

Vision Groups Synod Presentation: Continuing to Live the Vision

Generous Culture of Stewardship: St. Francis of Assisi

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I am Francis of Assisi and I have a vision about passionately follow and serve Christ: namely, to live for others by striving to give everything we have away instead of just striving to get. Our Lord Jesus Christ said to us in Matthew's gospel "to him who asks of you, give; and from him who would borrow of you, do not turn away." (Matt 5:42)



You may know that I did not have to choose a life of poverty. In fact, I was born to a wealthy family and had a life of great privilege. And, in my early days, I actually deeply detested the lepers around Assisi. I could not bear to look at them. Even from a distance of two miles I would hold my nose and cringe lest one of them came near!

That all changed one day as I dressed in all my fine Knight's regalia and rode my horse out of Assisi headed for Perugia to do battle. When I saw a wretched leper by the side of the road I spurred my horse on so as to pass him as quickly as possible. But as I galloped by I saw – unmistakably - in the face of the leper, the face of Christ. I stopped in my tracks and dismounted as quickly as I could. Then, I kissed the leper, gave him alms, and lifted him up and seated the man on my charger and led the way to his destination. After that experience I did not wait long before leaving behind this world of wealth I had known. Instead, I vowed to spend my life caring for lepers and praying to God. My motivation in life became to live as Jesus lived, and to preach as Jesus preached.

There were consequences of course! My father disowned me. He dismissed me and said I was a religious fanatic! I responded to him by renouncing all rights to my inheritance. From that moment on, I determined that there would be no one, anywhere, poorer than me. No matter what rags I might be wearing, should I meet a beggar dressed even worse than me, I would remove even my own clothing and offer it to the beggar, for they needed it more than me.

Learning to live among the destitute was not an easy transition for a spoiled, once wealthy and 'entitled' young man! To take a beggars sack and go from door to door begging for alms or food was humiliating. I remember the first time I did this, especially the deep shame I felt. I put all the food in a bowl and then sat down to the meal I had been given. I looked, and it was a hodge-podge of garbage - a fish head, a rind of moulding cheese, some rotten turnips and millet gruel. But deep hunger compelled me to overcome my disgust and I began to eat. As I did, somehow this mixture or near refuse became more delicious than any of the opulent meals I had ever tasted in my past. I immediately gave thanks to God who was transforming me, filling me with gratitude, and strengthening me. God was taking even this vile bowl and using it to nourish me to grow.

Now I have come to long for poverty, knowing that the poor are especially dear to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I desire poverty more than anyone could desire riches. I choose poverty for Christ's sake. I will give whatever I have to give, and do it gladly, to please my Lord. Possessions are a trap that lead us away from God. Poverty has set me free to begin to measure the breadth and depth of God's Grace.

I will end with a story. One day the mother of two of my brothers in Christ came asking for alms but there was nothing left in the house to give except a Bible. I gave it to the woman so that she could sell it to help the poor. I believed that giving this Bible to her was more pleasing to God than my keeping it to read from it.

The Friars objected and did not understand this gesture. So, I reasoned with them. Once you own a book, you need a waterproof cover for it, a candle to read it by, a pen for making notes, a desk to write on, a chair for the desk, a house for the furniture, a servant to clean the house... where might it end? Was it not better to be not anxious for our life, what we shall eat or what we shall drink? Was it not better to be as free as the birds of the air, who sow not nor reap yet neither want nor need? The Heavenly Father can be trusted in every aspect of the life he gave us, and beyond.

When I see a world where people have come to believe that material things matter more than life itself, when I see a world where many walk in hunger and darkness, or starve on our very streets, while others are materially rich beyond measure, I grieve so deeply, recognizing the man I once was, knowing now what I could become.

I am mindful, then, of the words of our Saviour from Matthew's gospel, who said: "To him who asks of you, give; and from him who would borrow of you, do not turn away." (Matt 5:42) This work is with us still. As I have done my duty; may Christ teach you yours.