

THE VOCATION, CHARISM AND MISSION OF SECULAR FRANCISCANS

This segment on Vocation, Charism and Mission of Secular Franciscans is based on the work of our brother Benedetto Lino, OFS, coordinator of the Formation Commission of our International Presidency.

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FORWARD TO VOCATION, CHARISM AND MISSION OF SECULAR FRANCISCANS

Too often, especially in the past, candidates were admitted into the Order simply "because they were good and pious people" or because they held in great esteem some holy friar or simply because they liked Saint Francis.

Often, until today, people ask to enter the Order because they feel lonely or because they need to feel part of a group or simply out of devotion.

Obviously this is not enough. Quite the opposite ...

Entering into a "form of life" such as the Franciscan form of life is not just one of the many "optional" decisions we make in our lives. It is the result of a very precise call of God to become Franciscan with a very precise purpose.

Becoming Secular Franciscan is, must be, the result of an authentic vocation. Along with it comes a precise mission, in communion with the entire Franciscan Family, sustained by the very charism of Saint Francis, which enables us to accomplish the mission in our secular state.

It is absolutely necessary to rediscover and to live to its full extent the vocational dimension of our being members of the Secular Franciscan Order.

It is no longer acceptable to become Secular Franciscan out of devotion or without a true and authentic vocation. In the absence of a real vocation there are many ways to share in Saint Francis' spirituality and in our own secular Franciscan spirituality, without entering the Order.

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OVERVIEW

VOCATION

It is God who calls. We are not the ones who choose.

Called to Life.

Called to life in Christ. Acceptance of revelation.

Called to Holiness, which is sharing in the Life of God

Called to a state: *lay ordained, religious, secular.*

Called to the Franciscan way.

Discernment of vocation.

CHARISM

Charisms

Charism of the Founder and of the Institute

Charism of Saint Francis

Franciscan spirituality (apostolic religious, contemplative religious, apostolic lay secular).

Franciscan Spirituality in its secular expression.

MISSION

"Go Francis repair my house" in the Franciscan Trilogy

"Missio in nomine Ecclesiae" in the Public Associations of Christian Faithful

"Make present the charism of Saint Francis in the life and in the mission of the Church (Rule

1): "They should be recognized by their "being" from which their mission springs" (General Constitutions - 100).

Live in 'communion' with the Church and the world.

THE VOCATION

The vocation, the call, of the Secular Franciscan was thoroughly discussed in the section dedicated and titled "*Vocation*," so it will only be briefly addressed and summarized here. The goal and intention of this section is to look at our Charism, which stems from our spiritual insights and vision of our Founder, St. Francis, and to understand our mission within the Holy Church.

So let us first begin with a brief revisiting of vocation, then on to our major topics of the Charism and Mission of the Secular Franciscan Order.

"I want love, not sacrifices, not offerings, but COMMUNION with ME, says the Lord."
(Antiphon of Psalm 49, Monday, Week 3, Office of Readings)

It is not possible to speak of *vocation* without reference to *Communion*. Communion is the **aim** of the call of God (the *vocation*); the **foundation** of our **hope**, the object of our **faith** (communion with God), and the immediate and ultimate accomplishment of the sense of life (**love** with God and with each other).

St Paul exhorts us strongly in this direction:

*"May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what **hope** his call holds for you, how rich is the glory of the heritage he offers among his holy people..."* because *"there is only one **hope** to which you are **called**, the one of your **vocation**"* (Eph 1:18-19; 4:4)

Through Revelation we know that **God is Love**.

But in order for the love of God to reach his goal (the vital sharing of His life with his creature [the *Other*, each of us], it is necessary that we **exist**; (*ex-sistere* = to be outside) and also for us to realize our complete "otherness" from God. Once we accept our "otherness," then free will and our specific choice comes into focus. Each of us needs to choose for or against entering into and developing a deepening relationship with the God who is our loving Father.

This is, therefore, the PLAN OF THE FATHER- the inconceivable, the Eternal, the Infinite, who "thinks" of us from the beginning as the focus of his love and *calls us to life to exist and to share eternally in His Life, His Divinity!* It is unparalleled, hard to grasp and understand that God loves and desires us!

In the Son, God creates us, and in Jesus He "assumes" the fullness of our Humanity, individually and collectively, so that all human beings, individually and collectively, may, by His Grace, "be made God-like", that is, become, by Grace, what we are not by nature.

