



OFS Formation Newsletter June 2013

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ONGOING FORMATION ORIENTATIONS FOR OFS (2012-2015) CONFERENCE PRESENTED AT THE 2013 OLOTA ELECTIVE CHAPTER

When I started to think about what the Holy Spirit would like as an ongoing formation program for OFS members in Canada, I first sat down to see the signs of the times, and they speak loud and clear. It was the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II council, the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the opening of the XIII General Assembly Ordinary Synod of bishops to be held in October with the theme «The new evangelization for the transmission of Christian faith» and the official opening of the **Year of Faith** by pope Benedict XVI.

For me, it was evident that Holy Spirit was blowing strongly on the Church and on all Christians to reconnect with our faith, the teachings of the Church and to be ready for an important turning point to happen. This was for me an urgent call to conversion and it is the main reason why I propose sanctity to every OFS member.

Like Francis, I was not sure however that conversion needs a lot of documents and written programs. (It doesn't mean that the Initial Formation Program was not the right thing to do for the formation of new inquirers to profession as members of OFS. But for ongoing formation, I had another feeling.) This idea was confirmed by a letter written in 2010 by Benedetto Lino, the CIOFS formation coordinator, where he gives to the National Director of Formation important clarification to the profound meaning of formation. Having emphasized that formation is not instructions, that it consists not only in receiving and giving documents and that it has no bearing on meetings where devotions are practiced, he defined **Franciscan formation** as a journey that shapes and takes on a new form, the form of Christ.

In October 2011, he gave a more detailed description of what it is to be a Franciscan at the XIII General chapter of OSF in Rio de Janeiro. In a conference entitled: A SPECIFIC VOCATION FOR A PARTICULAR MISSION, (available on CIOFS website) Benedetto stated that our fundamental vocation is this: reply to the call of God to be saints, to meet Him in Christ and to let us be shaped by the Holy Spirit to join the Father and share the life of God. **So to be a Christian is the foundation to be a Franciscan and not the contrary.** He also said that he was so convinced that the vocation of Francis and ours is uniquely to be only and fully Christians, that he thinks that Francis would not be happy that we call ourselves Franciscans rather than Christians. Is that not a little bit surprising to say this in a General chapter of the OFS? He even said that all virtues, especially poverty and humility, the most beloved by Franciscans are not specific to them since every Christian is called to live all virtues.

So what is so specific to Franciscans? What does it mean to be a Christian **like** Francis? The answer given by Benedetto and that all of us should recognize is in the **intensity** he puts to live the Gospel and to follow Christ. This **intensity** should be the norm for all Franciscans, in every state of life.

So let us consider now our secular state of life. It is baptism that gives us the mission to become saints. However, it is only since Vatican II, 50 years ago, that the mission to attain sanctity was explicitly opened to lay people. Before that, it was merely reserved to priests and members of religious orders. Vatican II gave us a rejuvenated understanding of the Church, of access to sanctity, about salvation and our outlook towards other Christians. It also gives a central place to the Gospel, the word of God. For Francis and his followers, this last aspect was put ahead 800 years ago, but it is not obvious that we took significant advantage of that unique path to sanctity.

Based on those considerations, the ongoing formation program I propose is to conform to Christ. This goal is expressed on the Tau sign that I wear that shows the crossed arms and hands of Jesus and of Francis bearing stigmata.

The only books we need for this formation is the Gospel and our Rule which emphasized some crucial aspects of the gospel to conform to Christ. Of course we also need the nourishment of the sacraments and the light and strength of the Holy Spirit.

From the Rule, I will retain only two articles, article 4 and article 7.

What does article 4 say?

ARTICLE 4

The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and center of his life with God and people.

Christ, the gift of the Father's love, is the way to him, the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the life which he has come to give abundantly.

Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to gospel.

I want to highlight and to give few examples on that last sentence.

The first part of that sentence, *the careful reading of the gospel*, needs some closer attention. You all know by heart the next few verses of the scriptures I will go through with you. I hope you will find however that the careful reading of the gospel do not only involve intellectual understanding, but also heart intelligence that reveals wisdom and profound meaning which cannot be attained without the light of the Holy Spirit. That journey from head to heart however is sometimes called the longest path to conversion, but we are not alone. And God who knows us better than ourselves will choose the right pace for each and every one of us.

So let's start with the Gospel of this day, on the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I must say that when I was preparing this talk, I didn't notice that this Friday would be the feast of Sacred Heart of Jesus and that the Gospel would be the parable of the lost sheep. But for God, nothing happens by coincidence.

The lost sheep (Lk 15, 3-7) -

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

WHERE CAN I STAY?

Do I consider myself as a sinner or as a righteous? Do I want to rest on the shoulders of Jesus or to stand with the flock of good ones?

