



## 50 years Vatican Council II – Remembrance and obligation

### “But among you it will be different! “

Who has never experienced the yearning for influence and power, the struggle for first place, the competition for recognition and applause? This goes along with the ambition to stand at the top and to be better than others. Ambition and achievement are a natural requirements for achievement in school, sports, professionally and in everyday life. In any case: the right balance is the key! If it is lost, then it will turn into a problem and have negative influence on life.

Jesus demonstrates the stumbling blocks to his disciples. When he discovered that the core group of his disciples was striving to the top, which is quite a human feature, he pointed out to them that being in the first place can also make a person arrogant; power can provoke abuse of power, and mastery may mislead to oppression. “But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. And he adds: “Whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all“ (Mk 10:43f).

It means the reversal of values. Things that are small and insignificant are to be regarded as big; things that seem to be big and valuable are to be seen as small and minimal. Jesus reasons with his own mission. He, the reincarnate Son of Man, did not come to be served, but he came to serve (cf Mk 10:45). God thinks differently than man. The small should be placed at the centre, the mighty should serve. The disciples’ task is to be a role model for this divine and revolutionary change in the world and to turn its destiny for the better.

Francis of Assisi is one of the individuals who understood and lived this “other-logic” of these values. It is the lepers who opened his eyes. When he dictated his testament shortly before his death, he wanted to remind all his followers that everything had started with his shift from the wealthy town of Assisi to its outskirts; his new life at the side of the poor as the result of discipleship

of the poor Jesus of Nazareth. He tells the brothers who want to go on mission: “They should obey the Muslims, they should not start arguments, they should show that they are Christians, they should only preach once they realized that it is God’s will “ (cf ER 16). This means a mission with patience and sure instinct. Mission is to be regarded as service instead of domination, mission is to be practiced by the convincing example of life.

This is somewhat the shortened version also for the mission of the Church. It is all about conveying the liberating message of the Kingdom of God here and now. God has called on his people, his Church as the People of God, as it is described in the conciliar document *Lumen Gentium*. It is a Church where every individual has the same dignity because everyone participates in the general priesthood of Christ. It is a Church applying all sorts of charisms and the “mighty” are the servants of all, just as Jesus had asked of the disciples.

There has been certainly the desire for dominance within the Church. Missions have been fought with sword, there has been arrogance over other cultures and religions, and power has been misused. But there have also been men and women that have literally followed the example of Jesus; people dedicating their entire lives to proclaim the loving and benevolent God.

That is what people are striving for today. That is everyone’s mission. As Christians we have been sent for this service to the world. This certainly requires respectful tolerance towards all other beliefs and dialogue on equal terms. It requires the willingness to give and to receive. This way of dealing with each other can only be accomplished if only, as Francis would say, we are willing to serve each other, which means to listen to and to learn from each other. Thus, Francis has given us an example that can really help us today.

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*The council has asked the Religious Orders to return to their sources. The CCFMC is a fruit of this obligation. Thousands of sisters and brothers of the Franciscan family in the whole world are gathered together in an intercultural dialog regarding what the Franciscan spirituality has to say for our time. Fifty years after the beginning of the council we want to show with lived examples how highly relevant and explosive this is today.*

### Conversion of the Prelates

#### An activity by Saint Francis and a task following Vatican Council II

Fr. Hadrian Koch OFM

What an attempt trying to convert prelates?! This is certainly easier said than done. But be careful: this can make a person vain and self-satisfied, especially if you are not a prelate. You may point your finger at others. But you need to know that the other four fingers of your hand point at you.



But was this not part of what Francis did? Did he not convert Prelates? This was not his main objective, but it was certainly not a secondary matter for him. He tried without becoming a constant critic or nagger of the conditions in the Church. He also did not look down on people.