This is what we are radically “called” to be, to enter into relationship with God and to transform ourselves to be God-like [St. Francis exhorts us to become imitators of Jesus and to conform ourselves to Him].

But it is only through our free acceptance of this relationship of receiving and reciprocating God’s love and his grace, can He introduce us into the sharing of his own life. This is living in imitation of the divine mutual relationship shared between the Father and His Beloved Son, Jesus.

This is our VOCATION - the irrevocable call to sanctity, the sharing in the life of God.

For this reason, each of us, during our lifetime, is called by God to exercise a *fundamental option*¹: to accept or refuse this relationship, to accept or refuse his love; in practice, to accept or refuse God himself.

To develop our reflection on *vocation*, I would like to propose two Gospel passages on which we can meditate together. One is about the *Rich Young Man* (Mt 19:16-26) and the other is about the *Gerasene Demoniac* (Mk 5:1-20) and (Lk 8:26-39).²

THE RICH YOUNG MAN (MT 19:16-26)

A rich young man goes to the Lord and asks what he has to do to gain eternal life (Mt 19:16-26). *You have to observe the commandments*, says the Lord. *But I do observe them. Have I missed anything?* No, he hasn’t: he who observes the commandments, who performs his duties, who is a good father to the family etc. will gain eternal life and will go to paradise. There is no doubt.

The Lord looks at him and says: *you are lacking one thing. If you want to be perfect* (this is the key word), *go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, then come and follow me.*

This was a true “religious” vocation. This was God’s project for him.

THE GERASENE DEMONIAK (MK 5:1-20) AND (LK 8:26-39)

¹ The fundamental option is a person’s basic orientation in life either for or against God. This orientation is directed by a person’s actions. See also: John Paul II Encyclical Letter “*Veritatis Splendor* 66-67, 1993.

² For this section and the following on the “call to perfection” I depend on the work the Fr. Andrea Boni OFM.

“They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his full senses ... As he [Jesus] was getting into the boat the man who had been possessed with demons begged to be allow to stay with him. He would not let him, but said: “Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you”. So he went and began to proclaim throughout the Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him and everyone was amazed.”

This is a typical “secular” vocation: to remain in the “world” and proclaim God’s good news. Two different, but identically “perfect”, types of vocation and discipleship.

THE SPECIFIC FRANCISCAN VOCATION

Are you called to be Franciscan? To answer this question of vocation, you must first understand the essential elements of the *Charism of St. Francis and how they grew into Franciscan Spirituality*.

Every human being needs to give meaning to his/her life, to find the origin of his/her life, to find a father; *the Father, the giver of Life*. Man, ultimately, searches for the Father, the origin of Life and for his perfect realization of Him.

Jesus, the beloved Son, is the *Way*, the *Truth* and the *Life*. Jesus is the One who points us in the right direction and leads us to the Father. St. Francis understood this and realized that in imitating Jesus we are uniting ourselves to the One who draws us into relationship with the Father.

The world is searching for Christ and finds in the life of Francis the living, vibrant and fully understandable representation of Jesus, present in both a historical and human form. This is why all people feel attracted by Francis.

All that Francis did and what he became, was the result of his *imitatio Christi* (*imitation of Christ*). Francis became an *alter Christus* (*another Christ*). This desire to imitate Jesus fully is what has inspired countless generations and attracted many to Francis’ vision of Gospel life.

Being attracted, however, does not necessarily correspond to a vocation to bind oneself permanently into a “consecrated” Franciscan “religious” or “secular” form of life. An accurate discernment is necessary. It is necessary to understand with the help of God what He wants from us.

One can be inspired by Francis but not be destined to serve in a consecrated (religious or secular) Franciscan form of life.

Francis was chosen by God as an example, a model for the entire People of God, for all mankind and not only for the “Franciscans”.

In order to understand if we have a genuine Franciscan Vocation, it is essential **to know Francis** and strip away feelings based upon romanticism and sentimentalism and so we are free to discern if we are being asked by God to follow in Francis’ way.

To have a real Franciscan Vocation, means to be called to take **the same path of identification and total conformity** that Francis took with *his Christ*.

To have a genuine Franciscan Vocation, whether religious apostolic, contemplative or secular, means this: to verify our own availability to fully embrace this path.

