

# A SPECIFIC VOCATION FOR A PARTICULAR MISSION

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**VOCATION:** CALLED TO BE EVANGELISED

**MISSION:** CALLED TO EVANGELISE

“Evangelised to evangelise” and “Vocation and Mission” are two closely linked themes, and in a certain sense, they are simply two ways of saying the same thing.

Let us look at the reasons for this.

*Vocation* is the call from God “to be” that which He has prepared for us.

God has created us in His own image and in the likeness of His Son, the Lord Jesus.

God has *called* us “to be” **conformed to Jesus**, “the perfect man”.

Now, the Gospel is the *epiphany of Christ*, his complete manifestation. It follows that anyone who has responded fully to the call from God (Vocation) and has embarked on the path of conformity with Christ Jesus, is someone committed to being “evangelised”.

This is the deepest meaning of “to be evangelised”.

From our “being” flows the “doing”, the *Mission*. The fundamental mission of anyone who has embarked on the road of conformity with Christ, can only be *to proclaim Christ*, to pass on the urgency of God’s love which we ourselves have discovered and which has changed our lives. This is the deep meaning of “to evangelise”: to communicate Christ, to bear witness to Him, to make Him present through our lives and our proclamation.<sup>1</sup>

Let us come, now, to the theme we must develop: A *SPECIFIC VOCATION FOR A PARTICULAR MISSION*.

## IS OUR VOCATION SPECIFIC?

When I was given this theme, I thought for a long time about these two adjectives: *specific* and *particular*.

First of all, I did some research in our source documents: the Rule, the General Constitutions and the Ritual.

The word *Vocation* accompanied by the adjective *specific* only occurs once, in Article 2.1 of the General Constitutions, while the word *Mission* accompanied by the adjective *particular* is nowhere to be found. So let us examine this single passage:

**The vocation to the OFS is a specific vocation that gives form to the life and apostolic activity of its members. Therefore, those who are bound by a perpetual**

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<sup>1</sup> “... they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words”. (Reg. 6)

“Let the proclamation of Jesus, which is the Gospel of hope, be your boast and your whole life”. (B. John Paul II - Ecclesia in Europa, 45)

“All are called to “proclaim” Jesus and their faith in Him in every situation; to “draw” others to the faith through models of personal, family, professional and community life which reflect the Gospel; to “radiate” joy, love and hope, so that many people, seeing our good works, will give glory to our Father in heaven (Mt 5, 16), and be “won over”; to become a “leaven” transforming and enlivening from within every expression of culture”. (Ecclesia in Europa, 48)

**commitment to another religious family or institute of consecrated life cannot belong to the SFO.**

The statements contained in this article are extremely meaningful. They say, in fact, that this *specific* vocation **gives form** (the typical edition in Italian uses the word **in-forms**: gives shape *from within*) to the **life** (*the being*) and to the **apostolic action** (*the doing*, the mission) of the members. The article then affirms that the transformation brought about by this vocation, when it is welcomed and lived, is such that one can be part of no other religious commitment in life. If therefore our vocation is authentically Franciscan, all our life must **take this single shape**: the *Franciscan* and *secular* one.

I think it is important to highlight that the acting subject is *vocation* and not us. Indeed, it is not we who give this form (*in-form*) to ourselves; it is the vocation which acts upon us. It is God Himself (as always) who takes the initiative and transforms us.

While this is the only reference to the *specific* character, it seems to me to be a decisive reference even though it does not clearly explain the nature of this *specificity*. It is essential, therefore, for us to have a clear understanding of the nature of this *specific* character.

Nevertheless, before considering this aspect, which is decisive for us, we need to reflect on *Vocation* in its fullest and most inclusive meaning. Very often, in fact, the concept of *Vocation* and its consequences are not well understood and even neglected or trivialised.

#### THE FUNDAMENTAL VOCATION

Over and above any *specific* vocation there is a **fundamental vocation** which is at the root of our very *being* and which extends to every creature. This is the *call* of God to holiness, a call to welcome Him in Christ, to allow ourselves to be “modelled” by the Spirit in order to be re-united with the Father and to share in the very life of God Himself.

From this **fundamental vocation** derive and depend all other *specific vocations*.

Our response to this call and its fullest realisation enable us to achieve the conditions of Christian perfection: this is the call of all *ordinary* Christians. Where, *ordinary* in this context is certainly not a reductive term, because the *ordinary* of God is *holiness*. Therefore, if we manage to accomplish in full our fundamental vocation we would not need to seek any further *specification* to fulfil God’s project for us.

Each *vocation* is a call both *to be* and *to do*, as inseparable aspects which determine one another. The *being* is wholly contained in the **fundamental vocation**. The *doing* (the mission) springs from this *being* and in a certain sense determines its *specific* character.<sup>2</sup>

The **fundamental vocation**, taking *Christ as its model*, corresponds to the **expropriation of a private existence to serve universal salvation**. It means becoming the property of God. It means being assigned by Him to the redemption of the world, and being used and consumed in the process of that redemption. Every vocation is primarily personal (*to be*) in order that (springing from a personal “yes” to God) the person can be used for a certain purpose (*to do in favour of*).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> cfr. Gen. Const. 100.3

<sup>3</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Vocazione”, Ed. Rogate, pag. 23, 2002

It is clear, therefore, that we cannot talk about, still less live, a *specific vocation* without having understood, accepted and realised the **fundamental vocation**.

