

Re : Workshop # 2: Life Project: Living the Gospel

Excerpts from the CIOFS Manual: section The Profession in the SFO

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 Franciscans take on when they make profession.

13. The promise to live the gospel life

From the beginning the Rule states that the Secular Franciscan Order —is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful. In these fraternities 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)

Later on, the Rule and then the Constitutions restate the same concept several times, teaching that the commitment assumed by profession is a *commitment of one's life*, it is existential, concrete, encompassing the whole of a person's being and activity; it is not limited to a particular moment, because what is involved is a *life that is wholly committed to and for the gospel*. 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

The second element that distinguishes Profession in the Secular Franciscan Order is its necessary reference to 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.

However, we still need to make the point that Francis' intention was simply to return to the *Gospel of Jesus*. Every Franciscan vocation is therefore an *evangelical-Franciscan* vocation, not because Francis' experience is intended as a substitute for the gospel, but because the gospel is rendered transparent through the mediation of Francis. So, for Franciscans it is a question of learning from Francis and, like him, of knowing no other rule or life except that of the gospel of Jesus. This mediation by Francis lies at the origin of our vocation.

The Franciscan mediation of the gospel extends to the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, to —this Rule || (and to no other), as —authenticated by the Church || . Through its approval at the highest level, the Church takes —ownership || of the SFO Rule (the Rule belongs to the Church) and by its authority proposes it to the Secular Franciscans. In this way the Church simply transmits to Secular Franciscans the gospel message of salvation, which is spirit and life for all believers.

Therefore, for those who make profession in the Secular Franciscan Order in order to —attain the perfection of charity in their secular state || (*Rule 2*), the reference to Francis, the Rule and the Constitutions is not an optional matter: it sets the standard, it is the norm. Obviously everything depends on how one understands and lives the Franciscan vocation.

A true vocation is one that takes hold of a person's whole being, becomes the very substance of one's being as a person, to such an extent that the individual is unable to think of or define himself except as one who is called to the evangelical-Franciscan life. Rule and Constitutions, are not extrinsic realities to the life of a Secular Franciscan, but are themselves his/her life, on the basis of the gospel. In fact, we ought to speak of a || life || rather than a Rule, thus accepting all the fullness of St Francis' concept. 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 Preface of the SFO Ritual opens with the following statement:

—Many men and women, married and single, and many members of the diocesan clergy are called by God to follow the way of perfection of the gospel life after the example and manner of Francis of Assisi, to share his charism, and to make it present in the world. *They promise to follow Jesus Christ* and to live the gospel in fraternity by entering the Secular Franciscan Order || . (Preface, n. 1).

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.

Therefore the gospel, too, is a *mediation*, in fact it is a *sacramental mediation*, because it gives us the presence of Christ. Anticipating by a few centuries the teaching of Vatican Council II, Francis sensed in the gospel the presence of Jesus Christ. He had a most lively awareness that the Lord spoke to him directly, beyond the limits of space and time, through the biblical word. In that word he saw as it were an extension of the Incarnation of the Word, who manifested to him the divine will and truth. Consequently for Francis, gospel truth is not something to be known, but *a living person to be followed*, a life to be lived in the company of that person, who is Christ. For this very reason Francis, when he instituted his brotherhood, absolutely refused to follow any previous Rule. In accepting the gospel, Francis welcomed the very person of Christ, who spoke to him and invited him to follow Him in all things.

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. He found it in the First Letter of St. Peter, but took from the Apostle the urgency of *following in the footsteps of Christ*, since — Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example for you *to follow in his footsteps* || .

The significance of discipleship is therefore centered upon the arrival on the scene of Christ's life: the suffering and death of the Servant of the Lord, unjustly undergone for the world's salvation. . 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

In taking as his model the life of the Lord Jesus, seeing himself always in the mirror of Christ, Francis made such progress that he appeared to all as a —new Adam || ; the people acclaimed him as — a new man, come from another world || (*1Cel* 36).

St Francis' first biographers frequently use terms that refer to the *forma* that was to be acquired through imitating Christ, the likeness or shape which Francis wished to imprint on himself and wished to see imprinted on his brothers. Thus we find the terms *transformed*, *conformed*, *reform*, *form*, in the sense of to mould (oneself), educate (oneself). But the most frequently used term is *conformity* to Christ —in all things || (*Fioretti* XIII), especially in the Passion.

Francis had one dominant thought, one unquenchable desire, one constant intention: *to intention: to* It was thus that Francis achieved full conformity with Christ. He himself became fully aware of the fact, so that one day he declared to a group of his companions who exhorted him to read the scriptures: —As for me, I have already made so much of scripture my own that I have more than enough to meditate on and revolve in my mind. I need no more, *I know Christ, the poor crucified one* || (*2Cel* 105).

This was a knowledge of the mystery of Christ by experience, an intimate, mutual merging in love which reached its highpoint in the culminating experience of La Verna, following which —in truth there appeared in him a true image of the cross and of the passion of the Lamb without blemish, who washed away the sins of the world, for he seemed as though he had recently been taken down from the cross, his hands and feet were pierced as though by nails and his side wounded as though by a lance || (*1Cel* 112).

17. Christ. The Book of life

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.