

The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans - Assumption BVM Province

February 2008 - No. 13

Spirituality and the Places of Our Lives St. John Lateran Baptistry of the Franciscan Order



Basilica of St. John Lateran: Rome

St. John Lateran is more closely connected with the life of Francis and the whole Franciscan movement than any other place in Rome. In 1209 Francis and his first companions came here to have their way of life confirmed. Pope Innocent III gave verbal approval to the brothers, tonsured them, and commissioned them to preach penance. This fact is so vital because if Francis had not come to Innocent there would be no Franciscan family today. For this reason St. John Lateran is called the Baptistry of the Franciscan movement, the place where the Franciscan family was born into the Church.



Baptistry at St. John Lateran, Rome

Why did the Pope listen to Francis and confirm his way of life? Prior to Francis ever meeting Innocent, something had been happening to him. What happened to Francis is what made the Pope listen. Three factors stand out.

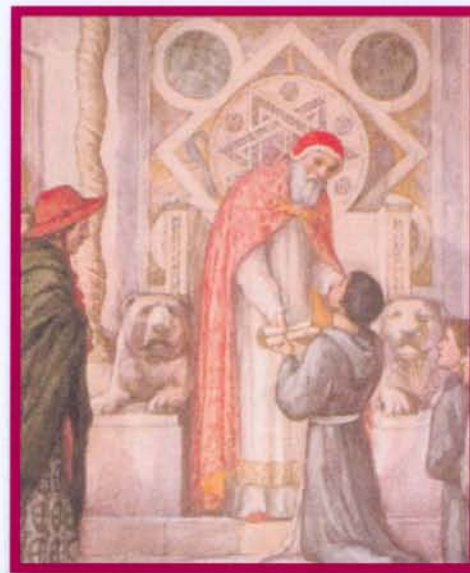
The **first** came from Francis's experience of God. The time he spent in the caves around Assisi affected an interior change. This change gave Francis an inner power and conviction which compelled the Pope's attention. Francis developed an interior silence which made it easy for the Pope to see and to listen.

Innocent thus knew that here was a God-spirited man and could not help but confirm Francis's proposal and send him forth for the Church.

The **second** is Francis's self confidence. Although he saw himself as dependent and nothing on his own, he grew in the awareness of his goodness and inner potential because of God. It was humility, learned in the caves, and the experience of dependence, that kept a proper balance. Francis's experience of God didn't allow greatness to turn into pride, power or arrogance.

One time Innocent asked Francis to pray that God might reveal his will regarding Francis's request. God spoke to Francis figuratively

through the image of a poor woman living in the desert with her sons. He returned to the Supreme Pontiff and narrated the story. "My Lord," he said, "I am that little poor woman whom the loving Lord, in His mercy, has adorned, and through whom He has been pleased to give birth to legitimate sons."



Innocent III confirms the Franciscan Way of Life, 1209

In effect Francis was saying: "God has called me; God is leading me. I am that woman; I am giving birth. I know this with certainty." It led to confidence, sealed Francis's identity within, and gave force to his honesty. This compelled the Pope to confirm what God was doing.

Thirdly, Francis was convinced of God's call to a renewal of life based on the entirety of the Gospel.

Francis's life is sometimes aligned with other apostolic movements of his time which concentrated on Christ's missionary discourse to his apostles, encouraging his followers to go about the world with little or nothing. Duane Lapsanski, however, writes in *The First Franciscans and the Gospel* (pp. 54-56):

Francis also began his evangelical metanoia by observing these (apostolic) demands, as his biographers emphasize. But during the course of his life this evangelical seed blossomed into the observance of the whole Gospel...

For some unexplainable reason, the various lay movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries completely lost sight of the following of Christ and once again gave their full allegiance to the following of the apostles...

With the coming of St. Francis and his followers, however, this "apostolic" element receded completely into the background and was replaced by a renewed emphasis on the following of Christ. Though many elements in the life of the Friars Minor closely resembled that of the earlier movements, their motivation and inspiration for living this kind of life were significantly different. Whereas the life of the apostles and the example of the early Church were the primary goals of most religious groups of these centuries, it was clearly the following of Christ himself which inspired the Friars Minor. ...

This could well be some of the motivation that prompted Innocent III to approve this movement. Francis says in his Testament: "...the Most High himself made it clear to me that I must live the life of the Gospel." What we have is a deep-seated conviction on the part of Francis that he was called to live not simply a part of the Gospel, but rather the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whole and entire, particularly the great commandment of love of God and neighbor.

To answer the question "Why did Innocent listen to Francis?" the above reasons are compelling. Francis had no hidden agenda. All he desired was to imitate Christ and this completely disarmed any adversaries. To say no to Francis would have seemed like saying no directly to Christ. And because of his rootedness in Christ, Francis could embrace the Church as an institution, despite her shortcomings. To embrace the Church, for Francis, was to embrace Christ.



Francis Holding Up the Church.
Monument built by Benito Mussolini
1926

Francis did not allow the Church to be a hard rock, unbending or lifeless. Rather he found himself reborn in and through the Church as a mother giving birth. How can we bring life to the Church in our time? How to rebuild and yet stay within the institution? How to transform from within? How to make

a hard rock soft, pliable and life-giving? How can we be pregnant with Jesus? Francis pointed out a way and the Franciscan family was born.

I wish all my SFO Brothers and Sisters a Blessed and Grace-filled LENT. May our hearts turn ever more fully to embrace the whole Gospel. *Fr. Roch*

SFO FRANCISCAN PILGRIMAGE

November 8-17, 2008

Brothers and sisters, I encourage you to consider this Pilgrimage to Rome, Greccio, La Verna and Assisi. I am again including a flyer with full details Register as soon as possible. Use this application or the one on the flyer. If more needed, call or write.

APPLICATION

Detach and send with \$200.00 deposit to:

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Published by:

Fr. Roch Niemier, OFM

Provincial Spiritual Assistant
9230 W. Highland Park Ave. - Franklin, WI 53132
414.349-6851
email - roch@ofm-abvm.org.