This FRANCISCAN WAY requires:

- following Jesus without reservations in the footsteps of Saint Francis. In other words, to be ready, in our specific state of life, to follow Jesus just as Francis did.
- to discover, accept and develop within ourselves the same Charism received by Saint Francis, make it present and bring it to fruition in the world.

This spiritual “style” entails:

- a very intense *Eucharistic spirituality* (kenosis = self-emptying)
- a very strong *fraternal communion – mutual equality*
- *simplicity*
- love of *poverty*
- *humility*
- a genuine sense of *minority, or littleness – seeking to serve and not be served*
- a complete and active abandonment to God, which is demonstrated by *obedience*, particularly to the Church.

To have an Authentic Franciscan Vocation means to desire to embrace these attitudes and behaviors that characterize our form of life; this charism-mission, this spirituality.

Those who, through proper discernment, recognize that their life’s call and desire *is to embrace this way of life*, may express their commitment through a **public, solemn and perpetual commitment** (Profession) **before** God and the Church.

This is the case of all Franciscans of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Order.

The Franciscan vocation, therefore, is to be carefully discerned according to the letter and the spirit of the Rule to which the specific vocation refers.

Secular Franciscans, should refer particularly to:

- The whole of chapter two of the Rule.
- The articles 37:2-3; 38:1; 40: 1-2; of the CCGG (General Constitutions).
- Title I of Chapter 2 of the CCGG.

VOCATION, CHARISM and MISSION are facets of this life and are linked, one to the other. Each of them presupposes and prepares the other.

CHARISM

It is a common observation that we all have *natural inclinations* towards certain things rather than others, and that we are attracted towards certain projects more than others. This being *inclined* is already a gift; it is the gift of perceiving life and the world around us, in a typical specific way.

It is also a specific way to relate to reality. It is a way of being, a way of behaving, a personal “flavor” originating from this perception.

We consider these gifts as a specific *charism*, a seed that God has planted in each of us that calls us to “*be that person who God intends and hopes we will be*”.

The Rule of the SFO begins by saying (Article 1):

“The Franciscan family, as one among many spiritual families raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church, unites all members of the People of God – laity, religious and priests – who recognize that they are called to follow Christ in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi.

In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church”.

We have just read that we Franciscans, all of us, have to make present in the world of our specific time, the **charism of St. Francis** and to accomplish this task, it is essential, for us to understand: the nature of the Franciscan Charism.

The word *charism*, today is not widely used and often less understood. It remained, for a long time, a way to speak only about the exceptional gifts of the Holy Spirit which were needed to build up the early Church. The word (charism), started to be used in the last century, and became commonly used just before the Second Vatican Council.

Let us now see what the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church - CCC) teaches about charisms:

799. “Whether extraordinary or simple and humble, charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men and to the needs of the world.

800. **Charisms** are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them and by all members of the Church as well. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic prompting of the same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charism.³

801. It is in this sense that **discernment of charisms** is always necessary. No charism is exempt from being referred and submitted to the Church’s shepherds. “Their office is not indeed to extinguish the Spirit but to test all things, and hold fast to what is good,”⁴ so that all the diverse and complementary charisms work together for the common good. (1 Cor 12:7)⁵

2684. In the communion of saints, many and varied *spiritualities* have been developed throughout the history of the Churches. The **personal charism** of some witnesses to God’s love for men has been handed on, like the spirit of Elijah to Elisha⁶ and John the Baptist⁷, so that their followers may have a share in this spirit...⁸

A distinct spirituality can also arise at the point of convergence of liturgical or theological currents, becoming witness to the integration of the faith into a particular human environment and its history.

³ Cf 1Cor 13

⁴ Lumen Gentium (LG) 12

⁵ Christifideles Laici (CfL) 24

⁶ 2 Kings 2, 9

⁷ Luke 1:17

⁸ PC 2 (Perfectae Caritatis 2 – II Vatican Council Decree on the adaptation and renewal of religious life)

The different schools of Christian spirituality in the living tradition of prayer and are essential guides for the faithful. In their rich diversity they are refractions of the one pure light of the Holy Spirit.”

This last point leads us into the following themes, which intimately concerns us, i.e., the *charism of the founder* and what today, in theology, is called the *charism of the Institute* or *of the members of the Institute, (or for us as Secular Franciscans, Our Order)*.

CHARISM OF THE FOUNDER

The charism of the founder is the gift (or gifts) particularly granted by God to a believer which leads to the foundation of an Institute or religious movement and which includes a **specific way of being** through the specific spiritual experiences that God grants to him.

