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Introduction

A Conversation with Pope Francis*

Holy Father, could you explain to us why you thought of Saint Francis of Assisi when you chose your name.

During the election, I was seated next to the archbishop emeritus of São Paulo and prefect emeritus of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Claudio Hummes: a good friend, a good friend! When things were looking dangerous, he encouraged me. And when the votes reached two-thirds, there was the usual applause, because the Pope had been elected. And he gave me a hug and a kiss and said, “Don’t forget the poor!” And those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars, as the votes were still being counted, and Francis is the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi. For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation.

On October 4, 2013, just seven months after being elected and after 800 years of history, the Pope decided to celebrate the

* Freely drawn from the speeches of Pope Francis, especially those given in Assisi, October 4, 2013.

saint's feast in Assisi. Your first stop there was with the disabled and sick children. Will you share with us the reasons for this choice?

It was right to begin at the Seraphic Institute, for Saint Francis says in his *Testament*: “The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body” (FA:ED I, 124). Unfortunately, our society is polluted by the “throwaway” culture, which is opposed to the culture of acceptance. And the victims of this culture are precisely persons who are the weakest, the most fragile. Thank you for this sign of love and true civilization offered by the Institute, where you are working together to offer a dignified life for persons with grave difficulties.

We must learn to place at the center of our social and political attention those who are the most disadvantaged! Too often their families find themselves alone in caring for them. Serving with love and tenderness persons who are in need of so much help enables us to grow in humanity, because they are humanity's true resources.

Could you tell us what meaning Saint Francis's decision to strip himself of everything before the Lord has for you?

That gesture of Francis was prophetic, an act of prayer, love and trust in the Father. The choice to be poor is not sociological or ideological; it is a choice to be like Jesus, to follow him to the end. Saint Francis's renunciation tells us simply what the Gospel teaches. Following Jesus means putting

him in first place, stripping ourselves of the many things we possess that suffocate our hearts, renouncing ourselves, taking up the cross and carrying it with Jesus.

We are all called to be poor, and to do this we must learn how to be with the poor. The Christian is one who encounters them, who looks them in the eye, who touches them. This is the path Francis followed.

I think of the youth and the impact this invitation to poverty can have on them, more so today when the crisis is taking the wind out of their sails.

Saint Francis was a rich young man; he had ideals of glory. But Jesus spoke to him in silence and changed him. He showed him that what really matters in life is not riches, the strength of arms or earthly glory, but humility, mercy, forgiveness. When Francis made that gesture of divesting himself he was a young boy and didn't have the strength for this. It was God's strength that impelled him.

Many young people have been stripped by this callous world that offers no work, no help. To this world it doesn't matter that there are children dying of hunger; it doesn't matter if many families have nothing to eat, do not have the dignity of bringing bread home; it doesn't matter that many people are forced to flee in search of freedom. I ask the Lord to give them and all of us the courage to divest ourselves, not of twenty dollars, but of the spirit of the world, which is society's cancer. It is the enemy of Jesus!

The crisis is not the only threat. Many flee when the time comes to make a choice of life. They are afraid to hear talk about a vocation. What would you say to them in this regard?

Praying and walking in the Church are the two essential elements for discerning who we want to become. A powerful experience of God is always at the origin of every vocation to consecrated life, an unforgettable experience that you remember for the rest of your life! This is what happened to Francis. We cannot plan our vocation. God always surprises us! But it is important to have a comfortable relationship with the Lord, which is like keeping the window of our lives open so that he can make us hear what he wants us to do. A relationship with God involves the whole person: affections, intellect, senses. It is a love so great, so beautiful, so true, that it deserves all our trust.

Despite the difficulties, there are still many who choose to work in society, and their life is a silent evangelization. Holy Father, how would you encourage them?

