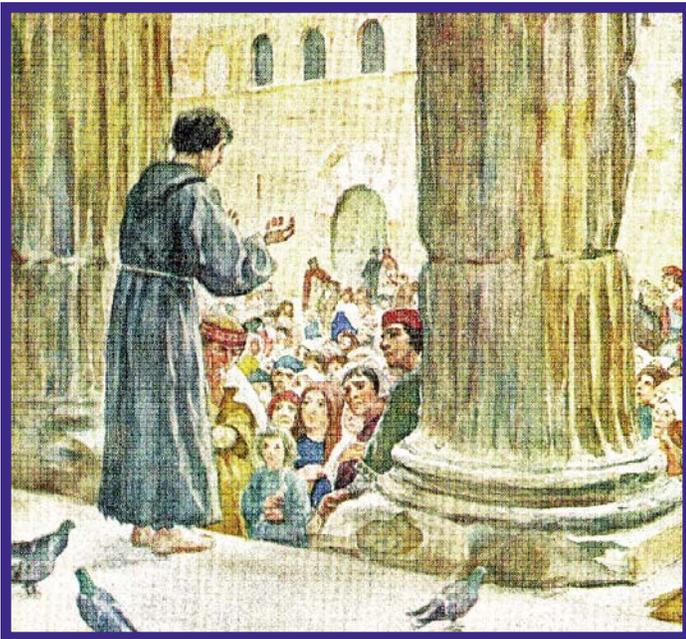


The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

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Francis preaches his first sermon

One day he was riding his horse near Assisi, when he met a leper. And, even though he usually shuddered at lepers, he made himself dismount, and gave him a coin, kissing his hand as he did so. After he accepted a kiss of peace from him, Francis remounted and continued on his way. He then began to consider himself less and less, until, by God's grace, he came to complete victory over himself. ... After a few days, he moved to a hospice of lepers, taking with him a large sum of money. Calling them all together, as he kissed the hand of each, he gave them alms. When he left there, what before had been bitter, that is, to see and touch lepers, was turned into sweetness.

Another fascinating story (**Mirror of Perfection, 66**) exemplifies how St. Francis transformed the life of three robbers.

A party of bandits who used to hide in the woods and rob travelers occasionally came for food to a hermitage of the brothers situated above Borgo San Sepolcro. Some of the brothers said that it was not right to give them alms, while others did

so out of compassion, and urged them to repent. Meanwhile blessed Francis came to this friary, and the brothers asked him whether it was right to give them alms. And he said to them, 'If you will do as I tell you, I trust in God that we shall win their souls. So go and bring some good bread and wine, and take it to the woods where they live. And shout to them, saying, "Brother bandits, come to us. We are brothers, and are bringing you some good bread and wine!" And they will come at once. Then you must spread a cloth on the ground, place the bread and wine on it, and serve them humbly and gladly until they have eaten. After the

meal speak to them of our Lord's words, and end by asking them for the love of God to grant your first request, which is to promise not to strike or injure anyone. On a later day take them eggs and cheese with the bread and wine to show that you

Transformation

Transformed people transform people. I ask you to read these words again. Transformed people transform people.

As we enter the season of Lent we are aware that a major focus has to do with conversion: change of heart and change of behavior. Transforming one's heart is one consideration, difficult but possible under the power of grace. However, to be an effective agent in bringing about transformation of life in others is another matter.

The key to having an impact on the hearts of others begins with the depth of transformation that has happened in one's own journey of life. Transformed people transform others.

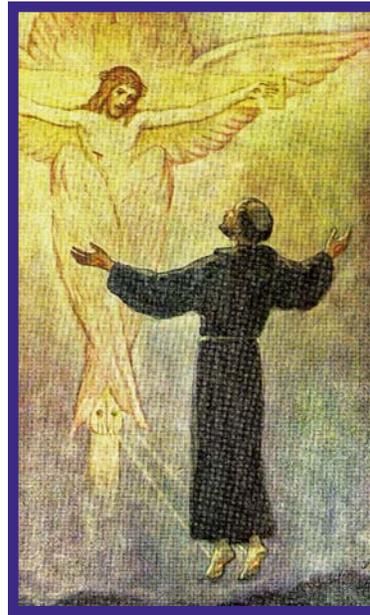
This is at the heart of the Secular Franciscan life and vocation. This was and is the heart of Francis, a fitting reflection to consider during this season of grace.

