

Secular Franciscans and the younger generation: a legacy to share

As Pope Francis recently stated in *Rejoice and Be Glad*, the call, the invitation to the fullness of life in Gospel commitment is especially addressed to youth. World Youth Day has become an essential dimension of the Church's ministry to young people (ages 16-35). As Sisters and brothers of penance, as men and women who have heard and accepted Jesus' summons to "Repent and believe in the Good News," secular Franciscans have a vision and way of life to share. Yet many of us are at a loss over how to do that.

Beginning with questions

The situation of faith in today's world is precarious. In order to share the Franciscan calling with the young men and women of today, substantive and sustained conversations and discernment are necessary. There are no easy answers to the question of what are the underlying causes. Simplistic explanations lead to ineffective responses and discouragement. "We tried that and it didn't work." This is something that Pope Francis noted in *The Joy of the Gospel* where he talked about the temptations faced by pastoral workers.

Before asking what has happened to *youth* today, we need to ask *ourselves* some questions. "Are we really open to youth?" "How well do we understand their needs and expectations?" "Can we empathize with their gnawing yearning for meaningful experiences?" "Do some of our judgements stand in the way of valuing young people?"

There is a gap (some would say a chasm) between the Church and the vision of a meaningful future that so many young people hold and desire. What do we need to understand and what do we need to learn how to do, in order to overcome the distance that separates our Franciscan world from their world?

One of the OFM friars recently told this story. "A few weeks ago I visited a school. I wore my habit, as I usually do. Some students asked me if I was real friar, or was this just a costume. One youngster, who was staring (I thought in admiration) at my brown robes and sandals, shouted: 'Nobody dresses like that anymore.'" That got me thinking. Does the image we are projecting about the Franciscan way of life stifle or free the life-giving message of St. Francis. By sticking to old ways do we unintentionally mis-communicate what Francis has to say to the world today?

Remembering Francis

In Francis' time, the first followers were almost all in their twenties. Clare and her sister were even younger. What impressed them? Can today's youth see and be drawn to those qualities in the lives of our fraternities today?

Many of Assisi's young people had bought into the notion that success and wealth go together, that fulfillment and social status were inseparable. Francis' example offered an alternative. But more than an alternative, it brought out unspoken questions and deeply felt doubts about the values that were dominating their lives.

Today, amid a throw-away culture of consumerism, young people are asking questions. "Why are we destroying our environment?" "When will racism and discrimination end?" "How can there be so many impoverished people in a world as rich as ours?"

Francis' contemporaries were impressed by his simplicity, his love of the poor, and his almost mystical communion with the environment. Back in the 13th century the youthful followers of Francis were not asking about prayers and devotions, but what made life worth living.

Communicating the message of Francis today

Francis didn't love poverty, he loved the poor. He did more than "care for" the lepers, he spent time with them and what he had previously believed to be repugnant, he experienced as "sweetness." Francis learned by doing and discovered what the beatitudes promised: Blessed are..." Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, says that we become strong by embracing our weaknesses and that we find meaning in sharing with others their desire to be loved and to belong.

Take heart

Pope Francis doesn't have an answer as to why youth don't feel a spiritual home in the Church anymore. That is why he has called for a meeting (synod) of Bishops from every part of the world. "Youth, faith, and life decisions" is the theme of the Synod, so it will be a big help if secular Franciscans who are asking about the future of the Order pay attention to what happens at that meeting. Perhaps the most important step in communicating the message of Francis to today's youth is not to ask the question "how do we get youth to share in the lives of our fraternities?" but "how do our fraternities share in the 'joys and hopes; fears and anxieties' of the lives of young people today?"