**To be a Christian is the basis of being Franciscan, and not the other way round.**

#### IS IT ESSENTIAL THAT OUR VOCATION BE *SPECIFIC*? A NECESSARY CLARIFICATION

Without any doubt, our vocation is *specific*. Indeed, we are not Jesuits, Dominicans, Carmelites or Members of the Focolare Movement or of any other.

Nevertheless, ... are we confident that we positively need to be something *different from simply being Christian*? Does *simply* being Christian not give us enough *spirituality* to be saints, to realise our potential fully? Certainly it does!

This is a difficult point to deal with for those of us who are used to live in the context of innumerable religious "labels" of which we ourselves are a part. In a certain sense, we are used to thinking that unless we belong to *something*, we are nothing!

**It is almost as if belonging *only* to Christ and to the Church were not enough!**

Certainly, all ecclesial movements have been born from the inspiration of God. He draws them forth through a providential response to a certain need in the Church and the world. Often indeed, after the initial phase, movements settle down, crystallise and may lose contact with their original inspiration. They may eventually end up living in a self-referring isolation, creating boundaries and often minute distinctions, boasting, at times, unfounded superiorities and self-sufficiency etc. Then, that freedom of the Spirit which urges us to be open towards everyone and everything, is replaced instead by a self-centred focus, by an ever more marked search for real or presumed specificities which, in reality, isolate the movements within ever more narrow confines. They become separated from the rest with the risk of being transformed into the *Pharisees* (the separated ones) of today. For many institutes and movements this is a real risk or a present reality. Nor are we and our brothers and sisters in the Franciscan Family immune from this.

To want to be *different at all costs* is not a good thing for the Church or for us.

It is necessary and urgent, instead, to rediscover the beauty of being "Christian" - *simply* Christian.

"*Why is it so hard to follow the Gospel?*" someone asked in a recent Italian television serial about Saint Philip Neri. The reply of the saint is disarming in its absolute truth: "*Because it is simple!*"

We are conditioned to complexity and this often stands in the way of our grasping and welcoming the *beauty of the simplicity of God*, as Francis did.

I often feel a certain uneasiness when reading certain books or listening to certain conferences that grasp at straws to explain our profound differences from others, to define our "specific character", which, on closer inspection turns out to be simply and solely that which Jesus has asked without distinction from everyone.

When I ask my brothers and sisters: *How are we different from other Christians? What is it that characterises us as Franciscans?* There is at first a bewilderment. Then the usual responses come: humility (which we often lack though we talk about it enough); poverty (in fact many of us are poor, though not always by choice); minority (a concept often relegated to

mere theory and in which I sometimes think very few Franciscans still believe anymore); and so on. Then, when I ask: *But shouldn't every Christian do these very things?* – then, the silence is deafening.

Francis' vocation was that of being *simply Christian*. He never sought any further *description* than that of being *wholly and completely Christian*. We, too, need to understand that to be his disciples means to be *simply and solely Christian*, as he was.

#### THE SPECIFICITY OF OUR VOCATION DEPENDS ON SAINT FRANCIS

Our *specific* vocation is to be **Franciscan** and **secular** and, as such, it is directly dependent on Francis of Assisi and his vocation. His example and his life have attracted us. God used him to lead us to a *specific form of life*. So we must turn to and start from Francis if we are to understand our own *specific vocation*.

Francis did not undertake a “specific” way of life in the sense of “specialising” in a circumscribed area. Let me explain.

St John Bosco was concerned with youth, St Camillus of Lellis, St John of God were concerned with the sick, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta with the abandoned poor, holy contemplatives with their task of immolation *for the life of the world*, in contemplative prayer – and so on.

St Francis “specialised” in nothing.

St Francis placed himself at the disposal of *all*, he had *become all things to all* (1Cor 9, 22-23).

Francis, in the first place, sought God in order to find himself.

*First of all*, he sought to respond to the fundamental core of his primary vocation (which is the same for everyone), namely, to establish a living relationship with God, to give a sense of completeness to his own existence. Through long periods of prayer and contemplation, he succeeded to perceive the intimate essence of God as a Father, *Abba*. A God who has made Himself close to us in His Son, in His Incarnation, Life, Passion, Death and Resurrection, through an act which was a total and perennial gift of Himself. A Son who, in turn, leads us to the Father, who gives us life and who makes us holy through His Spirit.

This brought about in him a desire to allow himself to be *totally* transformed by the Spirit in order to *be conformed to Jesus the Son*, and to respond to his fundamental vocation from God by sharing the very life of the Triune God.<sup>4</sup>

Francis wanted nothing else in life than to draw his life from Christ, to live in Christ, to live the Gospel totally. In a word, he wanted to be only and wholly **Christian**, and nothing else.

Francis did nothing except to respond fully to what Jesus Christ has asked and always seeks from each and every one of us, without distinction.