CHARISM OF THE INSTITUTE OR OF THE MEMBERS OF AN INSTITUTE

The charism of the institute is the specific **mission**, the **goal**, the **apostolic task** of the members of an Institute, **transmitted by the Founder** who, by **his example** and **his life** draws and convinces others to follow him.

The members receive the **particular grace of vocation to follow this life experience** and, in some way, to **be associated to the charism of the Founder**.

The charism of the founder is, therefore, “transmitted” to his followers. We say for instance, that the charism of Saint Francis has been transmitted to the members of the Franciscan Family, hence, also to the Secular Franciscans, *directly* from Francis.

But how can the *personal gift* (charism) of a founder be transmitted? How can a founder himself transmit it? Does it not come directly from God?

The charismatic personality of a founder is certainly *unrepeatable*. This does not mean, however, that his experience has to remain necessarily confined to the period in which the founder lived. Thus, in some way, the charism of the founder is preserved and passed down to subsequent generations of members, allowing the **unrepeatable to live on**.

The Religious Institute, (generally through its specific Rule of Life), offers the way the charism is transmitted and made to future generations the course of history (K. Rahner).

Here, we can see an **analogy** between 1) **Incarnation** and its **continuation** by the Church and 2) **Charism** and its **continuation** in the followers of a founder: both occur by the action of the Holy Spirit; (continuation of Incarnation in the faithful through *Baptism*) and the other (continuation of charism in the followers through *Profession*).

This is how **the same charism** of the founder, given as pure gift by the Holy Spirit to support the mission of the Church (in accomplishing of God's eternal project), is transmitted (made repeatable) and *continued* in the followers.

Let's now return to Saint Francis. **What is his 'charism'?**

It is difficult to explain, and harder yet, to define in a few sentences, a "living" entity such as a *charism*; simply put, it is a God given gift that is capable of re-shaping a person's way of being, for his/her entire life. Francis is a living example of how a life may be re-shaped if offered into the hands of the Father.

For this section of the presentation I am largely indebted to the inspiring work of a great friend of the Secular Franciscan Order (If you see OFS, in Latin it means - Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis, and is generally used in place of SFO outside the USA), Fr. Cristoforo Piacitelli OFM.⁹

CHARISM OF FRANCIS AND OF HIS FAMILY

The *mission* to which Francis is called has an exceptional character and, as far as we know, it has remained unique in the history of the Church.

To an **exceptional mission** there must be a corresponding **extraordinary Charism** to accomplish it. This cannot be one or more virtues lived heroically, but a comprehensive gift that radically re-shapes a person's whole life, in all its expressions and which prepares it for a specific mission.

St. Bonaventure writes about Francis: "Surely he was the most Christ-like of men! His only desire was to be like Christ and imitate him perfectly, and he was found worthy to be adorned with the marks of his likeness; in his life he imitated the life of Christ, and in his death he imitated his death, and he wished to be like him still when he was dead." (LMj XIV, 4¹⁰).

⁹ Fr. Cristoforo served for many years as National Spiritual Assistant of the OFS. This subject is treated in his two books: "*La spiritualità del Francescano secolare*", Ed. Imprimenda, 2008 and "*Con san Francesco nel mondo per il mondo*" Collana Tau, 2003.

¹⁰ Major Legend by St. Bonaventure, Section XIV # 4

But what is the existential characteristic of **Christ**, the very essence of His life? This characteristic cannot but be that of “**being Son**”, the Son of the Father (NMI 24¹¹). His personality is a “son-like” personality. This filial quality penetrates the depth of his mystery.

We, Franciscans, understand the charism with which the Holy Spirit has endowed Francis as the **experience (ability) of truly feeling to be a “son” in the hands of the heavenly Father**, just like Jesus is Son.

Hence, Francis, by gift, came to think with the mind of the *son*, see with the eyes of the *son*, love with the heart of the *son*, and act with the abandonment and dedication of the *son*. This son-like love for all the Father creates enables Francis to see all creation in terms of brothers and sisters. Those who would follow Francis are called to bring life to *fraternity*, under the gaze of the heavenly Father. By virtue of this most particular gift that conforms him to Christ, who is *founder* of the Church, Francis can be the one who can “*repair*” the Church.