Here in Assisi, close to the Portiuncula, I seem to hear the voice of Saint Francis repeating, “The Gospel, the Gospel!” He says it first to me: Pope Francis, be a servant of the Gospel! If I do not succeed in being a servant of the Gospel, my life is worth nothing! The most precious thing I have to suggest is the Word of Jesus. It concerns not only religion, but humanity, the world, society. The Gospel is God’s message of salvation for humankind, which truly needs to be saved! We see it every day when we flip through the newspaper or watch the news on television. But we also see it around us, in people, in situations and in ourselves! Each of us needs to be saved. Evil is at work but is not invincible, and a Christian does not give up when confronted by evil. Our secret is that God is greater. This is the Gospel: God’s love has won!

If I believe that Jesus has conquered evil and saved me, I must follow Jesus, I must follow along his path for my whole life. Francis made faith grow and renewed the Church, and at the same time he renewed society, he made it more fraternal, with the Gospel and by his witness. He once said to his brothers: "Always preach the Gospel and if necessary use words!" But is it possible to preach the Gospel without words? Yes, by your witness! First comes witness, then come words.

Go forward with courage, with the Gospel in your heart and in your hands. Be witnesses of faith by your lives. Bring Christ into your home, preach him among your friends, welcome and serve him in the poor. Spread a message of life, peace and hope. You can do it!

What does Saint Francis's witness tell us today?

In all of Francis's life, love for the poor and imitation of Christ are inseparably joined. They are two sides of the same coin. What does his witness say to us today? First of all, that being a Christian means having a living relationship with the person of Jesus. It means putting on Christ, being conformed to him.

Francis's journey to Christ begins with the gaze of the crucified Jesus, with letting Jesus look at him at the moment he gives his life for us and draws us to himself. Francis let Jesus look at him from the crucifix at San Damiano as he was praying. On that crucifix, Jesus' eyes are wide open in a gaze that speaks to our heart. If we let him gaze upon us, we are re-created, we become a "new creation." Everything starts with this, the experience of transforming grace, the experience of being loved for no merits of our own.

The second witness Francis gives us is that everyone who

follows Christ receives true peace. The Gospel tells us: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light” (Mt 11:28-29). What is the peace that Francis received and passes on to us? It is the peace that the risen Jesus gave to his disciples when he appeared in their midst (see Jn 20:19-20). It is not something saccharine or a kind of pantheistic harmony with the forces of the cosmos. That Saint Francis does not exist! His peace is that of Christ, and it is found by those who take up his yoke, namely, his commandment: “As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34). And this yoke cannot be borne with arrogance, presumption or pride, but only with meekness and humbleness of heart.

Finally, Saint Francis begins his *Canticle* with these words: “Most High, all-powerful, good Lord...be praised with all your creatures” (FA:ED I, 113). The saint of Assisi bears witness to the need to respect all that God has created, as he has created it. But above all he bears witness that humans are called to care for other humans, the center of creation where God intended them to be. Let us respect creation and not be instruments of destruction! May there be an end to armed conflicts that cover the earth with blood, may the clash of arms be silenced, and everywhere may hatred yield to love, injury to pardon and discord to unity.

Saint Francis is the patron of Italy. In your opinion, how can we protect this value?

By praying for the Italian nation, that everyone will always work for the common good and look more to what

unites us rather than what divides us. I make my own the prayer of Saint Francis, for Italy and for the world: “I ask you, Lord Jesus Christ, Father of mercies, not to consider our ingratitude. Be mindful of your most abundant piety which you have shown to [this city], that it always be an abode for those who truly acknowledge you, and glorify your name blessed and most glorious forever and ever. Amen” (*A Mirror of Perfection*, 124; FA:ED III, 372).

Holy Father, would you leave us with three words to guide us for our life, words inspired by the example of Saint Francis.

Listen, walk and proclaim. Especially the last: proclaim. When I was in Buenos Aires I understood the importance of going out to meet others in the outskirts, which are places, but which are primarily people living in particular situations in life. Here, too, don't be afraid to go out and meet these people and situations. Don't allow yourselves to be impeded by prejudice, habit, intellectual or pastoral rigidity, by the famous “We've always done it this way!” We can go to the outskirts only if we carry the Word of God in our hearts and if we walk with the Church, like Saint Francis. Otherwise we take ourselves, and we are not the ones who save the world. It is the Lord!