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<sup>4</sup> I do not need more, son; I know Christ, poor and crucified. (2Cel LXXI, 105)

“The essence of the Franciscan spirituality is ... Christ. Christ is the focal point of this spirituality. We can say: only Christ. ... All your Franciscan literature clearly shows that Saint Francis strived to fully imitate Jesus. ... “In full awareness, continuously he (Francis) wanted to live like his Master, with his Master, of his Master. His Rule, as he had conceived it, is nothing but the Gospel in action”. (Paul VI to the OFM Gen. Chapter, 22 June, 1967)

## OUR VOCATION: TO LIVE CHRIST, TO LIVE THE GOSPEL

God has raised up Francis and his three-fold family for the Church and for the world, so that both would **believe** that it is **possible to live the Gospel** *sine glossa*, without gloss, and that it is **concretely possible to be a complete Christian**, *with no further specifications*.<sup>5</sup>

Francis did this. And we too, his disciples, have solemnly promised it:

“. . . **I promise to live**, in my secular state, for the whole time of my life, **the Gospel of Jesus Christ** in the Secular Franciscan Order.” (Profession Formula, SFO)

Our Rule is full of pressing exhortations to put Christ at the centre of our lives, to live the Gospel, which is Christ, like Francis, recognising the Fatherhood of God to which we must tend with all our strength and Whose will we must do. (Rule 4, 5, 6, 7, 10; Cost. Gen. 9, 10, 11, 12). **This is the heart of our Rule.**

We do not have particular or *specific* prescriptions but rather quite the contrary:

“The spirituality of the secular Franciscan is a **plan of life centred on the person and on the following of Christ, rather than a detailed programme to be put into practice.** (Gen. Const. 9.1).

So convinced am I that **Francis’ vocation, and ours, is simply and solely to be fully Christian**, that I think Francis would not be very happy that we call ourselves “Franciscan”. I believe he would have far preferred that we simply call ourselves “Christians”. He chose a name for his disciples which would not draw attention away from Christ and one which, instead, served to define the distinctive traits of their following of Him: “*Friars Minor*” (Lesser Brothers) - brotherhood and being lesser and subject to everyone; “*Brothers and Sisters of Penance*” - fraternal life and permanent conversion; “*Poor Sisters*” - Poverty, as a concrete sign of total self-giving, *pro mundi vita*, for the life of the world. Today however, it is not uncommon to meet “Franciscans” for whom “being Franciscan” is almost more important than to be Christian!

I believe that if he could speak to us today, Francis would say: “My dearest brothers and sisters, in order to be my true and faithful disciples, you have to be *only* Christians, *wholly* Christians. You have to be *perfectly* **Christian, just as the good God has granted me to be, by His grace alone.**”

## THE SPECIFICITY OF OUR VOCATION: TO BE TOTAL CHRISTIANS, AS FRANCIS WAS

Our vocation is certainly *specific*, not only because we are called to live out our lives in the *saeculum*, in the ordinary conditions of the world, in the lay or ordained state, whether celibate or married. The vocation to this state of life is that of the great majority of believers.

It is *specific* only because our call refers to an example, a model, a unique way of following:

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5 “ Yet he [Innocent III] hesitated to do what Christ’s little poor man asked because it seemed to some of the cardinals to be something novel and difficult beyond human powers. John of Saint Paul, bishop of Sabina, then said: «If we refuse the request of this poor man as novel or too difficult, when *all he asks is to be allowed to lead the Gospel life*, we must be on our guard lest we commit an offense against Christ’s Gospel. For if anyone says that there is something novel or irrational or impossible to observe in this man’s desire to live according to the perfection of the Gospel, he would be guilty of blasphemy against Christ, the author of the Gospel.» (LM 3, 9)”

## Francis of Assisi.

**This is the true and the only specific element of our vocation that distinguishes us and unites us: to be *total* Christians, as Francis was.**

Beyond this, there is nothing specific. Further, I would dare to say that our vocation is, on the contrary, like that of Francis, *non-specific*. Let me explain.

What did Francis do which was not only what the Gospel, what Jesus, asks of every believer? Francis did nothing other than attend perfectly to everything Jesus has asked of everyone.

Francis is humble? Jesus asks humility of all believers.

Francis is poor? Jesus said to everyone "Blessed are the poor".

Francis is chaste? Chastity is enjoined on all believers.

Francis is meek? Jesus recommended it for everyone.

Francis lived in fraternity? Do not monks and religious in general as well as all Christians live (or at least should live) fraternity among themselves?

We could go on in this way with everything, and we would see that what Francis did is exactly what Jesus has asked of all believers.

Francis did not have a charism and a mission which were confined to a contingent narrow and specific area. His charism, his vocation and his mission are *non-specific* in the sense that they correspond to that of the Church at all times, the Church of Christ in its purest and integral state. They are rooted in the deepest essence of Christian life with no further specifications.

His way is not reserved for a restricted number of elected people but rather for all!

The *Letter to the faithful*<sup>6</sup>, which is the reference text for *secular Franciscanism* and is placed as the Prologue to our present Rule, is the most evident proof of this. Francis writes to the "penitent faithful" (*de illis qui faciunt poenitentiam*<sup>7</sup>), therefore to all of us, but for him **all** must undertake the way of penance-conversion. Francis discovered the Absolute Good and exhorted **all** with passion to discover that this is the only way to achieve life, the only true life: to be converted so as to share in the communion of *his* and *our* Lord Jesus Christ, of *his* and *our* Heavenly Father. **The Franciscan ideal coincides with the vocation of all Christian Faithful** (and not only the lay ones).

Our *specific* vocation is, therefore: **to be Christian, as Francis was.**

Our great and only specificity can be summed up in two words: as Francis.

That "as" however, makes a world of difference because, if it is true that Christ has asked everyone to do what Francis did, it is also true that Francis did it to the ultimate degree. The difference does not lie only in doing *specific* things but in the *intensity* with which these things are done. This *intensity* characterised Francis and is the paradigm and norm of all of us Franciscans in whatever walk of life.