Francis’ **charism**, therefore, at its fundamental core, consists of a **strong and radical son-like experience** which is manifested in the joyful, loving and trustful attitude of readiness to do the will of the heavenly Father. Francis used to say “*I desire to be found always and completely in harmony with and obedient to God’s will alone in everything*” (1C¹², 2nd Book, VII, 107), just like Jesus the Son who said: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work.” (Jn 4:34).

The great and special gift Francis received was to be able *to perceive, and to live in an exceptional manner*. Fundamental to him life was Francis understanding of **God’s humility**: the Father’s total **Self-surrender or complete self-giving [kenosis]**, exemplified by the Son.

Francis perceived and experienced the Father’s *emptying and total giving of Self* (kénosis) with an unprecedented intensity. Francis understood that the **essence/nature of God is to pour Himself out in love for all His creatures**. This is God’s desire; His original intention to enter into a lover/beloved relationship with mankind.

O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread!
(LtOrd 27)

This was the gift Francis was given: to perceive, as never before, God’s own *humble essence*, the *depth of His love* without reservation, His *poverty*, His *simplicity* and all the

¹¹ Novo Millennio Ineunte, John Paul II, 2001

¹² Celano’s “First Life of St Francis”

consequences that derive from all this, which then became the lived experience and practices of Francis' life.

Jesus, the beloved Son, who is the *Way*, the *Truth* and the *Life*, is Francis' only **model**- the **mediator** between the God of Love and the world. Jesus who incarnates the Father. Jesus who has made the Father visible, audible, touchable (1Jn 1:1-3 and Jn 14:8-11).

Francis is totally focused on Jesus and unceasingly contemplates Jesus' total giving of Himself (kenosis) in the Incarnation; in the Manger, on the Cross, and in the Eucharist.

Francis perceives in the Incarnation, "*human-ation*" (Lat. *humus*=earth, soil – from which derive *hum-ility* and *hum-ble*), God taking on the matter of the earth and entering fully into human history which unifies the vital sharing of God and all Creation, for the sake of Love. From this intuition comes all the typical Franciscan traits about the deep respect of all creatures, animate and inanimate, which are (by virtue of this vital sharing in God's life) brothers and sisters of Christ himself and, hence, our brothers and sisters.

God has given Francis the gift of this living intuition and with this gift, the grace to conform himself to the Son; a conformation that resulted in the imprinting in his flesh the signs of the Passion of Christ (stigmata).

In this sense, we now understand the affirmation of the Popes about Francis being an *alter Christus*, "another Christ". Francis is not Christ. He remains always '*alter*' (other), however, he has become *christiform* (Christ-like) to a degree no one else has ever reached.

This is the gift. This is the *Charism*.

Francis accepted, without reservation, to be guided and molded by the Grace of the gift: *this is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart* (1C, 1st Book, IX, 22).

From the living *charism* of Saint Francis we have come to understand certain practices and behaviors, specific ways of being and of relating to God, i.e. a *spirituality*, that we call 'Franciscan'.

This *spirituality* is characterized especially by:

- A very *intense Eucharistic life* (contemplation of God's kénosis)
- *Poverty* (the consequence of kénosis)

- *Minority-Humility* (the consequence of kenosis)
- *Simplicity*¹³
- *Obedience* (to conform to the eternal project of the Father)¹⁴,
- *Chastity*¹⁵.
- *Fraternity* as the specific characterizing element, also in its universal and cosmic implications, to be lived with special intensity.
- The *Franciscan evangelical radicality*, as a specific way Saint Francis followed the *total* Christ in simplicity and *sine glossa*¹⁶ (without splitting hairs on Gospel interpretation taking away, watering down or adding to it).

All of us, the children of Francis (1st, 2nd, 3rd Order) are called to **participate** in his exceptional gift (charism) and to continue his mission. Francis shows us the way to follow; to fully live our vocation, and effectively accomplish the mission entrusted, through him, to all of us.

Pope Pius IX reminds us of this in his prayer by the tomb of St. Francis: “*You [Francis] entrusted the reforming mission to your children who responded well to this high task*” (8/5/1857)

DEEPENING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE FRANCISCAN VOCATION

After this short introduction to *Charism*, we can resume the discourse already started on the “*Specific Franciscan Vocation*”.

