



## **Francis as the model of authentic Church reform**

April 2, 2003

Franciscan University of Steubenville

I write a lot of letters every day because a lot of people write to me, and my parents always taught me that ignoring anyone is bad manners. So I always write back, which means I have a lot of interesting pen pals, some happy, some angry and a few who are a little strange. One of the angry ones emailed me a few weeks ago to complain that the Archdiocese of Denver was becoming a magnet for every flaky, right wing new group in the Church. And I immediately thought: Thank you for a great way to begin my talk on St. Francis.

It's true that God has raised up many new charisms and communities in the Church over the last 60 years, and especially since Vatican II. It's true that all of them have their special weaknesses along with their special strengths. And it's also true that the Archdiocese of Denver has tended to welcome them with an openness which they may not always find elsewhere. I think that's partly because of the vision of my predecessor, Cardinal Francis Stafford, and partly because of the conversion our own local Church has undergone since World Youth Day 1993.

But in each of these new charisms that has taken root in Colorado – groups like the Community of the Beatitudes, the Neocatechumenal Way, the Christian Life Movement, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, the charismatic renewal, Opus Dei, Cursillo, the Marian Community of Reconciliation, Families of Nazareth, and most recently a wonderful apostolic society that began 30 years ago in Peru, the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae – in each of these cases, their spirit is something very familiar to anyone who knows St. Francis.

Francis once said that, "the saints lived lives of heroic virtue, [but] we are satisfied to talk about them." Francis himself wasn't satisfied with pious words. He wanted to act on the things he believed. He called his brothers to live the Gospel with simplicity and honesty. And that's why he used the words *sine glossa* – without gloss -- in his Testament. He saw that the Gospel wasn't complicated, but it was demanding and difficult. The theologians and Church lawyers of his day had written commentaries called glosses. And these glosses were very good at either explaining away the hard parts of the Gospel, or diminishing our need to follow Christ's demands. Francis wanted none of that. He was a radical in the truest sense. He wanted to experience discipleship at its root.

Francis lived in a time at least as complicated as our own. It was an age of Christians killing Christians, Muslims and Christians killing each other, wars between cities and states, and corruption both within and outside the Church. Views of society and the Church were changing, and both were experiencing upheaval. The feudal system was falling apart. For much of his life, Francis was lost in the confusion. But in his experience of faith and prayer, he came to some basic insights that gave him a very powerful inner freedom. And this enabled him to live the Gospel with simplicity and clarity in such a way that he not only was converted himself, but also became the leader of a movement of conversion in the Church and society at large.

The insight of Francis was very simple. He experienced God as a personal, loving Father -- and knowing that a father would not give his son a scorpion when he asks for bread, Francis decided to live in the world as God's trusting child. Of course, this led him to identify with Jesus Christ, the Son in whom we become God's sons – male and female alike -- and in that experience, Francis began to graft his own life onto the way of Jesus Christ.

Right away that had consequences. Because of his relationship with God as his Father and Jesus as his Brother, Francis began to experience other people in a new way. They became his sisters and brothers because they were sons and daughters of God and sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ -- and this relationship wasn't just one of words. It was a reality. Everyone and all creation that flows from the Fatherhood of God are somehow "children" of God. And that explains Francis' reverence toward nature, because nature also flows from the hand of a loving Father. Francis' ability to seek real holiness and to be a poor man came directly from this understanding of God's personal love. He wanted to depend on nothing but the providential care of God, his Father.

Not all of his brothers saw things in the same clear way. Francis had a lot of struggles in his order. He was a man of great gentleness and charity, but he could also be very tough. He fought with his brothers quite frequently, especially when they wanted to water down what he knew was the inspiration that God had given him. The Franciscan Order, right from its origins, was the place where the struggle was joined. And Francis was always right at the heart of the battle. In the year 1221, just a few years after the Franciscan community began, some 3,000 friars gathered with Francis for a general chapter. And the ministers, the ones who were the leaders of the community, wanted to change the Rule. They wanted to accommodate it to the times, so it wouldn't be so demanding. Of course St. Francis fought that. And this man of peace chose the following verse from Scripture as the theme for his preaching that day: "Blessed be the Lord my God, who trains my hands for war." Those were the words that he spoke to his brothers as he began his homily. And he won the day. The Rule was later modified anyway, but not that day, because Francis knew how to fight hard for what he believed was right. Like Mother Teresa and many other saints all through Church history, Francis was holy and good and kind -- but when it came to fighting for matters of faith and principle, he was not necessarily nice, and he was never soft.