"The first fact about Francis' vocational development ... **is his personal experience of a**

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<sup>6</sup> I refer to both versions, the Earlier one, shorter and Prologue to the OFS Rule, and the Later one, which is an amplification and an enrichment of the first.

<sup>7</sup> Title of the Letter to the Faithful (Earlier Redaction): "H[a]ec sunt verba vit[a]e et salutis que si *quis* legerit et fecerit inveniet vitam et [h]auriet salutem a domino *de illis qui faciunt poenitentiam*. - These are the words of life and salvation *concerning those who do penance*. **Whoever** reads and follows them will find life and draw from the Lord salvation. This "**whoever**" is not restrictive but extensive. It is directed to **all**.

**relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship marked by RADICALITY, TOTALITY AND PERMANENCE.”<sup>8</sup>**

This is our *vocation*: “to conform ourselves to Christ”, *the perfect man*. And our *specific character* consists in living this conformation with the **same intensity** as Francis lived, the same **totality** with which he gave himself to an imitation of the *total* Christ, the same **radicalness** which marked his transformation-conformity to the depths of his being, the same **permanence** with which he lived these out.

Francis, “truly **the most Christian of men**, who strove by perfect imitation to be conformed while living to Christ living, dying to Christ dying and dead to Christ dead, and deserved to be adorned with an expressed likeness “! (LM XIV, 4).

As Bonaventure has underlined, Francis is the **most Christian man**.

This is his *specificity*, his *specific character*: to be completely and totally Christ’s, *to be a most Christian man*, with nothing held back and without limits.<sup>9</sup>

Francis, acclaimed as *another Christ*, rose up humble and high, as one who sought to identify with his Lord in all things. Welcoming unreservedly the grace and help of the Spirit, he was able to become, to an exemplary degree, a paradigm for the whole Church in all times and throughout the whole world.

“His highest aim, foremost desire and greatest intention was **to pay heed to the Holy Gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace His footsteps completely with all vigilance and all zeal, all the desire of his soul and all the fervour of his heart**.

Francis used to meditate constantly on the words of Christ and recollect His deeds with most attentive perception. **Indeed so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.”<sup>10</sup>**

However . . . , must it not be this way for every saint? Yes, without a doubt. All the same, it does seem that the Most High wanted Francis to incarnate this total identification with Christ, to a degree which was more all-embracing, more visible and more of a paradigm, for ever.<sup>11</sup>

He has become the Christian man par excellence. So God has entrusted to him the most special mission of being an imperishable sign for the whole Church, for all Christians, for the entire world. And Francis, although he died some 800 years ago, still continues to

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<sup>8</sup> Andrés Stanovnik OFM Cap. Archbishop of Corrientes, Argentina.

<sup>9</sup> The comparison between Saint Paul and Saint Francis, the two great converted ones, is enlightening. Both of them have lived in fullness a life in Christ, as Paul tells us and as Francis has also intensely lived: *to me life is Christ; yet I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me* (Phil 1, 21; Gal 2, 20).

<sup>10</sup> 1Cel XXX, 84.

<sup>11</sup> “Even if others, daringly, compare among themselves the heavenly heroes of holiness, who have been destined by the Holy Spirit to fulfill various missions in the midst of men – and such comparisons, which originate from partisan passions, are to the advantage of no one and are injurious before God, the Author of Holiness – nevertheless we can affirm that **there has been no one in whom the image of Christ and the evangelical form of life shone as lively and resembling as in Francis**. Therefore, he who called himself the «*Herald of the Great King*», was rightly acclaimed as «*another Jesus Christ*», having presented himself to the people of his time and to the centuries to come almost as Christ returned from the dead; and this is the reason why he lives now and will continue to live as such for all generations to come.” Pious XI, Encyclical Letter, *Rite Expiatis*, 30 April 1926

carry out his mission to an outstanding degree!

#### HEIRS OF HIS MISSION: SIGNS AND POINTS OF REFERENCE FOR AN INTEGRAL CHRISTIANITY

And what of us, whom God has *called* to continue the work of Francis, *heirs of his mission*, how do we cope ?

We, like Francis, are *called* to fulfil his very own task of being a *sign*, of being a *sure* point of reference for a **Christianity which is lived in its fullness, to 100%**, without containing ourselves within the restraints of our respective Order, or Family or Church. We are called to be *total* Christians, **like Francis**. We must flee from the tendency to define ourselves more and more, to the point of creating unjustified lines of demarcation between ourselves and the rest of the Church, ourselves and the world, presumptuously claiming *superiorities* which do not exist, resting on Francis' laurels. Let us be mindful of that which Francis so severely reminded us: "... *it is a great shame for us, servants of God, that the saints have accomplished great things and we want only to receive glory and honour by recounting them!*"<sup>12</sup>

In the effort of over-specifying what we are, we run the risk of losing the central object of our vocation which is that of complete conformity to Christ, to be only and entirely Christian with all the intensity of our will, our heart and our mind, like Francis.

#### OPEN TOWARDS THE WORLD IN SERVICE OF THE GOSPEL, WITH THE CHURCH

It is essential, instead, not to close oneself to the world but to open oneself as Francis did, with no superiority or inferiority<sup>13</sup> complexes. We must adopt an attitude of evangelical *parrhesia*<sup>14</sup> as Cardinal Rodé urged us in his letter to the Order dated 6 May 2009. In our Rule and General Constitutions there is an insistent call to turn towards the world in order that, with courage and simplicity, we may bring in it Christ and the revelation of God's love.

