**“REJOICE IN THE CHOICE: CONVERSION PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE”**

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**Isaiah 12:5-6**

Sing praise to the LORD for he has done glorious things;

let this be known throughout all the earth.

Shout with exultation, City of Zion,

for great in your midst

is the Holy One of Israel!

You have listened this week to learned scholars, to theologians and to gifted preachers, but I can assure you that I fit into none of those categories. I am no mystic with gifts beyond my understanding and I am not here to teach you about history, expound about the present, or predict the future of the Secular Franciscan Order.

What I hope is to share with you my thoughts of how Saint Francis changed the lives of the ordinary people of his day. How he helped them to live for Christ by being exactly who they were created to be, exactly where they were and exactly in the time of history that they lived.

What made them have a conversion in their way of life? Why did they choose to change? What prompted them to follow the example of a spoiled rich kid who, after his own conversion, became a radical poor man, a fool for the Lord? Why did Francis’ lifestyle offer hope to the people of his time?

As we all know, the Medieval Ages were a brutal time. The rich were trying to hold onto their riches, the middle classes were trying to “climb the ladder of success,” and the poor were trying to eke out a living for themselves and their families.

As I understand it, as a Catholic you had few options to exercise your faith in that world. You could, with permission of your family, go into religious life, which at that time meant mainly a monastic life. And for women, a life based upon your status in life. As a secular person you could be a practicing Catholic and fulfil all the required obligations, or for a deeper faith life, you could be a part of the penitential movement of the day, as St. Clare’s mother was believed to be.

What emotions did Francis’ preaching elicit or what example did his way of life present that offered the people a new and different way to live their Catholic faith to the fullest? What fires of faith, hope and charity did he stir in the hearts of the people of his day?

I once heard Francis’ spirituality described as an “aroma”. What aroma did Francis exude into the countryside of Assisi? Not by force did he call others to his way of life, but by attraction. It was the aroma of God! The aroma of love! The aroma of his lifestyle, his works of mercy, and his intimacy with Jesus Christ that attracted others more than any spoken words could ever hope to accomplish. Francis’ own conversion seemed more like a joy to others than as a penance as most of them were used to in their lives of that day.

Let us look at Francis’ lessons on conversion.

As Jesus taught us to call God “Our Father” as we pray, Francis taught us to call Jesus “Our Brother”. Let us recall “…we are brothers to him when we fulfil “the will of the Father who is in heaven.”” *OFS Rule prologue, Ch. 1*

Francis reminded the people that by the grace of God they were made in his image and likeness and they did not have to be “known” by who they were or by what they did. They did not have to earn the privilege, nor ever had, to be called, a son or daughter of God! It is a pure gift of the Lord!

What a moment of conversion! To know that we are valued by the God who created us! For us to understand and believe that we have an identity that no one can take from us! What a revelation this must have been in the time of Francis and Clare.

We can believe this may have been Francis’ greatest gift to the people of his time.

Francis then went a step further, by his own example, he showed us how to treat each other. If he was a child of God, then so was everyone else. From the lowest outcast of the leper to the church’s highest Bishop, he held them all in esteem, for they too were children of our Lord and thus deserved to be loved and respected.

Francis may have wanted to be “lesser” than all because he knew he was greater than none. During his years of conversion, and giving everything away for a life with Christ, Francis realized that only by his own life of humility would he be able to understand the humility of Christ.

When Francis was able to minister from this relationship with Christ, he was able to quit worrying about what people thought of him, and his only concern was with “the other”. He did not have to be the best anymore, he just had to be present and engaged.

Francis was able to see beyond the outer layers that people use to hide their fears, their shortfalls, and possibly even their sins. All he saw was a child of God in need of love.

This love and acceptance by Francis was also a catalyst for the conversion of others.

*I believe conversion for Francis came in waves of inspiration from the Lord and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:*

*The Eucharist*

His writings and stories tell of his deep love for the Eucharist. From sweeping the churches and chapels along the roads and the respect for the priests and their hands by which the host is consecrated.

From Francis’ *A Letter to the Entire Order*…

“…how holy, just, and worthy must be the person who touches [Him] with his hands, receives [Him] in his heart and mouth, and offers [Him] to others to be received.”

And again Francis tells us…

“Therefore, hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves

so that He who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally.”

