

The Gospel as the first criterion

Francis' fundamental loyalty to the Church is beyond doubt. His writings bear witness to this fact. What he wrote about "true faith," the respect and honor due to the sacraments, his respectful behavior towards priests and theologians, his respect for diocesan bishops and the rules he wrote concerning obedience to the Cardinal Protector of the Order, all bear witness to that. It was this loyalty which enabled him to get his ideals approved by the Roman authorities. The Saint of Assisi, however, can in no way be called "a man of the Church", if this label designates someone who is content with conforming to existing conditions and whose chief task would be to ensure the smoothest possible procedure. In fact, Francis did not place his Order directly at the service of the ecclesiastical institution as other founders of religious orders often did. To be sure, Francis warned his brothers explicitly against the danger of straying into heresy or moving outside the Church (2LtF; LtOrd; Test 6). But without denying dogma, liturgy or the organizational structures of the Church, Francis concentrated his whole energy in proclaiming to all a new religious-ethical message, a new way of life according to the Gospel. At least such was the impact he made on his contemporaries. He rejected all attempts to divide the Good News into legal regulations, ordinances or prescriptions. He also strictly forbade his brothers to annotate, gloss or provide further comments on the Rule. The self-assurance with which Francis approached all persons in ecclesiastical authority from the Pope downward, while fighting for the approval of this new form of life, sprang from his firm determination to want nothing but to live according to the Gospel. It is the same Gospel to which the Church and its hierarchy were bound just as firmly. Francis proved to them that one can really live according to the Gospel. We find this conviction spelled out in his Rule: The Rule and Life of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without property, and in chastity (LR 1).

Every new generation of Franciscan women and men is given the freedom and the task to use their lives in order to prove to their own age that the Gospel can be lived. This calls for initiative, for creativity to improvise and for courage to break out of established customs. It is in harmony with the original Franciscan spirit to renew the concrete ways of life and make the Gospel message more effective in the face of new situations and realities. The main criterion for the life and work of the Franciscan brothers and sisters in the Church is the practice of Jesus, His Incarnation, His life and work, His death and resurrection. It is not a matter of re-formulating the content of the Bible, dogmas and traditional moral codes. The main task of the brothers and sisters of Francis consists in living the Gospel and making it relevant for the people. The whole course on the Franciscan Mission Charism is intended to show what this means today. It means to live the Gospel in the midst of today's problem areas, to be Church, to approach people and the world in the spirit of Jesus.

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