

Francis, go and repair my house...



In the year 1206, at the Church of San Damiano, St. Francis of Assisi heard the voice of Christ, “Francis, go and repair my house which, as you see, is falling into ruin.” Compelled by this voice Francis immediately began to act on this call. Francis started to look for rescuers to re-build the church of San Damiano. He needed money, so mounted variety of cloths (scarlet) from his father's shop on a family horse and went to Foligno and sold the cloths as well as the horse. He went and gave the money to the priest. Result of his behaviour, Francis was dragged before the bishop of Assisi by his father and thus at that point

of time he renounced his earthly father. There Francis returned to his father not only the money he had but the clothes he wore, saying: "Now I can truly say, Our Father, who art in heaven."

Francis begged for stones and he would say, “Whoever gives me a stone will receive a reward from the Lord. Whoever gives me three will receive three rewards.” G K Chesterton says, “Francis went about by himself collecting stones. He begged all the people he met to give him stones. In fact, he became a new sort of beggar, reserving the parable; a beggar who asks not for bread but a stone.” Francis also begged for oil for Chapel lamp. He begged not to feed himself but to repair the house of God.

When did Francis truly understand his real mission that was not building the material church but something else? At St. Mary of the Angles during the mass in honor of St. Matthias, February 1208, something extraordinary happened to Francis. Francis heard the gospel of Mathew, chapter 10, where Jesus instructs his disciples to go out and preach, “You received without payment, give without payment. Take no gold or silver or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals or a staff.” He run to the priest and asked for further explanation, priest explained that Christ’s disciples were not to possess gold or silver, nor any money at all for that matter, nor carry a wallet or a sack, nor bread, nor a staff, nor to have shoes and no more than

one tunic, so that they could preach the kingdom of God and penance. Filled with joy Francis declares, “This is what I want! This is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart!”

Even though the principal intention of those words by Christ to Francis were indeed, as St. Bonaventure and history has shown, to build up ‘The Church’, the people of God, one cannot help but wonder if Francis’ first response to build the material church, was not a misinterpretation, but rather a common first step of the long process of

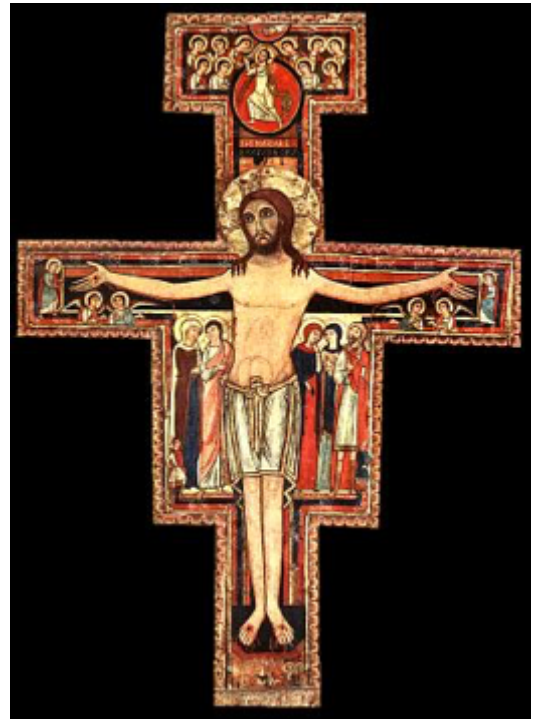


building up **The Church**, ‘**the people of God.**’ We know The Church is not a building, but rather the people of God that make up the Body of Christ on earth (1Cor 12:27).

In the year 1209, the larger mission became clear that God was asking Francis of Assisi to repair the Church which had become dilapidated by the accumulation of excessive wealth, the search for mundane glory, widespread ignorance and immorality among the clergy, and a host of other problems. Deeply transformed by this mystical experience, Francis radically changed the course of his life. He began to spend long hours in prayer in empty caves and country chapels seeking to discern God’s will for him. He began to contemplate God’s beauty in nature where every flower, every blade of grass, every little bird, spoke to him of God’s infinite love and glory. He began to care for the poor and needy people around him, particularly the lepers who lived as outcasts in the peripheries of the city. Francis and his followers began their contribution in the renewal of the Church in 12th century and generations followed him. Francis had discovered not only what he was to do with his personal life, but he now also had a concrete method for rebuilding the church. Francis was indeed a man raised by Divine Providence to renew the house of God in those times.

The medieval church was indeed in need of repair. At the fourth Lateran council, Pope Innocent III noted and condemned variety of abuses in throughout Europe: many Priests have lived luxuriously. They have passed the time in drunken revels, neglecting rites. When they have been in mass, they have chatted about commercial affairs. They have left Churches and tabernacles in

an indecent state, sold posts and sacraments, promoted ignorant and unworthy people to the clerical sate, thought they had others better suited for it. Many Bishops have appropriated the income of a parish for themselves, leaving the parish indigent. They have gone to the enormous abuse of forcing parishioners to make special payments so as to have still more income. They have extorted money from the faithful on very pretext. They have made a scandalous commerce of relics. They have allowed the illegitimate children of a canon to succeed the father in benefice. Corruption infected all levels of the Church's life. Prior and canons regularly went to court to argue about fields and olive groves. Small monasteries rebelled against the rule of