*In Prayer*

We all know of Francis’ time in prayer. He may have spent more time in prayer than in active ministry.

Prayer for Francis was his life-line to the Trinity. Prayer was the source, the support and the steadfastness of all his ministries in the world. This ranged from active apostolates, to preaching, to his very being. He was not against learning, as long as it did not take time away from prayer.

*Through Creation*

Creation for Francis was a living gospel given by God. He showed the people of his time how to respect the creation around them. He called them brother and sister and gave them human qualities to make the people realize what wonderful gifts they were from the Lord. He marveled how everything worked together from the littlest worm to the donkey that was used to carry the ill.

Through creation he was called to conversion by not taking the world around him for granted. He shared that love of creation through care and verse. He was taught by our Lord to be thankful, to be appreciative and to be in awe of the beauty God has provided us for no other reason except out of pure love for us.

*Penance, Forgiveness and Peace*

Through his conversion he learned that penance was a gift that may have been greater than the forgiveness that followed it. It was through penance that one was humbled. It was through penance that one was converted. It was through penance that one was taught patience, acceptance and love for others.

Conversion and penance go hand in hand followed by mercy and forgiveness. Two of the greatest gifts of our Lord. Mercy and forgiveness may come from the Lord, but Francis also had to learn to forgive himself. Possibly to forgive a past life, of time wasted, or of doubts too numerous to count. Francis’ need for forgiveness mirrors our own.

A lasting gift he gave us was the gift of always striving for peace. Francis struggled to have the Portiuncula indulgence approved so men would no longer have the need to go and fight to receive pardon and the remission of sins. He knew war and violence were never the answer to society’s problems.

*Letting Go*

Francis even taught us how to know when it was time to let go, move aside, and to let others lead. He showed us that to hold on too tight to our ways of doing things, our ideas of what is always best, and of us always being in charge does not open the path for others’ gifts to bless the Order and let the Holy Spirit guide us into our future.

As Francis lived his life and brothers gathered around him, common people were also attracted to his was of life. Were they already in the penitential movement of the day? Possibly. Or maybe this was the first time they heard someone who looked like them, and probably dressed worse than them, preach about a God who loved them just because HE chose to do so! A God who wanted them to know HIM personally and intimately and not to be afraid to come to HIM. A God who loved them and cared about their daily lives, whether they saw changes or not.

Francis showed them God’s loving care and Jesus’ brotherly love by word and example. Such as:

* Francis rebuilt and cleaned churches so Masses could be celebrated
* He preached on the Eucharist and the ultimate gift in which Christ humbles himself to come to us in the form of bread
* He re-created the Christmas narrative visually to ignite the fires of the people’s heart of the love of God who sent His only Son to be our brother
* Francis ministered to the lepers, cleaning their sores, so that he could clean his own soul
* He taught his brothers to plant flowers in the garden to remember the beauty of God

Why would the people of Francis’ time not want to follow him in whatever way was available to them? They were swept up in the fervent expression of his love for our Lord, in his intimacy with Jesus Christ and in his love for his brothers, sisters and all of mankind.

We “Rejoice in their Choice” to ask Francis for a way of life to be written for the laity to follow, for *WE* are the benefactors of their choice!

In the words of Servant of God Dorothy Day, “…it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much.”

Even after his transitus and death, the Franciscan spirit and aroma grew and moved throughout the world, ever growing, ever enticing, ever attracting more and more followers.

Through the years, the followers joined together, bands of brothers and sisters, wanting to live in communion of heart and soul and remember a founder who radically changed the face of the earth with his conversion, preaching and love for all!

We here today, we do “walk the path before us upon foundations built by our brothers and sisters”! Our aroma is strong my brothers and sisters, long may we smell!

**I have looked into the past and this is who we have been…**

Brothers and sisters, we are the present, and I am honored today to talk with you about how we represent the order.

Some would say we are the best kept secret; I will get back to that later, but brothers and sisters Phoenix is very aware the Secular Franciscans are alive and well.

I must admit that I am overwhelmed to stand in front of so many seculars and try to explain who we are today. I can only share with you how I feel, how I became a secular and what inspired me to choose this way of life.