A true “specific” vocation requires that we understand the deep reasons for our attraction to Francis. First to desire and seek the same Jesus “found” by Saint

¹³ All can, and must be referred to the single simple act of God’s love: His complete donation of Self. God is simple. We render Him complicated. This is the reason why Francis insists on implementing the Gospel, *sine glossa* (without adding anything to it). This is not aversion to study, but simply an exhortation to pick the essential, the simplicity of God, avoiding all that makes him complicated to our eyes, less understandable, remote. Moving away from the simplicity of God, His burning Love will crystallize in streams of colder and colder commandments, precepts, norms which will eventually solidify and become incapable of generating life.

¹⁴ An essential characteristic of the spirituality of Francis is his obedience to the Church. In it he recognizes the presence of Christ’s Spirit in its fullness. His obedience to the Church and to its representatives is total and he never stops to exhort his friars to be “catholic”. The Church is for Francis the infallible mediator through which he receives the confirmation of the goodness of his the journey on which he has embarked. Her sacred pastors, the priests, the bishops, the Pope are the object of his veneration, because Francis is rooted in the belief that there is no Church without Eucharist, and there is no Eucharist without those who consecrate the Body and Blood of Christ.

¹⁵ God donates Himself completely. What else can we desire? God alone is sufficient, there should be no more place in us after the inrush of God’s fullness into our life, In Him we are made able to love everybody, much more and much better.

¹⁶ *Sine glossa* – without gloss, e.g. interpreting Scripture to prove our preconceived idea or reinforce our own position

Francis and then to ask if I am ready to develop the same kind of “relationship” with Jesus that Francis lived.

If I am ready, then, I will discover in me the germ of the *charism*, and gradually God’s desire for me will manifest itself more and more clearly.

If I find the humble God, the simple God, the servant God , the God who has emptied himself, and if I find him in the Son and if in finding him, I make him not only an object of intellectual reflection but I manage somehow to make Him the foundation of my life and practice, as Francis did, then, this is Franciscan vocation.

Francis’ *charism*, then, starts working in me to transform me and enables me to undertake and continue his original mission, in a *personal* way, blending this charism into my own unique life and making it my own.

If we have made the right discernment, however, we have to make sure that we follow through and make every effort to fully develop our vocation. We cannot be apathetic or hesitant about living this charism; if we are not committed, then it is not vocation.

“**Receiving his charism**”, therefore, means:

- *receiving Francis* as our model, constant inspiration, spiritual brother and guide.
- Receiving and accepting him, enables us to *receive his “spirit”*, in a way similar to the “two thirds of the spirit” of Elijah as requested by Elisha (2Kings 2, 9);

Together with *the Charism of Francis*, we also receive some fundamental gifts to fulfill our *vocation* and to accomplish our *mission* in the Franciscan way of life:

- a **special Grace** which God bestows on his children, to help them and enable them to carry out this type of following and mission. This is a form of *grace particular to this new state of life*, springing from our Profession, which is a true and real life-long *nuptial alliance* with God. This Grace is the gift of the Spouse: we give our life to Him, He responds and totally gives His to us.
- Profession is a *liturgical act*: it realizes, what it signifies. For this, a special gift of grace accompanies this consecration of ourselves.
- the **intercession of Saint Francis**, whose spiritual children we become.
- the **inclusion** in the *reciprocal vital communion* of the whole Franciscan Family of today and of all times.

This new gift which we have received in our call, is added to all other particular gifts we have already received. "*Our personal charism*" makes us those unique persons that God has loved and desired from eternity.

MISSION

After dealing with Charism it is necessary to examine the Mission of St. Francis and of his Family: TO REPAIR THE CHURCH (HOUSE).

This 'mission' of saint Francis, which at first looks so *generic* and *all inclusive*, is in fact Saint Francis' "**specific**" Mission.

Jesus Christ Himself indicated the mission to Francis in the San Damiano Chapel when he "*heard with his bodily ears a voice coming from that cross, telling him three times: Francis go and repair my house, which, as you see, is all being destroyed*" (LMj II, 1).

In that moment, Francis understood his mission and what would eventually become the mission of the whole Franciscan Family.¹⁷

What is the House-Church, and how is it repaired?

It is the Body of Christ. In it, Christ is the head, we are the members. But if the house is the Body of Christ, it can only be repaired with Christ Himself, through His Spirit!