The Church insistently asks us for this.

"*Duc in altum!* Launch out into the deep! The Church **expects** from the SFO. . . a great service to the cause of the Kingdom of God in the world of today. [...] The Church **desires** your Order to be a model . . . in such a way as to present the world with a "community of love" [Rule 22]. The church **awaits** from you, Secular Franciscans, a courageous witness, one which is consistent with the Christian and Franciscan life, reaching out to the construction of a more fraternal and evangelical world in which to realise the Kingdom of God."<sup>15</sup>

In reality, the Pope rightfully summons us to put into practice what we have promised: "I renew my baptismal promises and *consecrate myself to the service of the Kingdom.*" (Profession SFO)

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<sup>12</sup> Adm. V

<sup>13</sup> cfr. Rule 13

<sup>14</sup> *Parrhesia* is the Greek word used in the New Testament to express freedom, frankness of speech, without fear or hesitation, to give uncompromising witness to the truth of the Gospel. See, e.g., Acts 28, 31. Comment to Card. Rodé's letter available at [www.ciofs.org/Y2009/a9ENrodelet.html](http://www.ciofs.org/Y2009/a9ENrodelet.html).

<sup>15</sup> Message to the SFO Gen. Chap. of Bd. John Paul II, 22 November 2002

With our response at Profession, we have undertaken a demanding and absolute commitment to the call of God, to our Vocation, which is a *Vocation that in-forms the whole life and apostolic activity* of all and of each one of us.

Instead, many of us lead a wearisome life, turned in on ourselves, frequenting always the same restricted circles. Many seem concerned only to go from one meeting to another, one celebration to another but *always among ourselves*, concentrating on ourselves in an attitude of self-complacency and unable to step into the wide world in order to accomplish Francis' mission: to **Go**, like the Lord, **towards the world**.

We shall not be more authentic disciples of saint Francis or become holier persons by spending more time in Church buildings or talking among ourselves or vaunting our superiority and *specificity*.

#### FRANCIS, OUR ESSENTIAL REFERENCE POINT TO START AFRESH FROM CHRIST.

Francis urges us, by his life and his example, to be complete Christians.

We must look to Francis, mindful not to yield to the world's prevailing trends and vagaries, in order to learn how to realise our vocation. We must always go back to the beginning. We must **always start again from Christ**. We must also **always start again from Francis in order to learn how to start again from Christ**, to be true Franciscans and secular Franciscans.

On the contrary, recently, there has been a tendency to distance oneself from Francis' own experience as the irreplaceable cornerstone for all Franciscans, as if the fact that he belonged to the world of the thirteenth century unfitted him for the world of today. There is a widespread tendency to consider the developments of the successive centuries to replace our point of reference towards a largely undefined *today* of the Franciscan experience, rather than in the *perennial* Saint-Franciscan experience (St. Francis' own personal and paradigmatic experience).

There is in this attitude a negation of the perennial relevance and definitive manifestation of Christ and His revelation of the Father and of the Being of God. Francis appealed to this way of interacting with God, and his approach has a modernity which will never become out of date. The form of it may belong to a certain period and its customs, but the spiritual expression and the attitude of conversion and approaching God, are never out of date.

Let us humbly acknowledge that, eight centuries later, in our *today*, Francis is still the one who draws the people of the twenty-first century towards Jesus, not us! Francis is still the one who inspires, who leads with his simplicity, humility and perfect following of Christ. Not us, burdened as we are with superstructures, distractions and tepidity.

The *today* of God is always **today**, it never becomes yesterday and is never overcome by the changing trends of man! We are not speaking here about going barefoot like Francis, of punishing ourselves with extreme fasting or other such things but **to convert ourselves in the depths of our souls**, like Francis, and **as people of our own time**, allow the Spirit of the Lord to tell us what He wants us to do and act according to the promptings of the same Spirit, with the same determination of Francis.

Every spirituality belongs to the one who lives it, in the first person. It belongs to the one who interprets it, and not to anyone else. We, **secular Franciscans**, receive it directly from

Francis and from nobody else and we implement it, with its own characteristics, into secular, lay and ordinary life. It is to Francis that we must first look. Brothers and Sisters, we are the ones who must incarnate *Franciscan* spirituality in *secular life*, drawing it directly from the spirit of St Francis.

### IS OUR MISSION PARTICULAR?

What is, therefore, our mission?

It is **certainly not** particular, unless we want to consider that its *particularity* consists precisely in its *non-particularity*, in its *all-inclusiveness*. The word "particular" is one which refers to a part of the whole and, it seems to me, that our mission, instead, includes everything.

### OUR MISSION: THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Our mission is THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH, of the entire Church.

"Francis go, repair my house" means to repair the whole house, not just a part of it.

Our Rule begins by describing the nature of this mission: "*to make present the charism of our seraphic Father St Francis in the life and in the mission of the Church.*"

And the mission of the Church is **to evangelise**: *To evangelise is the grace and vocation proper to the Church, it is her most profound identity.* (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 14)

**Evangelised**: conformed to Christ, like Francis.

**To evangelise**: to bring Christ to the world: *They should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words.* (Rule 6)

### TO OFFER THE TOTAL CHRIST

But *what Christ* must we bring to the world?