The chapter of 1221 tells us something else about St. Francis very useful for our own day: his humility and obedience. After the chapter, the ministers of the Franciscan community did succeed in wresting control of the Order away from Francis' hands. For awhile, in some ways, he just gave up. Francis got tired of the battle and went off to the hermitage with a few of his friends. But he was angry and badly depressed. From time to time he still wanted to fight. He's quoted as saying -- or shouting actually, at one point -- "If I go to the chapter, I'll show them who I am!" He was going to straighten the brothers out, and teach them what was right.

But eventually the Church, in the person of the Holy Father, approved the Order's modified Rule. And once the Church had approved it, Francis had a peace-giving dream in which Jesus spoke to him. Tradition tells us that the Lord said to Francis, "Poor little man, why are you so sad? Is not your order, My order? Is it not I who am its chief shepherd? Cease to be afflicted, then, and take care rather of your own salvation." We're told that after Francis had this dream, the peace and joy that were so characteristic of his early life returned to him, and he died in that spirit of grace.

That peace Francis experienced is something we need to reflect on very carefully today, because many of us are probably worried about the Church. We've experienced a kind of corporate demoralization as Catholics over the past year.

The political life of the Church seems to be in disarray. We have all sorts of factions fighting each other, among priests, among bishops, and certainly among our laypeople. We're humiliated and shaken by the criminal sexual behavior of some of our clergy. And this has led, even for some who are deeply loyal to the Church, to a lack of confidence in ourselves as individuals, in our priests, in the Church and her future, and even sometimes to a lack of confidence in Jesus Christ. We wonder if the Gospel is really true or if the Church is just a fraud. We have struggles with our faith.

Francis certainly felt many of the same sentiments, and he faced many of the same questions. And yet a very clear part of his spirituality was his love for the Church, his obedience to her pastors, his unwillingness to be critical of the Church. Instead of tearing her down because of the sins of her leaders, Francis chose to love the Church and serve her -- and because of that love and by his simple living of the Gospel without compromise, he became the means God used for the conversion and renewal of a whole age of faith.

When God called Francis to repair the Church, Francis heard it literally and thought he was supposed to repair the chapel of San Damiano near Assisi. But of course the real call was to repair the larger Church with an interior revolution, by the personal witness of a pure and basic living of the Gospel.

Francis loved Scripture as deeply as he loved the Church, and he understood the intimate linkage between the two. Scripture is the lifeblood of the Christian faith, and the Church is its hands and feet, its bone and its muscle. They depend on each other in the work they share of feeding and sanctifying the world. Some time ago, I had a young Franciscan Scripture scholar from Poland visiting me in Denver. He was giving a mission in one of our local parishes. One afternoon he asked me if I had a fireplace in which to burn some papers. I said "no," and I asked him why. And he said that as he was working on his talks, he had written verses from Scripture on these pieces of paper, and he just couldn't bear to put them in the garbage because they contained the word of God. He wanted to burn them so that those words would be treated reverently.

This reminded me of Francis himself, who insisted that his brothers pick up scraps of paper they found lying around, just in case the word of God might be written on them. That same kind of reverence for God's word ought to characterize each of our lives -- and for that matter, all of our discussions about the Liturgy, which is the source and summit of our lives as believers. All of us need to be concerned that our translations of the Scriptures are accurate, so that the word of God in its fullest meaning can be handed on from generation to generation. We should never retranslate or "reinterpret" the Scriptures in a way that either panders to contemporary sentiments or doesn't adequately capture the challenge of Scripture to today's culture. Francis understood that, and so should we.