During the lifetime of Saint Francis the prelates obviously had little interest in pastoral care. They were owners of ecclesiastical benefices. Thus they were not very popular among people. There was a lot of criticism. There was comparison: Jesus is poor, in comparison, the Pope, the bishops and prelates become rich; Jesus is peace-loving and the Church was martial; Jesus was poor, he did not know where to sleep, the hierarchy and also the prelates loved to live the courtly life.

The lay people wanted "to follow naked, the naked-Jesus". This, obviously, the prelates did not want to do. Otherwise how could Catherine of Siena write to the Pope: "the sins of your prelates cry out to the heavens"!

For Francis, prelates had a place in his Order. If a prelate ordered a brother to do something "contra animam", i.e. 'against the soul', the brother would have the right to disobey. Prelates should also not brag that they are prelates, but "act as prelates" as if they would wash the brothers' feet. Francis loathed everything "superior" and everything that could be connected with it. He preferred to exchange all that could be connected with "magis, prae und super" (bigger, pre, above) with things that society regarded as "minores" and with "subditi" (servants). Within his Order he wanted equality for all.

This corresponded to the large movements of his time: with the quarrel against the "superbia", with arrogance, with conceit. In those days, sin was mostly committed by the "superior" people including the prelates. On the other hand, Francis clearly differed from the movements of his time, from the Cathars or the Albigenses. For Francis what mattered was self-conversion, and not to point at another person. It is one's own example - exempla trahunt – that should lead to conversion.

How successful was he in doing so? Also in this case, "success is not one of the names of God", as the Jewish religious philosopher Martin Buber would later put it.

For Francis success was not the important thing; it was not all about numbers. He said and did what he considered to be the right thing and what was based on the Gospel. Francis respected the priests and the hierarchy. At the end of the Testament of Siena he wrote at the end: "and they (the brothers) should always be faithful and subject to the prelates and to all the clerics of Holy Mother the Church."

“Faithful and subject to” – what does this mean today after the II Vatican Council? “Free spirit is the right of friends”, says a Spanish proverb. Is it only a proverb?

During the time after Francis, when the competition with the secular priests became more and more obvious, the Franciscan Duns Scotus claimed: “the Brothers are equal to the prelates of the Church; they are even closer to the state of perfection and even better suited to proclaim the Christian truth to the world.” (Hans-Joachim Schmidt, Francis of Assisi and the Order of the Franciscans p. 75; in: Francis – Light from Assisi, Publisher Christoph Stiegmann Bernd Schmies, and Heinz-Dieter Heimann. Hirmer Verlag 2010).

Conversion of the prelates. What an attempt! Second Vatican Council did not “abolish” the prelates. Bishops, Abbots and Cardinals are called prelates because they “stand before”. The 1983 issue of the Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church has implemented the resolutions by Vatican Council II and has inserted the term “personnel prelature” in addition to the already existing legal form of the “prelature” that is linked to a certain territory. The personnel prelature is a union of priests, deacons and lay people.

According to Helmut Feld it is not surprising that not a single member of the higher clergy joined the Franciscan Order during Francis’ lifetime. Francis nevertheless did not get discouraged to repeatedly set new “signs”. Living according to the Gospel was more important to him and his example was convincing – even though it impressed the “lower clergy” more as it was closer to the people. Does this still run true today?

It is not a secret that it is difficult to get out and start over – this was the case then, and still is today. But the demand is still there if you face up to it.

The extent of a “Conversion of the prelates” that has taken place or is still taking place since the time of Francis cannot be articulated on a global level. There were times when some in the Church were very “close”: During II Vatican Council forty Council-Bishops met on 16 November 1965 in the Domitilla Catacomb outside of Rome “inspired by the prophetic spirit of Dom Helder Camara”. They concluded a pact for a serving and poor Church. This “Catacomb Pact” of the prelates has largely been forgotten. That it comes back to mind after 50 years can only be welcomed.

Francis did not point the finger at anyone. He did what he thought to be right and correct according to the Gospel.