I think we have all had an experience when we met a secular or Franciscan Friar or Sister, this is no different than the people who met Francis and Clare in Assisi. For me it was in Winston-Salem, North Carolina at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church. Our first mass was Christmas Eve 1987 and Fr. Canice Conners, OFM Conventual was leading a donkey down the main aisle of the church, until the donkey reached the linoleum floor. The donkey immediately stopped, legs spread and poor Fr. Canice tried but failed to pull this donkey any further, only a Franciscan Friar would bring a live donkey to mass! I knew then something was radically different about these priests. I relate this to Assisi, when in front of the bishop Francis removed all his clothes and left all of his belongings and gave his life to the Lord, people who knew this man, knew it was a radical move.

Radical is often a description of Francis and could also be for anyone of us, if we only let it. One of the definitions of Radical is – very new and different from the usual and ordinary.

Do we see us as this, are we out there where people can see us? This is the reference that I made earlier as the best kept secret? *WHY* are we a secret?

Francis was not afraid to be out there preaching, rebuilding the church and involved in social concerns. He was visible, people saw him, talked about him, and encountered his love for the Lord. This was captivating to those who yearned for something more, something that gave them joy. They knew Francis was different, just like when I saw Fr. Canice bring in that donkey.

Brothers and sisters, let us not be shy of what we have, to quote Francis, “I have been all things unholy. If God can work through me, He can work through anyone.”  I will admit, I stand before you and have not personally invited anyone to our fraternity gatherings. I ask myself, why is that Tim, what are you afraid of? To be honest I am not totally secure in my knowledge of my own Order, when people ask me why they should come and visit or what is different about this way of life, I pause searching for the right words.

SO, in preparing this talk I re-read our promise which we state at profession:

I, Timothy, by the grace of God, renew my baptismal promises and consecrate myself to the service of his Kingdom. Therefore, in my secular state I promise to live all the days of my life the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Secular Franciscan Order by observing its rule of life. May the grace of the Holy Spirit, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and our holy father St. Francis, and the fraternal bonds of community always be my help, so that I may reach the goal of perfect Christian love. [Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order]

Let me highlight one key sentence that spoke to me:

“May the grace of the Holy Spirit, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and our holy father St. Francis, and the fraternal bonds of community always be my help, so that I may reach the goal of perfect Christian love.”

*WE DO NOT DO THIS ALONE!!!*

Look to your left, look to your right, look in front of you, and behind you! Let me say it again:

*WE DO NOT DO THIS ALONE!!!*

Look at all those providing “perfect Christian love”, that love is burning in our hearts. I see it in everyone sitting before me, through the smiles, the Franciscan hugs, this room is filled with Christian love! If anyone would just spend some time with us they would run to join us!

I pray when we leave here, we leave with our hair on fire, well for those of us that still have hair. If not, with all our hearts ablaze! Our conversion story should not be to disappoint all those who have come before us in those 19 Qs, or the 800 years of our Rule, but to carry on the holy and radical legacy given to us.

Winston Churchill said, “Success is not final; failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” And Francis teaches us to “Start doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible!” These statements spoke to me, they encouraged me, and I am no longer afraid. Now I understand what to say, as it is written in Proverbs “Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding.” I CAN do the impossible with God!

When I had the privilege of being in Assisi this past May, I saw lines of people walking by our father Francis, stopping and acknowledging his presence and what he represents, when I walk into Home Goods, I see Francis, he is still alive and well, he is still attractive to many. Brothers and sisters, we need to seize the moment, it is here right in front of us.

The Lord sent the world Francis just when it needed him, it was in chaos and division of classes, how is this no different than the world or nation that we are living in today. I believe the Lord is sending us today just when the world needs us. As the Swiss mystic Father Zundel once said, *“…we carry in ourselves a treasure capable of changing the whole universe.”* Of course he was speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, but does that quote not also reflect the vocation the Holy Spirit has given us and the profession we have attested to?

*“…we carry in ourselves a treasure capable of changing the whole universe.”*

I challenge myself to make that radical move with confidence to show someone that WE are something different and personally invite someone to come and join us. I challenge everyone here, who like me, has not been confident to do this to take that same radical step. Let us not be the best kept secret any more, let us be like Francis!

Francis served the people of his time by giving them what they needed at that moment. As Secular Franciscans living and serving today we must offer, share, and communicate with the people in this present moment. We must meet the challenges of an ever-changing world with fast paced life styles, multi-media communications, and people who share themselves with a digital presence. We must leave behind our outdated excuses of being too old to learn something new or too afraid to try a different skill, we have each other in fraternity to teach us and help us.

