

Embracing the Franciscan Future

by Dr. Richard Shields

Driving from the Quebec City airport on the way to a retreat in the French Canadian village of Cacouna, Carol, a Secular Franciscan, asked: “How will we attract young people to the Secular Franciscan life? What does it say about our charism, when it doesn’t seem to speak to young people?” Friar Benny, an amiable Capuchin, originally from India and now a member of the Canadian Capuchin community was also with us. Those questions, he said, apply equally to the First Order. In Canada many friaries have closed because of a shortage of vocations. “I am not the only friar from a missionary country,” he added, “friars are coming from Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe to support community life and the ministries of the Franciscans here.” There is, of course, no institutional guarantee of the future; yet members of all three branches rely on God’s assurance to St. Francis that “though the Order be reduced to three, it will remain by My grace unshaken (2 *Celano*, 158).” But what might the future look like and how do we get there?

The Future: Gift of the Present

St. Francis’ embrace of the Gospel was neither a nostalgic journey into the past nor an attempt to adjust to the *status quo* of the Church of his time. It was a decisive act that changed how he saw the world and understood himself. It was a conversion in the sense of Jesus’ announcement: “The time has come, repent and believe the good news! (Mark 1)” The future Jesus’ contemporaries so ardently desired was now. These words also shed light on St. Francis’ conversion.

For Francis the “time” was there before his eyes: the dilapidated Church, the leper on the road, the disparity between the merchant class (to which he belonged) and the beggars and migrants (who were left behind in the emergence of towns and cities). Francis was prepared, whatever the cost, to *repent* (to place into question what he expected from life); and to *believe* (to entrust his future to a God who would lovingly show him what to do next). In this way Francis heard the call to what Pope Francis describes as “a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel.” When Francis counselled every friar “to love and respect one’s brother as much when he is far from him as he would when he is with him (*Admonition XXV*),” he was proposing, in the Pope’s words, “a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance. In his simple and direct way, Saint Francis expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate, and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives (*Fratelli Tutti*, n.1).”

Here we find a Franciscan way of embracing the future. As individuals and communities, Franciscans are called to repent and believe, to discern where God is present in the here and now of our

world. Franciscanism is not a self-contained cocoon of spirituality. The “love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance” was for Francis a gift of God, making the future the gift of the present. “While we have time, brethren, let us do good (*Exhortation to the Friars*, attributed to St. Francis).”

Walking Together—The Synodal Way

The future is a journey already begun and on which we will need companions. Travelling together is a theme that for Pope Francis is how God expects the whole Church to move forward. He calls this the *synodal way*. Will the window to the Franciscan future not open in a similar fashion?

Why a shared journey? Because to hear God’s voice we have to listen to one another. In community we find mutual support along an unfamiliar path. In faith filled conversation we discern how to nourish mutual hopes, stimulate trust, bind up wounds, weave new and deeper relationships, learn from one another, build bridges, enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission (*Handbook for the Synod 2021-2023*).

St. Francis showed us the way. His biographers recount many conversations he had with his companions: at gatherings of the friars called “chapters;” and along the road with one or two brothers. The more intimate conversations frequently revolved around a brother’s doubts or perhaps Francis’ concerns for his own spiritual welfare. At the larger gatherings Francis and the brothers talked about the challenges they faced as a community trying to live the Gospel in their ordinary lives.

The image of walking together not only tells us to see, reflect, and act together; but it tells us how. “The ability to imagine a different future...depends largely on the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute (*Preparatory Document for the Synod*).” The Franciscan future depends on how well we share the journey.

New Wine in New Wine Skins

The uniqueness of St. Francis is not that he founded an Order separated from the world. Just the opposite. He embraced the noble dreams and ideals of his times and his contemporaries, but he responded to them in a way that seemed to the people of Assisi to be innovative, creative--an unheard way of understanding and living the Gospel. Conventual Minister General Carlos Trovarelli reminds us that the Franciscan movement was “one of several medieval lay movements that were born from a social and cultural ferment of change, openness, and novelty.” It cannot be properly understood apart from the particular historical situation in which it originated. That situation was Francis’ *now*.

As communes replaced the feudal agricultural tracts as centres of influence, citizens of Assisi anticipated a new social order based on an economy of goods and trade and marked by the dream of

human equality, individual freedom, and economic mobility. But the quest for wealth corrupted these ideals and became the source of inequality, oppression, and social divisions.

St. Francis came to recognize the contradictions in what was going on. Disillusionment set in as he saw the misery caused by the broken promises of progress. His later disdain for money, to the point of forbidding the friars to accept “neither coins nor money (*Rule 1223*, Chapter 4),” can be traced back to that betrayal of what Pope Francis calls the duty to “social friendship and universal sisterhood and brotherhood (*Fratelli Tutti*)”.