The Franciscan tradition tells us that often in his life, Francis would meet with his community, and this man who was one of history's greatest saints would say to them, "Brothers, up to now we have done nothing. Let us begin." And I think that even though we've accomplished many wonderful things in the Church in the United States, even though we have hundreds of new buildings, 19,000 parishes and tens of thousands of good people doing religious education and evangelization, teaching in our schools, running our charities, doing RCIA, and taking part in the Liturgy with joy -- even though all these things are going on, if we want to be what God calls us to be in the years that lie ahead, we need to be like St. Francis.

We need to look at each other and say to each other every day, "Dear sister, dear brother, up to now we've done nothing, but let's begin. Let's begin in the name of the Lord Jesus, let's live our lives in His name, and let's end in His name because in no other name will we ever find salvation."

And this brings us back to where we started. Those of you who know Franciscan history know that the Capuchins began as a reform movement within the Franciscan Order. The Capuchins wanted to recover the purity and simplicity of the original vision of St. Francis, and that's certainly why I saw my vocation as a Capuchin even before I was sure of my vocation as a priest. Young people are hungry for a challenge, and Capuchin spirituality is challenging; it understands in a very special way that the Church is always reforming and always in need of reform -- *ecclesia semper reformans, semper reformanda* -- beginning with the individual believer.

But if that principle applies to the Church, it also applies to the charisms within the Church. Religious communities like the Jesuits, the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the TORs here in Steubenville, are great traditions. They can thrive and be fruitful for a very long time -- but unless they find some way of constantly reconverting themselves to the Gospel, constantly resubmitting themselves in love and obedience to Jesus Christ and His Church, then even great traditions sooner or later become part of the furniture. That's why God raises up new saints and new communities to blow the dust off our discipleship and set our hearts on fire. And that's why, as a Capuchin Franciscan, I see Francis again and again in the new movements and communities taking root in the Church.

Francis wasn't the only Church reformer of his day. Plenty of other men and women saw the problems in the Church and tried to do something about it. Francis wasn't even the smartest or the most talented -- but he was almost certainly the most faithful, the most honest, the most humble, the most single-minded in his mission, and the most zealous in his love for Jesus Christ. And I'd argue that these marks of authentic Church renewal haven't really changed at all in 800 years.

Whenever I hear people talking about the need for Church reform, the first thing I ask is how they feel about obedience. Francis of Assisi was a strong, shrewd man and nobody's fool, but both he and St. Clare wanted to be obedient to the Church because Jesus was obedient to His Father, and they understood that our salvation came through that submission of obedience.

When an individual or even a religious community redefines obedience to mean something other than a practical, willing obedience to the Gospel and to the pastors of Christ's Church – no matter how imperfect those pastors are -- what always results, without exception, is disobedience to Christ Himself. So if the new communities in the Church are "right wing and flaky" because they seek to be obedient, then so was St. Francis, and we need a lot more of it.

If the new communities in the Church are "right wing and flaky" because they preach Jesus Christ without caveats or excuses, and want to bring the whole world to believe in Him, then so was St. Francis, and we need a lot more of it.

If the new communities in the Church are "right wing and flaky" because they choose joy and zeal and hope rather than fighting for what they mistake to be power; or because they're more interested in actually living the Catholic faith than in reshaping it in the image of their own theology, then so was St. Francis, and we need a lot more of it.

Throughout my life, I've often turned to the Prayer of St. Francis before the Crucifix. It goes like this:

Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, so that I may carry out your holy and true command.

It's always easier to talk about reform when the target of the reform is "out there," rather than in here. The Church does need reform. She always needs reform, which means she needs scholars and liturgists and committed laypeople to help guide her, and pastors who know how to lead with humility, courage and love. But what she needs more than anything else is holiness – holy priests and holy people who love Jesus Christ and love His Church more than they love their own ideas. Today, just like 800 years ago, the structures of the Church are so much easier to tinker with than a stubborn heart, or an empty hole where our faith should be. Reforming the Church, renewing the Church, begins with our own repentance and conversion, our own humility and willingness to serve -- and that's the really hard work, which is why sometimes so little of it seems to get done.

But it can be done. Francis showed us how. Now it's up to us to do something about it.