

# *Conference of National Spiritual Assistants*

## **Secular Franciscan Order**

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### **A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF APRIL 2021.**

#### **“THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL” FRANCIS TO FRANCIS PART 3**

As we enter this season of joy and celebrate the Easter mysteries, we continue that theme in this final reflection on the “joy of the Gospel” Francis to Francis.

For St. Francis, to follow Jesus was to fully live the life of the Church, the Roman Catholic Church.

Pope Innocent III had the humility, faith and openness to the Holy Spirit to take the risk of approving a new men’s religious community.

That St. Francis was unwaveringly loyal to the Catholic Church and refused to harshly criticize priests and bishops for their shortcomings is clear from his writings.

Perhaps the most eloquent and powerful of St. Francis’ loyalty to the Church and to all things Catholic is again seen in his Testament.

He speaks of his veneration of churches, priests, the Eucharistic species, anything bearing the name of God, and even theologians.

Francis was not a reformer who sought to make His calling and His life a standard for the rest of the Church, even for the leadership of the Church.

He was genuinely and truly humble.

He accused himself of his sin and weakness before everyone, from God to his brothers.

Francis knew his place in the Church and in God’s plan.

Poverty is certainly at the heart of St. Francis’ way of following Jesus. However, this could not have borne the fruit it did without obedience, which rooted all that Francis and his friars did. This was on a firm foundation, solid as a rock.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from the II Vatican Council, the primary image of the Church is the People of God, and Pope Francis expounds on this truth that God’s plan is to save his People, not as isolated individuals.

In a General Audience during 2013 Pope Francis posed some questions to us and so I want to restate them.

“Let us ask ourselves today: how much do I love the Church? Do I pray for her? Do I feel part of the family of the Church? What do I do to ensure that she is a community in which each one feels welcome and understood, feels the mercy and the love of God who renews life? Faith is a gift and an act that concerns us personally, but God calls us to live out our faith together, as a family, as a Church.”

Pope Francis emphasizes that we, the Church, are a people on a journey, a pilgrim people walking together with Jesus.

Like St. Francis, Pope Francis realizes that the Catholic Church is a church of sinners, of penitents not a church of the pure and perfect.

Pope Francis sees the Church’s holiness manifest in the patience and endurance of Christians who strive to

God's will in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life.

There are many in the Church who struggle and suffer, and the Church weeps and prays with them.

Pope Francis said "Our Mother Church has...the courage of a woman who knows that her children are hers and that she must defend them and bring them to meet her husband."

Pope Francis' care and concern extends to the whole Church of which he is the Chief Shepherd.

We also have to remind ourselves that Pope Francis is a Jesuit and not a Franciscan.

Remember how St. Francis emphasized obedience to the Catholic Church and her leaders.

St. Ignatius of Loyola the founder of the Society of Jesus also saw obedience to the Church and to the Pope as a foundation for his own spiritual life and later for his religious community.

His spirituality saw that if one is obedient to the Catholic Church or to one's superiors and community, these are expressions of obedience to Jesus Christ and to His Gospel.

St. Ignatius of Loyola expressed obedience as "thinking with the Church." Pope Francis says this means all members of the Church – The People of God – listening to each other in the pursuit of truth and what is right.

An element of Jesuit Spirituality that is most helpful in Pope Francis' Petrine Ministry is the discernment of God's will by seeking to see and hear things from God's point of view.

Pope Francis is unabashedly prophetic – he is not afraid to speak a clear, direct prophetic word, not only to the world and to the "average" Catholic, but also to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

"Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News that the kingdom of God is at hand."

Pope Francis and St. Francis not only agree on this Gospel fundamental mission, but both of them make clear that this Good News of Jesus and his Kingdom is something each person is invited to accept personally through faith.

"The fundamental mission of the Church is to introduce others to the person of Jesus so that all may become new creations through faith in him.

Pope Francis said: "The Church is not a relief organization, an enterprise or an NGO but a community of people animated by the Holy Spirit who have lived and are living the wonder of the encounter with Jesus Christ and want to share this experience of deep joy, the message of salvation that the Lord gave us. It is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church in this path."

St. Francis preached in a rather unconventional way and this increased his popularity.

Pope Francis' informal speaking style and his occasional prophetic gestures in reaching out to people reflect St. Francis in some ways.

For Pope Francis, like St. Francis repentance is a central theme of his preaching.

He always calls attention to the mercy of God, yet this mercy and forgiveness only comes if a person approaches God with a repentant heart, confessing one's sins specifically and turning away from them.

He speaks often on the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He explains the reason that Catholics confess their sins to a priest in this Sacrament. He said: "Some people say they confess their sins directly to God, but it is too easy, it's like confessing by email." The Pope stresses the need to be sincere and specific in confessing sin as a "grace," because we should be ashamed of our sins before the sanctity of God.

Both Pope Francis and St. Francis are concerned for the personal, compassionate contact with individuals especially the poor, the infirmed and the marginalized.

It is a mission and ministry of 'presence' and of personal example, the witness of our lives more than our words.

Pope Francis underscores the need for Christians, including Church leaders to reach out in real, practical ways to those on the outskirts, those who are marginalized in any way in society or in the Church.

“If I do not succeed in being a servant of the Gospel, my life is worth nothing.”

However, the Pope also said: “The Church is not a refuge for sad people but rather a house of joy.”

Nothing attracts like joy. Nothing can lead others to Jesus Christ or at least have them consider faith in God effectively as Christians who are genuinely joyful.

Definitely in the lives of St. Francis and Pope Francis we can see that joy is a hallmark of their lives.

St. Francis believed that the only thing that should cause a person to be sad is sin, and the remedy for sin is close at hand – repentance.

For St. Francis the only joy is found in Jesus, both to suffer for him and to praise him for who he is and for all his gifts.

Jorge Bergoglio chose the name Francis for many reasons, but evidently the joy that marked St. Francis of Assisi was one of the characteristics that resonated with him and certainly radiates from him in his pastoral ministry.

The joy of meeting Jesus and following him who is a man of joy setting us all an example.

Jesus was full of joy because of his intimacy with his Father.

Jesus is the reason for joy of Christians and the author of this joy is the Holy Spirit.

Joy is the result of praising God which is humanity’s deepest desire.

As St. Francis had a deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Pope Francis expresses the need to pray to Mary for the gift of joy and the grace to praise God.

“It is she, the Virgin Mary, who brings joy. We must pray to Our Lady that in bringing Jesus, she gives us the grace of joy, of freedom, the grace of praise.”

Joy must be authentic, flowing from a consistent Christian life.

An authentic Christian life finds joy only in the Lord as St. Francis discovered.

St. Francis and his friars shared their joy by the way they lived.

St. Francis responded, and Pope Francis is responding to their call to live the Gospel joyfully and proclaim it boldly with joy.

Pope Francis says: “Evangelizing, proclaiming Jesus, gives us joy. Instead, egoism makes us bitter, sad and depressed. Evangelizing uplifts us.”

The challenge to you and me is: Are our lives so full of Gospel Joy – are people asking us: “Why are you so happy?”

Evangelization is first and foremost a work of God. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I say rejoice.’ (Phil 4:4)

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