In his homily of 9 April 2000, on the occasion of the Great Franciscan Jubilee, Cardinal Roger Etchegary indicated it to us with prophetic force:

*And now, at the dawn of the new millennium, does the Franciscan adventure still have meaning Does it still have any chance of success? Never has true fraternity been so longed for and at the same time so little lived. Never has the Franciscan charism been more needed than today in order to **offer the total Christ** to a disintegrating world which fears a brotherhood of solidarity among all human beings without exclusion.*

It is *the total Christ*, all of Christ, every aspect of Christ, which we Franciscans must, like Francis, bear within us and *offer to the world!*

The areas of **service** to which we are called are, therefore, **unlimited and demanding.**

### A TOTAL MISSION

The *Crucifix of San Damiano* entrusted Francis with an unequivocal mission: **Go, Francis, repair my house.** "Repair my house" refers in the most extensive and complete way to the whole house, to "**whatever**" might be in need of repair in the Church-Body-of-Christ. There are no limits.

This is the task to which we are called, like Francis, with Francis and with his whole Family<sup>16</sup> and, through the Rule, the Church has formally entrusted us with this mission:

*“Called like St Francis to rebuild the Church and inspired by his example, let them devote themselves energetically to living in full communion with the pope, bishops and priests, fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity. (Rule 6)*

*“The OFS, as an international public association, is connected by a special bond to the **Roman Pontiff from whom it has received the approval of its Rule and the confirmation of its mission in the Church and in the world.** (Gen. Const. 99.2)*

Our Rule and Constitutions provide us with the essential directions of our mission. These, while not substantially differing from what is required of every true Christian without distinction, offer us precious indications which highlight what the Church thinks of us, of our role and what she expects of us.

Look in particular at: Rule 6, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and Gen. Const. 12 and 17 to 27.

This short presentation does not allow us to go as deeply into these matters as they deserve. I would strongly urge all of you to take the Rule and Constitutions in your hands to meditate on these articles and to deepen your understanding of them.

Finally, our mission includes also whatever the Church hierarchy, both universally and locally, might indicate to us at any time, starting with the immediate needs of the Church, as a consequence of the mission we have been entrusted to accomplish, *in nomine Ecclesiae*, in the name of the Church, as an International Public Association of the Faithful (CIC 313) – *in an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity.*

## OPEN AND CATHOLIC

Francis wanted nothing more for himself and his brothers than to be “catholic”, open and universal. He wanted them to be the authentic expression of that God who, out of love, **came forth** from the heart of the Trinity, took flesh and immersed himself in the depths of human nature, ceasing to be the “wholly Other” to become just “Other”, the Father, the Brother, the unconditional Love.

## MEN AND WOMEN OF COMMUNION

Francis is, *par excellence*, a **man of communion**. He is the man who has made the **fraternity** revealed to us by Jesus Christ the centre of his life.

Francis wove bonds of **communion** between everyone and everything, all creatures animate and inanimate. His specific mission therefore was, and is, to **draw all things and people into the unity of Christ**. His mission was to destroy all ghettos, all fences, and to draw everyone into the humility, the poverty, the chastity, the obedience which Christ gave to the Father, to make us aware of how beautiful it is to be true children of the Father and a sister and brother of all.

We have inherited this same mission and, above all else, we must *seek the Holy Spirit and*

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<sup>16</sup>“The vision of Innocent III, of Francis supporting the Lateran Basilica, i.e. the Church, mystical Body of Christ, in its central and historical manifestation, one and hierarchical, in Rome, has prophesied the vocation and mission of your great religious family” (2 *Cel.* 17). Paul VI to the OFM General Chapter, 22 June 1967.

*his holy workings*, as Francis did. We must be catalysts of communion, destroyers of divisions, examples of humility, obedience, chastity and poverty. We must lead everything back to the sole centre which is Christ, with and in His Church, prompting all human beings to recognise one another as *true brothers and sisters, one for the other*.

**HOW DOES THE LORD WANT US TO BE? HOW DOES THE CHURCH WANT US TO BE?  
THEY WANT US TO BE SAINTS!**

Yes, they want us to be **different**, but different in **holiness**, a holiness which treads in the footprints of St Francis, **non-conformist, courageous, passionate**. Different, because we must be *total* Christians, like Francis.

The Church counts on us.

We have just recalled the Message of Blessed John Paul II to the SFO General Chapter of 2002: **The Church expects, the Church desires, the Church awaits . . .**

And the Church has always stated quite clearly what she expects of us.

**“Sons of St Francis**, make sure that, when people accuse the Church of having polarised its centres of interest in other aspects of Christianity – whether doctrinal, cultural or practical – rather than in Christ Jesus, **they may recognise in this saint**, *“the catholic and wholly apostolic man”*, **and in his faithful children and disciples who keep alive his testimony, the proof that the “primacy of all” belongs to the kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Church confesses and celebrates.**”

And further:

“Others may follow other ways; **yours is that of . . . non-conformity**. Do not despise the forms of your Franciscan way. Provided you follow them with dignified simplicity, they can have **the power of a free and daring language**, which is all the more suited **to impress the world**, the less it conforms to the dictates of worldly tastes and fashions. (Paul VI to the OFM Chapter 22 June 1967)

“To be a Franciscan does not mean showing some particular sign or wearing some special clothes, but **having unique magnanimity, liberty of spirit, the capacity to go beyond established patterns and frontiers, to be in solidarity with whoever needs understanding and love**. Those who follow Francis cannot be sectarian, iconoclast, racist, aggressive. Rather, wherever they go, they must **sow serenity and confidence, in other words, peace and good.**”<sup>17</sup>

It takes **passion**, passion on a grand scale, like that of Francis:

“The OFS has a huge mission in the Church, a reason for living and for putting forward your vocation, accepting a definite task which is in keeping with your secular state. It means: accepting the past with gratitude, living the present with passion, preparing the future with hope.