The House-Church, Body of Christ, is healthy when those who look at it, and those who live in it, see the person of Jesus and, seeing Jesus, sees and 'hears' the Father. "Show us the Father and it will be enough for us." "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father" (Jn 14: 8-9). To see the face of Christ, Way, Truth and Life (NMI 16 & ff), means to be on the way towards the Father, means to see the Father.

"*We want to see Jesus*" (Jn 12:21).

¹⁷ Paul VI reminds us: "*The vision of Innocent III of Francis who is supporting the Lateran Basilica, in other words the Church, the mystical body of Christ in his historical and central, unified, hierarchical and roman expression, has divined the vocation and mission of the great Franciscan family*". (OFM General Chapter 23/6/1067)

He repeated to the Secular Franciscans: "*We hope and trust that the visible and human Church will be supported by you especially, dear tertiaries,*" recalling the vision of Innocent III (19/05/1971). Francis repaired the Church "*not by way of criticism but by way of sanctity*". "*His charism and prophetic mission were to demonstrate concretely and in an exemplary way that the Gospel is entrusted to the Church, and that it has to be lived and incarnated fully and in an exemplary way in the Church and with the approval of the Church*" J. Paul II, Message to the Franciscan Vigil in St. Peter's 2/10/1982. See also Fr. Cristoforo Piacitelli OFM, "Con Francesco nel mondo per il mondo", page 13, Collana Tau 2003.

This is what the man of the 1st Century asked. This is what the man of the 13th Century asked as well. **Today, this is still what we are asking.** This is what every creature asks for all eternity.

Now, as we look at Francis, we see Christ! Francis has become a *sacrament of Christ...* and Christ leads us to the Father.

It is essential, therefore, for us to rediscover or maybe discover for the first time, that at the very center of our charism, is the heavenly Father (centrality of the Father) and to understand its importance for our spiritual journey and the realization of the mission.

This is the journey that Francis, guided by the Spirit, has done and what we have to do. Therefore, we must commit ourselves to become, feel and behave as true "*children;*" to discover the infinite richness of the Father and draw from it the capacity to love, to give and to forgive.

Jesus Himself wants the Father to be the norm and model, the inspiration and aim of all human beings. "*Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.*" (Mt 5:48; NMI 31)

This invitation carries with it a special meaning and responsibility for us, the children of Francis, whom the Spirit has endowed with the **special charism of son ship**. We are called to conform to the Son and to listen with a filial heart, when He speaks to us of the Father and proposes to us the attitudes to imitate.

We now understand that there are no limits in the scope of the mission of Secular Franciscans, which is to enhance and support the Mission of the Church to the whole world.

We, Secular Franciscans have to make ourselves available, like Francis, every time the Church calls, every time there is something, anything, to "repair". There are reconciliations to promote, sufferings to alleviate, solitudes to fill, despair to console, marginalization to fight, material and spiritual poverties to heal, respect for life and for nature, youth to love and to accompany, places to catechize, Liturgies to animate, and Christian communities to support in anything they might need, etc. These are the places where Secular Franciscans need to be found! There are no limits !

The children of Francis must continue his mission! What a responsibility!

APPENDIX 1 -- BASIC SIGMA AND ABBREVIATIONS

Writings of Saint Francis

Adm - Admonitions
2EpFid - Letter to all the Faithful, second red.
EpOrd - Letter to the entire Order
FormViv - The 'Form of Life' (to Saint Clare)
RegB - The Confirmed Rule (1223)
RegNB - The Unconfirmed Rule (1221)
SalBMV - Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Test - Testament

Writings of Saint Clare

BCl - Blessing of Saint Clare
2EpAg - Second Letter to St. Agnes of Prague
3EpAg - Third Letter to St. Agnes of Prague
4EpAg - Fourth Letter to St. Agnes of Prague
RegCl - Rule of St. Clare
TestCl - Testament of St. Clare

Other Early Documents

1C or 1Cel - First Life of St. Francis, Thomas of Celano
2C or 2Cel - Second Life of St. Francis, Thomas of Celano
Fior - Fioretti (Little Flowers of St. Francis)
LegCl - Legend of St. Clare
LMj or LegM - Major Life of St. Francis, St. Bonaventure
LP or LegPer - Legend of Perugia
Proc - Canonization Process of St. Clare
SC - Sacrum Commercium

Other Documents

NMI - Novo Millennio Ineunte, John Paul II, 2001
RegSFO - The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order (1978)
VC - Vita Consecrata, John Paul II, 1996

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