I haven't given you any new recipes. I don't have any, and I don't believe anyone who says he does. There are none. But I did find several beautiful and important aspects in the journey of your Church that should be developed. Listen to the Word, walk together as brothers and sisters, proclaim the Gospel to the outskirts! May the Lord bless you, may Our Lady protect you, and may Saint Francis help you all to experience the joy of being disciples of the Lord!

The Life

part one



Chapter 1

The Beauty of Francis

Assisi 1182. While the noises of city life filled the piazza of San Rufino, Madonna Pica was getting ready to give an heir to Messer Pietro di Bernardone, a rich cloth merchant, who was abroad on a trade mission at the time. The wait was becoming unusually painful and difficult when an unknown pilgrim advised the expectant mother to go to a nearby stable, where, shortly after, a cry announced that the event was happily over. At the baptismal font, Madonna Pica named the newborn baby John, but his father, who had returned from his business trip, decided to change it to Francis, either because the first name reminded him of the Baptist with his camel's skin and diet of locusts, or because France was the major source of his earnings.

A woman of exquisite sensitivity and a deep and practiced faith, his mother instilled in her firstborn much of her delicacy of tastes and feelings. In addition, Francis displayed a lively intelligence and a certain aptitude for study, but he was no less bold in joining his young friends to run and play. Sometimes the children, singing and chasing each other, would end up in one of the small and delightful piazzas, where there was more room and more open air to play in. Even today the piazzas in Assisi are like terraces extending

over the valley from which one can view the beautiful sunsets over verdant Umbria, so sweet and restful to the eyes.

Francis learned the first rudiments of letters and Latin from the priests at the church of San Giorgio, while from Madonna Pica he gained some familiarity with the French language, indispensable for helping his father in his work. At a certain point, Pietro di Bernardone reckoned that this son of his knew enough of such things by now. So, rather quickly, he unburdened Francis's mind of the excessive scruples of Pica and the boy's teachers. He wanted to make him a man in his own way, a successful merchant, and later perhaps a knight. He introduced him to the world of business by taking him with him on his long trips to Italy and France. But from then on, although Francis found that he had enough money to dress splendidly and enjoy himself, he was more interested in the countries and cities he was visiting than in the excellent business deals his father was making there.

In Assisi, he soon became the favorite among the youth, not only those of his own social class, but also those of the nobility. There was no celebration in which he did not take part, adding a special note of liveliness and cheer. He was always the first when it came to spending money lavishly, since he always had access to his father's warehouse. His father, accustomed to calculating and jealously guarding his earnings, would sometimes become angry with his son, but at other times, vain like all *nouveau riche*, he would feel in his heart a secret satisfaction at Francis's successes in a world that was certainly not his own.

Madonna Pica, on the other hand, watched her son with eyes different from those of Pietro di Bernardone. She knew Francis completely and understood that, beneath his spend-

ing sprees and passion for entertainment, he kept intact the good and simple heart of his childhood. The young man's moments of discontent and uncertainty were enough to give her hope that he would not become a common merchant or an ordinary man.

Although Francis had been named King of Feasts because of the way he frivolously threw away money during the wild evenings he spent with his friends, the germ of a love for those most in need, which God had placed in his heart, began to show itself already in his youth. Indeed, he was in the very prime of his happy-go-lucky life when one day, amid several valuable patrons, a poor beggar showed up in his father's shop, asking charity for the love of God. At first, losing his patience, Francis sent him away with harsh words, but he was suddenly stung with remorse when he thought: "What would I not have done if that man had come to ask me for something in the name of a count or a baron? And yet he was coming in the name of God!" And without further delay, he left the customers standing there and chased after him, his beautiful hair flying in the wind, hoping that he would be able to give the man the alms.