**The Franciscan who has no passion had better quit altogether.**

To be prophets in our day today one needs to be attentive and alert. All I ask is that, wherever you find yourselves, rather than listening to your words, **people may see that you are different**. It is extremely urgent to undertake a new course.” (Fr. José R. Carballo

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<sup>17</sup> Ortensio da Spinetoli OFM Cap. “Francis: l’Utopia che si fa storia”, page 13.

OFM)<sup>18</sup>

The Popes, too, throughout the last century, have expressed themselves in no uncertain terms about the **absolute commitment to and need for holiness** in secular Franciscans:

“He [Francis of Assisi] founded an Order, a **TRUE ORDER**, that of Tertiaries, not bound by religious vows like the other two Orders, but likewise shaped by simplicity of life and the spirit of penance. Thus Francis first conceived and successfully implemented, with the divine help, the project which no founder of a regular Order had yet conceived: to make the substance of the religious life something that all could share.” (Benedict XV, Encyclical “*Sacra Propediem*”, January 6, 1921)

“The life-long profession of a good Franciscan Tertiary ... does not lie in the rigour of the vows, nor in common life. It is not religious life according to the letter, but according to its spirit. *It is the spirit of that life and that perfection brought into the family, in daily life, in ordinary secular life.*”

“**If they are Christian faithful just like everyone else, there is no point in being Tertiaries . . . the Franciscan Tertiary is a special title ... one cannot usurp** – and it would be a usurpation – **such a title without something special to go with it.**” (Pius XI to the Franciscan Tertiaries of Italy, 5 September, 1936)

“**You are an Order: A LAY ORDER, BUT TRULY AN ORDER**, “*an Order in the true sense of the word*” as Our Predecessor Benedict XV of holy memory has called you; **but you must be a school of Christian perfection. Without that resolute resolve it is impossible to be a suitable member of so chosen and so glorious an army.**” (Pius XII, 1 July 1956, Address to the Tertiaries of Rome).

“... you are also an “**Order**”, as the Pope (Pius XII) said: “**A LAY ORDER, BUT A TRUE ORDER**”; also Benedict XV had already spoken of “*Ordo veri nominis*” (a true Order). This ancient term - a medieval one - “Order” expresses your intimate belonging to the great Franciscan Family. The word “Order” means the participation in the discipline and austerity which is proper of this spirituality, while maintaining the autonomy of your lay and secular condition, which implies often sacrifices that are not less important than the ones associated with religious and priestly life.” (John Paul II, June 14, 1988, to the OFS General Chapter)

A constant and consistent Magisterial teaching: 1921, 1936, 1956, 1988 !

This gives me the opportunity of underlining a few essential points concerning the *nature* of the SFO.

Our General Constitutions define the SFO as a “Public Association of the Faithful”. Because of this, some Franciscans complain: We are no longer a Third Order! We are no longer an Order ! We have been downgraded !

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<sup>18</sup> Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo, OFM Minister General, to the OFS General Chapter, November 2005, and at the Pastoral Visit to the CIOFS Presidency, April 2006.

Such affirmations are illogical, wrong and misleading. However, even if it were true (and it isn't) we would be in good company! The Order of Friars Minor, too, would no longer be an Order: they are, in fact, an *Institute of Consecrated Life*, just like many others.

Can you see? Always lurking under the surface, in fact at times quite visibly, is the desire to boast of our superiority, the disappointment or fear that *we count for less!*

There's no need to be afraid! These new titles (Public Association of the Faithful and Institutes of Consecrated Life) derive from the new nomenclature of the Code of Canon Law (1983), and the new names do not change an *iota* of what we are, of the nature of our Order. Our nature is determined by the foundational inspiration which Francis received from God, by our evolution and by the fundamental documents given to us by the Church.

The more attentive and less superficial readers will not fail to notice that being considered now as a Public Association of Faithful, with all the *specifications* that this entails, confers on our Order a depth and a richness of attributions and perspectives which go far beyond the vague and fragile status of being considered a *third Order* as it was understood then. Moreover, the SFO hardly corresponds, now less than ever, to the definition of *third Order* given by the present *Code of Canon Law* and to the doctrine underlying it.

No matter what its name, the OFS **is**, and always remains, the original Order of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance of Saint Francis, in an uninterrupted continuity with the one founded by Saint Francis of Assisi!

The name has not changed us in the least. We are the only ones who may change, with our unfaithfulness to the vocation received by God!

Anyway, dear brothers and sisters, it is useless to linger any further on these secondary aspects of our life. We should rather concentrate on "becoming saints" and accomplishing our vocation, with humility, simplicity and radicality. And if someone considers us *minors* or *worthless*, let us thank the Lord and rejoice: it means that we are on the right track to achieving our vocation in *perfect joy!*

### THE SECULAR TASK TO WHICH WE ARE COMMITTED

We must learn to de-ritualise, to a certain extent, our "being a Franciscan". In fact, in our case there is an adjective that goes together with "Franciscan": "**secular**". This adjective means that we are immersed in the world, in the ordinary conditions of everyday life.

The good God has no need of more incense, endless psalm-singing, complex liturgical functions, distracted rosaries, or more time spent in church buildings.