Perhaps the principal story of transformation in Francis's life came at the moment he met and embraced a leper on the road below Assisi. The strength of that encounter empowered him to spend the rest of his life seeking transforming grace in the hearts of others. **The Legend of the Three Companions, 11**, tells us:

SFO GC 17,1:
Called to work together in building up the Church as the sacrament of salvation for all and, through their baptism and profession, made "witnesses and instruments of her mission," Secular Franciscans proclaim Christ by their life and words. Their preferred apostolate is personal witness in the environment in which they live and service for building up the Kingdom of God within the situations of this world.

appreciate their promise, and serve them until they have eaten. And after the meal say to them, "Why do you stay here all day to die of hunger, and suffer so much hardship? And why do you do so many evil things, for which you will lose your souls unless you turn to God? It is better to serve God, for He will both supply your bodily needs in this world, and save your souls at the last." Then God will move them to repentance because of the humility and charity that you have shown them.'

So the brothers did everything that blessed Francis had told them, and by the grace and mercy of God the bandits listened to them, and observed all that the brothers had humbly asked of them. Further, they themselves humbly began to serve the brothers and carried logs up to the hermitage on their shoulders for them. At length some of the bandits entered the Order; the others confessed their crimes and did penance for their sins, laying their hands in those of the brothers, and promising that henceforward they would live by their own labor and never do such things again.



A moment of ecstasy.

Prayer: Intimately linked with desire is **prayer**. Each day one needs to beg God in prayer for the grace of transformation. Daily one needs to ask God to refine and purify this focus. No one can achieve it on one's own. It is God's project, and only grace makes it happen. The grace received through this process prepares one to become more vulnerable, compassionate, and more open to the exchange of life with others. It awakens a new strength within one's heart.

Relationships: "How do I open my heart to the transforming grace of Jesus?" The answer is simple yet difficult. Just live with others: in family life, community life, one's work place or parochial setting. The give and take of daily life will give us all the opportunities we need to live the Gospel. One does not need to look further for any challenges.

The life of Secular Franciscans infuses the Gospel into every facet of secular life. It is difficult to teach the Gospel unless I am transformed into it. That's what Secular Franciscans are all about, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel (**SFO Rule 4**).

I encourage you to consider this well as we all enter upon our graced season of Lent, literally a new springtime on our Franciscan spiritual journey. Remember:

Transformed people transform people.

(Richard Rohr)

(All pictures are from watercolors by P. Subercaseaux Errazuriz.)

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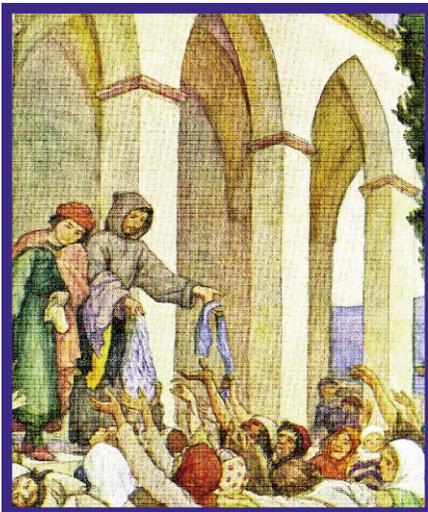
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Bernard of Quintavalle giving to the poor.

The people of Francis's time were mesmerized by the example of his life and his preaching. They were convinced of being in the presence of one who became a living Gospel. Their lives were profoundly affected and a conversion to Gospel living became desirable. Why? Because the people wanted what Francis had. It was this witness, a

transformed Francis, that attracted so many men and women to join him, NOT follow him, but join him in proclaiming and living the Gospel. They hungered for, and wanted, what Francis discovered.

Steps to Transformation

Desire: A person must want to be transformed into Jesus Christ, filled with a desire to become the image God has always intended. Desire is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but often one's heart will vacillate between wanting transformation and then not wanting it, being aware the desire is there, then gone. Through these ambiguities of life, however, we beg God repeatedly to grant it.

SFO Rule 6:

They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession.

Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words.