I must admit these past two years have been challenging. The pandemic has really forced us as an Order to make a drastic move to stay active and connected. It has changed how we now communicate and meet, it introduced technology to many with the utilization of zoom. This shows our desire and need to be in fraternity even if it was electronically, being with our brothers and sisters was important to carrying on the spirit and mission of St Francis.

I think what surprised me was it allowed us to re-connect with our brothers and sisters that were in nursing homes, or homebound, they could now be connected to our fraternity meetings via zoom. These are members who probably only got newsletters or visits by one or two members. Now they could be with us and share with us. I personally saw this as the small miracle the pandemic gave us. Isn’t this a reflection of how Francis reached out beyond the borders of the town of Assisi, opening to all who loved the Lord and wanted to be in fraternity? I often thought would Francis or Clare have liked to zoom to connect to all their Orders throughout the world?

Now do not get me wrong, our Rule calls us to be physically present with each other and being physically back in fraternity was critical. I just think it now allows flexibility to commissions, councils and regions with large distances to hold meetings via zoom. Brothers and sisters this is a visible sign of how agile and flexible we can be, no challenge can stop us to be a viable Order.

Francis said “He who works with his hands, and his head, and his heart is an artist.” Let us be artists of awareness and communication.

We have painted a beautiful picture through these years. Just a visit to our history museum here at the Q and we can see how true Francis’ quote has been a huge part of our essence. I see that beautiful picture before of me!

We all came here to celebrate a Jubilee, we all journeyed on a pilgrimage to Phoenix, and through this week we have prayed, cried, shared experiences and today we conclude it with a service project, mass and concert, a celebration like this cannot just conclude, it must be a new beginning for us as individual seculars and for our Order.

As a native Pittsburgher, football is in your blood. There is a cheer in college football in Pennsylvania when a leader yells “WE ARE” and the crowd answers with “PENN STATE!” I want a new cheer to resound in these walls today! When I say “WE ARE” you reply “FRANCISCAN!” Let me hear it again!

*WE ARE – FRANCISCAN! WE ARE – FRANCISCAN!*

Let the earth reverberate with these words, our vocation and our love of our Order!!

**I have looked at the present and this is who we are…**

When you think of the future, what do you think about? Future trips and adventures? Future family celebrations? A future where peace and love conquer death and destruction?

If you are anything like me, you have no clue what your future looks like or will be. The old Yiddish proverb, “We make plans, and God laughs.” is something we can all relate to. There are probably a million and one things I would have been doing right now if I had not listened to God and tried everything on my own.

From Jeremiah, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

St. Francis thought he had his life planned for fame and fortune, until God had other plans for his life. When St. Francis prayed before the crucifix, “Lord, what is it that you will for me to do? What is it that I’m supposed to do with my life?” That question to God expanded beyond St. Francis and is the question that we must ask ourselves, “What are we supposed to do in the world today?”

When I thought of the word future, which by definition means: *The future is the period of time that will come after the present, or the things that will happen then.* I did not feel that would give us hope, joy, and enthusiasm for what is all possible for all of us.

What I would like for this final message is not to imagine the future, but focus on our MISSION for the Secular Franciscan Order.

The word Mission means: *the vocation or calling of a religious organization, especially a Christian one, to go out into the world and spread its faith.*

*Mission means – sending. To preach, teach, and convert.*

From our Rule, Article 6:

“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.”

We are called, fully united with the church, to continue the mission. To encourage unity among each other and especially the youth and young adults among us.

In the United States, "young adults" are those young people from all cultural communities and abilities between ages 18 and 39 who are single or married, with or without children, divorced or widowed, and in college, working, unemployed, incarcerated, or in the military. These young adults are indeed adults and are impacting the Church and society today. *USCCB*

If you are between the ages of 18 through 39 please stand.

These young men and women are a symbol of HOPE. I pray that at our next Q there will be many more.

If you are with youth and young adults as much as I am, you know their enthusiasm and spunk is contagious. They know that God loves them no matter what. They “get it” without too much explanation. They want to get their hands dirty, and serve those in need. They pray without ceasing. Remind you of anyone? St. Francis and St. Clare.

St. Clare was only 19 when left the comforts of her home and became a religious women consecrated to God. She is also known to be the first female follower of Francis.