Another well-known parable is the parable of the merciful father and his two sons: Luke chapter 15, verses 11 to 32. In this parable, the younger son came back to his father mostly because he was starving. But at least, he had a touch of repentance because he said to himself: *I will go to my father and tell to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;'¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son but treat me like one of your hired hands.* But when he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son and covered him with kisses and before the son had time to finish the repentance phrase he had carefully learned, he was dressed with the best robe, a ring was put on his finger and sandals on his feet.²³ And the feast began with the fattened calf being killed to celebrate. You know what happened with the older son. He stayed outside the banquet hall, full of anger against his father and the younger son he didn't want to call him his brother. You know this parable doesn't only describe the God of all mercy but also what will happen to those good Christians who won't be merciful for those who hurt them in some way. They will not participate in the eternal banquet, at least not before going through some kind of purification.

WHERE DO I STAND?

This parable is simple to understand but not so easy to live!

Many years ago, I recognized myself as the older son while reading the book entitled *«The return of the prodigal son.»* That book was written by Henry J. Nouwen, a priest who also recognized himself in the older son through a very nice conversion journey that conducted him to contemplate the original painting of Rembrandt in Russia. I think that in every one of us we bear parts of both sons. Can we recognize this? If we do so, we will become more merciful for us and for others.

Another parable is the one about the **Pharisee and the publican** (Lk 18, 9-14)

The last verse is a significant lesson for our life, especially for us Franciscans who want to follow Christ in the footsteps of Francis: *«¹⁴All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.»*

WHERE DO I STAND in regard of this evangelical teaching of Jesus?

Once again, it's simple and easy to understand but not so easy to live. As Franciscans, humility is supposed to be a virtue that we ask for. But to gain humility, God must make us to face humiliation but who likes to be humiliated?

The encounters of Jesus with **the adulterous woman** (Jn 8, 3-11) and with **Zacchaeus** (Lk 19, 1-10) are two examples of how to act with sinners if we are real Disciples of Christ. Both were considered sinners by scribes and Pharisees but welcomed by Jesus who said «Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. »(Mt 9-12)

WHERE DO I STAND?

This question is not so easy to answer. Perhaps we would be one of the first to let the rock fall on the ground at our feet and to go back home. For instance, what are my real feelings about tax collectors, our governments, or about homosexuals, especially those affected by AIDS, the leprosy of our time? Like Theresa the little flower, would we pray for a murderer like Pranzini, or more closer to us, for a Clifford Olson?

To go daily from gospel to life and from life to gospel, we need Faith in the word of God and we need to examine our Faith. Otherwise, Faith can become an abstract theory, a mental exercise or even worst, a habit that leaves no place for questions and examinations from our part. This year of Faith, promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI, was not a sudden concern for him. In a book Joseph Ratzinger wrote in 1989, he said that «The apostasy of modern world is a result of a decline of examination of the faith in the life of Christians».

Honest answers to those **WHERE DO I STAND** questions can give us an idea about the authenticity and solidness of our faith. Those qualities of faith are not certainly given at all times. The experience of Francis illustrates dramatically how faith has to be continually nourished, deepened and examined by facts of our entire lives.

Article 7 of our Rule states that need for conversion in those terms:

*United by their vocation as brothers and sisters of penance, and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them **conform** their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that **radical interior change** which the gospel itself calls **conversion**. Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily. On this road to renewal, the sacrament of reconciliation is the privileged sign of the Father's mercy and the source of grace.*

So what happens when we are no more *motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel*, when the pace of our journey that shapes us to the form of Christ is slowing down, when we have lost the **intensity** that was driving us to conform to Christ? How can we be thirsty again for the source of all goods?

Perhaps it is time to go back to the sacrament of reconciliation as the rule recommends. And it is surely time to weep and cry to the Holy Spirit for him to blow on our ashes, to bring light to our shaded lives, to bring joy to our sadness.

But the Holy Spirit has already given us an inspiring model and a guide in the person of Pope Francis. For me, this is the turning point God was preparing for his Church when I was considering the signs of the times given to us in the Fall of 2012.

His daily homilies can be read on Zenit, are a breath of fresh air as his way of life that already speaks more loudly to distant Christians and men of good will who look at him.

In one of his homilies, he said that Christians don't want to be disturbed by the Holy Spirit who pushes us to take a road more in conformity to the Gospel but we say «Everything is all right God! » We resist the Spirit as the Church itself resists the reception of Vatican II. And he pursues, saying: «Fifty years later, have we done all the Spirit has said to the Council? »

To have a pope who chose the name of our Father Francis is a great source of joy for us Franciscans, but it is also a great responsibility, because more people will look at us in their search to find what is special in the life of those Christians who called themselves Franciscans. I think this is a supplementary reason to conform to Christ, the ongoing formation program I invite you to embrace with all the intensity of Francis.

You think it is too difficult for you? You are right but don't worry «For men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God. (Mk 10-27).

Paix et Joie to everyone!