larger monasteries. In short, the litany of priestly abuses outlined by Innocent III could all be found in Assisi. Though the abuses were transparent, the solution was not. So, Pope Innocent III thought “It would take fire and sword to cure it.” In response to this, Francis declares his belief in priests in his Testament verse 6; “Afterward the Lord gave me and still gives me such faith in priests who live according to the manner of the holy Roman Church because of their order, that if they were to persecute me, I would still have recourse to them.” Francis says, “I would not preach contrary to their will in the parishes in which they live. And I desire to fear, love, and honor them and all others as my masters. And I do not wish to consider sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my masters.” The opinion of the Church was that the personal sanctity of the priest was irrelevant regarding his priestly ministries, while many heretics maintained the contrary. The Church for Francis was not simply a man-made institution controlled by Machiavellian Monsignors, or a ‘celibate male hierarchy’. He was a keenly aware of his dependence on the institutional Church – the main reason is that where he experienced the presence of Christ – through priests in the Eucharist, in the churches, and in the people. For Francis, ever faithful son of the Church, the Church is the bride of Christ replete with community, people, salvation, and Trinitarian and Marian mystery. For him to be outside of it would be to lose the most precious thing in his life, in effect the only thing he desired to possess:

Jesus. Francis was a man of the Church whose teachings had a tremendous impact on his life and belief.

Other factors that transformed the life of Francis in repairing the house of God were *leper*, *feudalistic society and heresies*, etc. *Lepers* were the outcast in the society, lived outside the city wall, suffered social stigma. Francis embraces the leper “Which had seemed to me bitter was changed for me into sweetness of body and soul.” He lives among them, nurses their wounds and becomes a brother to them. *Feudalism* (a hieratical system; King, Lords, Knights and Serfs)



was a way of structuring society around relationships derived from the holding of land in exchange for service or labour. Francis chose to be a knight for Jesus Christ. He chose minority, solidarity with the poor and he chose to be a brother to all. Many heresies like; *Waldensians* began placing the authority of the Bible above the Church, and rejected purgatory, indulgences and the veneration of the saints. *Humiliati* believed that two eternal principles competed for pre-eminence. One- God- was the author of all good and of all spiritual souls. The other- Satan- was the author of evil, suffering and all materials things, including the human body. Human being composed of both soul and flesh, were the

product of both principles. They denounced marriage and seemed indifferent about sexual morals (for the flesh meant nothing if the spirit was holy).

To combat the bad situation of the society and the church, Francis a true Son of the Church, proposed a way of life for himself and his followers (lesser brothers); “The rule and life of the lesser brothers is this: To observe the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience without anything of our own, and in chastity. Brother Francis promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Honorius and his canonically elected successors, and to the Roman Church; and the rest of the brothers are obliged to obey Francis and his successors.” *Francis was catholic through and through*. “Let all the brothers live and speak as Catholics, says the Rule.

Faithfulness to things catholic was the decisive test of loyalty for Francis: if someone has strayed in word or in deed from Catholic faith and life and has not amended his way, let him be expelled from our brotherhood.” Francis was not blind to the realities; that priests had concubines, that bishop greedily accumulated land, that archbishops lived lives of luxury and that popes loved power. “If they obstruct the salvation of the people, he explained, vengeance belongs to God and he will punish them in his own time...if you are sons of peace, you will win both clergy and people and this will be more pleasing to God than if you were to win the people alone and alienate the clergy. Conceal their mistakes and make up for their many defects and when you have done this, be even more humble than before.”

We are familiar with the reality of the present church; blessings and crises. Blessings are enormous so as the crises. It’s important to name the present crises in the Catholic Church. “Not everything can be fixed or cured, but it should be named properly” says Richard Rohr. Sexual abuse, Marriage break ups (divorce), Abortion (My body my choice mentality), Euthanasia/ doctor assisted death, Vocation decline, Immigration crisis, Ecological crises, Society enthralled by expressive individualism, a Pragmatic view of religion in our society that relegates our faith to the private sphere of personal values, An increasing number of people see Christian morality as not only old-fashioned but also extreme or dangerous, People are increasingly isolated, fragmented, and polarized and the list goes on.

13 March, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio becomes Pope Francis. Many saw in the election of Pope Francis a divine intervention to “re-build” the Catholic Church in the wake of streams of scandals and mishaps, factors that some even attributed to the resignation of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. Here was the new Francis who would rebuild the “house” of God that was falling into ruin. Pope Francis did not disappoint. He appeared to have set in motion, in full earnest and with courage, a spate of courageous reforms within the Church, reaping some immediate and positive results already. From the very first days of his pontificate, all noticed that the new pope wanted to keep the simple lifestyle he had as an archbishop in Buenos Aires, for example, by keeping his black shoes instead of using the red ones that are traditionally worn by popes, or by lodging in the Santa Martha House with the employees and guests of the Vatican, instead of the papal apartments. Besides, he said himself, during his first meeting with journalists: “How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!”

The recent Vatican documents reflect the reform Pope Francis has brought about and what he wants for the body of Christ. His presence among the people and his listening heart has brought back many souls to the church already. He encourages us; the people of God to journey with each other just as Jesus journeyed with the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Jesus walks with them, their eyes were opened and they set off without delay, Lk 24:13-35).

Our vocation and mission as a Franciscan is also to repair the house of God. We are called to present the charism of St. Francis of Assisi in the life and mission of the Church. The Church and the world are waiting for a courageous and effective response from us. If God can work through St. Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis, he can work through anyone.

Jesus journeys with the disciples on the way to Emmaus. Are we willing and ready to journey with Jesus and repair His house?

As Francis says, “Let us begin again, my brothers and sisters, for up till now, we have done little or nothing.”

OFS, go and repair my Canada...