The Church was also shaken by the cultural shift taking place. It struggled, often reluctantly, to come to terms with its ties to the feudal system and to embrace a truly communal way of Church life. Many bishops and pastors seemed incapable of understanding the changing attitudes and values in the people they were called to shepherd. Those living on the margins of society—homeless, disabled, or just poor—were for the most part relegated to the peripheries of the Church.

Francis threw himself into this conflicted present. He did this with eyes wide open, expressing the ideals, dreams, and questions of contemporaries in the language of the Gospel. He did not try to fit his calling into the structures of the past. What would happen next in his life (the first followers, the mission of preaching, the example of St. Clare, and the beginning of the “brothers and sisters of penance”) reveal Francis’ understanding that “new wine needs new wine skins.”

Today the way to the future means letting go of attitudes, practices, and customs that tie us to the past. While we can’t say how St. Francis would respond to the many crises of our world, we know this: St. Francis worked at rebuilding the Church, without a strategy for the future. His underlying plan, if one could call it that, was to live the Gospel of Christ in whatever would happen next.

Youth: More than a period of time

We began with the question of how to attract youth to the Secular Franciscan life. While a legitimate question, Pope Francis asks a more challenging one. How do we regain the spirit of youthfulness in our often aging fraternities? “Youth,” he says, “is more than simply a period of time; it is a state of mind (*Christus Vivit*, 35).” Recruitment strategies fail when they are disconnected from the actual life experience of each Secular Franciscan community. On the future of Franciscanism, French friar Eloi Leclerc (+ 2016) noted: “The Gospel experience of St. Francis has an exemplary quality...that even today has the power to renew and rejuvenate.” Pope Francis sees the source of youthfulness in Jesus’ desire “to give us hearts that are ever young. God’s word asks us to ‘cast out the old leaven that you may be fresh dough’. Saint Paul invites us to strip ourselves of the ‘old self’ and to put on a ‘young’ self (*Christus Vivit*)”

The current *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* places two questions before the followers of Francis today. (1) How does journeying together allow our fraternity to “live the Gospel” and proclaim it? (2) In what “ways and forms [does our] life-giving union with each other..make present the charism of the Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church?” This may mean changing what we have grown accustomed to. But it will “bring a new evangelizing fervour and a new capacity for dialogue with the world whereby the Church is renewed (*Joy of the Gospel*).” Restoring the youthfulness of the Franciscan way may not be easy. St. Francis often found it painful to deal with change. But as German friar Cornelius Bohl points out, Francis was a happy man, not because he had an easy life, but because he had a thankful spirit.

A Spirituality for the Journey

The *Legend of the three Companions* relates how Francis, hearing the words of St. Matthew’s Gospel, “take nothing for your journey (Matthew 10),” clung to these words as a guide for his way forward. Secular Franciscans, as they walk together in the world today, will need to travel lightly. In the *First Rule* for Secular Franciscans (1221) Francis offers them three ways to simplify their lives that give structure for a spirituality that allowed them to more clearly hear the Holy Spirit’s voice in the questions, doubts, and hopes of our brothers and sisters. In chapter one Francis exhorts the brothers and sisters of penance to dress simply; to know the difference between what we need and what we want. Next he encourages periodic fasting and abstinence not only because it turns our minds toward the passion of Jesus, but fasting reminds us that we can do with less. Finally, he speaks about frequent prayer as part of our daily routine, because prayer is the language that raises the first two practices to a hymn of praise to the Lord. For Francis spiritual practices are not about what we can do for God, but a celebration of what God, “our most holy Father, our creator, Redeemer, Consoler and Savior (*St. Francis’ Teaching on the Lord’s Prayer*)” is already doing for us.

“Take nothing for your journey” is an invitation to a simple life; a way to make room for God in our today. What it requires of us may not be easy. Francis’ response came after several periods of prayer and serious reflection on the reality of his time. By choice and by grace Francis acknowledged and identified with those people left behind by “progress” in his own society. He unburdened himself from the expectations of his times and found a path to the future by living simply.

In a world marked by complexity, by contradictory “truths,” alternate “realities,” and polarizing ideologies we need to regain a sense of simplicity, “the sister of Wisdom (*Salute to the Virtues*).” We need to find times and places to reflect on our personal life choices, our relationships to others, and finally on how we treat “our Sister Mother Earth (*Canticle of the Creatures*).” In Pope Francis’ words, there can be no way forward “without the Spirit, and there is no Spirit without prayer.”

Conclusion

How many young people will be attracted to the Franciscan movement in the future is beyond our knowledge. We can only be faithful to our vocation today. Time does not stand still. We must move forward as it unfolds. Pope Francis has proposed the image of walking together as a model for our going forward on a journey that requires a “willingness to be converted by listening to the Word of God and by [moving with] the Holy Spirit present in our lives.” Does this not describe St. Francis’ experience as he moved forward into the unknown future, confident in Christ present in his life. He listened to the Word of God and found the Holy Spirit in “the now.” Francis was a man of his times; but his life continues to inspire Franciscans today to choose the future with open eyes and courageous hearts.