St. Francis began his gradual conversation around the age of 24 by generously giving to the poor and embracing a leper. In that same year, St. Francis heard, “Go, repair my house which as you see, is failing completely in ruin.” in the church of San Damiano. In that moment, Francis understood his mission and what would eventually become the mission of the whole Franciscan Family.

No matter what age you are, we have to continue to be radical. We must be energized by our gathering here and beyond. Challenge ourselves to get our hands dirty and be uncomfortable. By our profession we must “desire to live in the world and for the world”. *(Rite of Commitment of the Gospel Life or Profession)* We are called, by our Rule, Article 4, to “observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people.” This must be our way of life.

So, how do we authentically live out this vocation and to continue our mission?

Here are 3 practical ways: The Sacraments; through our witness; and by our personal invitation.

1. The Sacraments
   1. We cannot give what we do not have. In a letter to all the faithful, St. Francis wrote, “All those who refuse to do penance and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are blind, because they cannot see the true light, our Lord Jesus Christ.” We encounter God in the sacramental life of the Church. When we receive the Eucharist, we are taking in essential food for the journey. Christ humbled himself not only coming as a child, but as a small piece of bread. When we consume Christ- Christ consumes us. We become more like Christ.
   2. St. Francis knew this to be true, but we must remind ourselves constantly that Christ has to be in the center of our lives. We cannot do this if we do not frequent the sacraments.
   3. We are not perfect. To receive the grace and forgiveness we must frequent the sacrament of Reconciliation.
2. Through our personal Witness
   1. You should never be scared to share with someone who you are. In 1 Peter 3:15 it states, “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope…” Franciscan spirituality is anything but passive. There is joy and hope within us that we bring out into the world. We are called to witnesses in truth and love. Everywhere you are, and whoever you are around – be sure to share that JOY you have within. The Franciscan Charism is one to be shared.
   2. Here are some examples:
      1. By the way we act, speak, and what we wear - our TAU Cross
      2. Sharing with youth and young adults
         1. Teaching them about St. Francis and St. Clare.
            1. Have youth create placemats at the Q after they learn about the saints. Thank you to Betty Holler for personally reaching out to the local parishes and schools.
         2. Reach out to your parishes and youth ministers and get on their Vocation panels.
      3. Sharing your faith journey with family and friends.
   3. St. Mark tells us to “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:15)
   4. How are we witness on who we serve? Do we touch the hands of the poor that we serve? Do we look them in the eyes Like Pope Francis has encourages us to do.
   5. St. Mark tells us to “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:15)
   6. As Bishop John Stowe said yesterday, “Living the Gospel is more important than reading it.”
3. Personal Invitation
   1. Think back to how you became a Secular Franciscan. Was it an ad you saw in a bulletin, or a flier on a billboard? Most likely no, it was a personal invite from someone who recognized the uniqueness of who you are and welcomed you into this way of life.
   2. We all know that one of our biggest fears is our decrease in Secular Franscican vocations. It is felt throughout not only our order but in the priesthood and religious life. If we are not recognizing and inviting people to this beautiful way of life then we are not doing what we promised in our profession.
   3. Here are some examples:
      1. Inviting your family - this is how I personally became a Secular
      2. Inviting people to come with you to your fraternity meetings and fall or spring gatherings. This is where are “extended family is”.

Once we are strengthened with the Eucharist, we can go without fear to spread the Gospel, share our story, and invite others to this radical sustaining way of life through the example of St. Francis.

As Francis lay dying, he said to his friars, “I have done what was mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours.” Let this message be our motivation to carry on the mission of St. Francis and follow in his footsteps. Just do it!

**I have looked to the future and who are we to be?**

***AT THE END OF ALL FIVE PARTS OF THE TALK:***

From the series “Call the Midwife” …

“For things that mean the most to us are never ours alone.

We walk always in the footsteps of the souls who went before.

Our joy is the joy they felt,

Our tears, the tears they cried.

Thus, lost hands clasp living ones and their touch is holy.

Honor the things that are not new,

Cherish the treasures we inherit,

And listen for the ghosts of our shared and precious past.

We have not always been as we are now,

And one day we will be the people in the shadows.

Beyond all else,

We are the magic we pass down,

The beats of love that repeat and echo beyond us into a future we cannot always see!”