What God needs - and I really mean "needs" even of God, is to reach, through us, every man and woman in the world, everything that exists.

God has touched us in Baptism, touches us in every Eucharist, touches us with His Spirit and **longs to touch all humanity through us.**

God desires that the spirit of **fraternity**, which Francis received as a primary gift from God, and which should characterise us as well, reaches each and every human being. The task he looks for from us is: "**You give them something to eat**" (Mt 14, 16) and again "he pronounced the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, and **the disciples distributed it** to the crowd" (Mt 14, 19).

### WHERE GOD WANTS US TO REALIZE OUR *BEING* AND OUR *DOING*

If we "*study, love and live*" our Rule and General Constitutions (Bl. John Paul II, 1982 and 2002) we should be well aware that the **family, work and social, political and**

**environmental engagement** are themselves the **primary “theological” areas of our being and our work**. These are the areas in which we must most specifically “serve”.

**If the family, our work and social contexts were permeated by our active presence, by our example and commitment, then these realities would be animated by the spirit of love and by the presence of God. Without a doubt, ours would be a better society and the world would be a better world.**

**COMMITMENT TO BECOME HOLY TO CHANGE THE WORLD THROUGH THE GOSPEL, AS FRANCIS DID**

How far have we come in realising the whole of our vocation?

How far have we come towards the perfection of love which the Rule demands?

Are we – yes, even you and I - on the high road to becoming *other Christs*?

Because, you see, this is exactly what we are about. We cannot be content with just getting by, with a bit of pious devotion thrown in, being present, usually distracted, in the local parish Church, always on condition that these things do not *disturb* our daily routine too much.

**To fulfil our function as *signs* we must become SAINTS<sup>19</sup>.**

This is compellingly urgent and admits of no delay.

**DEAREST BROTHERS AND SISTERES, JUST THINK OF THE DECISIVE INFLUENCE WE COULD HAVE FOR CHANGING THE WORLD IF ALL THE 500,000 SECULAR FRANCISCANS, SCATTERED AROUND THE WORLD IN SOME 111 COUNTRIES, LIVED THEIR VOCATION TO THE FULL.**

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<sup>19</sup> See also art. 17.4 of our General Constitutions: **Participation in the service of sanctification**, which the Church exercises through the liturgy, prayer and works of penance and charity, **is put into practice by the brothers and sisters** above all in their own family, then in the Fraternity and finally, through their active presence in the local Church and in society.

## SUMMARY

1. “Evangelised in order to evangelise”, “Vocation and mission”: two concepts which express the same fundamental reality of our being Christians.
2. The **fundamental vocation**, which is the same for everyone, precedes every *specific* vocation and is the basis for it. To live the fundamental vocation is essential before entering upon a “specific” vocation.
3. **What is specific about our vocation** as Franciscans and secular Franciscans: **like Francis**. Francis is our specificity. Francis’ vocation and its realisation is the model of ours.
4. **Francis is “only” Christian**: he conforms himself to Christ, in order to reach the Father, docile to the action of the Spirit. One is “Franciscan” only to the extent that one fully becomes totally Christian, like Francis.
5. Francis’ way of being Christian is characterised only by the intensity of his discipleship: **radicalism, totality, permanence**.  
In our own lives, we must trace this way of setting out to follow Christ: radically, totally and permanently.
6. Francis, “*a Catholic and wholly apostolic man*”.  
Our calling is to be totally Christian, without creating barriers, without boasting of any unfounded superiority, profoundly apostolic, always geared towards “**going**”, ready to emerge from our customary realities of fraternity, of the Order, the Family, docile to the Lord’s will. **Ours is an apostolic vocation**. We are the *secular outreach* of the apostolic religious vocation of Francis.
7. Francis is not “Franciscan”, nor did he wish to found an Order of “Franciscans”. What he wanted was to **be only and totally Christian, Catholic, apostolic**. He wanted to have brothers and disciples who were totally in love with Christ, so as to live in communion with the Father, in the Spirit, in the bosom of the Most Holy Trinity.
8. **Mission is not particular: it is total**. Its particular nature resides in that totality. As with vocation, mission is the general mission of every Christian, but it too has to be lived and accomplished in a radical, total and permanent manner, with all the intensity of which we are capable. Our mission is to **bring the whole Christ**.
9. The mission revealed by the Crucifix of San Damiano is the paradigm for all Franciscans, and therefore for us Secular Franciscans. **The mission is addressed to the entire Church, to the whole body of Christ, in each of its aspects, and in every place**.

10. **The Church's mission is our mission**, and the Church's mission is to proclaim the good news of God's love and the redemption of humanity, to give them a share in the life and holiness of God : " ... " *to make present the charism of our seraphic Father St Francis in the life and in the mission of the Church*".
11. **The mission**, while it must be carried out by each individual, **requires concerted action, collaboration and complementarity from all members of the SFO, from all the Franciscans in the entire Family**. The time has come for us to realise that we cannot live separated from others with a false sense of self-sufficiency. God's plan for Francis and his Family is all-embracing, and we are each working for the other, in one single mission for the Church.
12. **Mission at the service of the Universal Church and of the local Church**, according to needs that arise, as indicated by the pope, bishops and parish priests.
13. We are not called to be mediocre Christians, only distinguished for their devotions and attendance at Franciscan events. We are called to commit ourselves with a passion, with every fibre of our being, always and everywhere, to **BE HOLY AS OUR HEAVENLY FATHER, like Francis**.