Poverty leads to freedom, and this makes us available and open to a love that is ever more vast and profound. And it is precisely on the foundation of *total availability* that the demand to *live the evangelical counsels* is rooted, even in the secular Christian life. Availability, understood as an interior attitude, includes the spirit and profound content of virginity, poverty and obedience. It presupposes that one loves Christ more than oneself, and above all other goods and persons, always, at every moment, without any possible reservations; there is no room for dispensations or discounts. In this total availability there are no degrees, because faith in Christ means being open to everything, taking on a commitment of absolute seriousness.

19. Secularity

...The being and action of the laity and of Secular Franciscans take place in this context of «the world». Living in the world, they are geared towards the perfection of charity and commit themselves to the sanctification of the world, working within the world.

Secular Franciscans, together with all the lay faithful, are called to live their lives in the ordinary situations of the world, and within the specifically «worldly» sphere they share in the Church's mission of evangelization. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer». (LG 31).

«What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature....to seek the kingdom of God by dealing with temporal things and directing them in accordance with God's plans»: this is the specific mission of the laity. Consecrated in the world and for the world, the Franciscan lay faithful have the task of *consecrating the world* by immersing themselves fully in it.

—To belong to Christ does not mean to deny the world.

Professing a form of evangelical life, living their consecration to God in the world and for the world, and «transmitting into world affairs the genuine spirit of the gospel» (*Ritual*, III. 46), Secular Franciscans bear witness that the sanctification of the world necessarily occurs through the sanctification of people, because this world cannot be transformed without the spirit of the beatitudes (cfr. *LG* 31).

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