

The challenges of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) in Europe today

Europe – a continent with 50 countries or sovereign states, with a territory of 10,2M sqkm, with a population of 740 million people, with more than 100 spoken languages, and with at least three commonly used alphabets. We are living in a wonderful, multilingual, multicultural continent, that is almost the smallest one by its territory, but shows up the greatest diversity. Its major religion is Christianity, and a vast majority, 76% of the Christians consider themselves to be catholic.

Good morning, my dearest sisters and brothers from the various nations from all over Europe to this very first, significant congress of the Secular Franciscan Order and the Youfra.

I am really glad to have this opportunity to see meet you, to learn who we are, who you are, to exchange ideas, to rejoice, and to experience our Franciscan fraternity.

It's a privilege for me to have this opportunity to speak to you on this special feast day of St. Benedict, the patron of Europe.

The age we are living in, with its own particular challenges, can seem to be a time of bewilderment. Many men and women seem disoriented, uncertain, without hope, and not a few Christians share these feelings. There are many troubling signs which at the beginning of the third millennium are clouding the horizon of the European continent, which “despite great signs of faith and witness and an atmosphere undoubtedly more free and unified, feels all the weariness which historical events – recent and past – have brought about deep within the hearts of its peoples, often causing disappointment”. (Pope John Paul II., Ecclesia in Europa, 7.)

This is the beginning of the exhortation of JP II. Europe is in crisis. Today there's said to be a deep, grave economic and financial crisis. I'm not an expert in this sense so I can't oppose, however, I think it is rather a spiritual and moral crisis. Pope John Paul II said, that Europe is a missionary area. And like every crisis, it is a gift to discover how to go on, how to change things, and it is a challenge. If we think that things are going well, we don't feel the need to change, we don't feel the need of conversion. It is the deepest temptation to fall asleep and not to do anything, not to seek God's will. So, this is not only a time of difficulties, not only a time of dark moments, but also the time of hope, the time of future. Challenge means that we are looking to the future. We do not give up. We are seeking solutions. Crisis is a blessing, it is a gift to hear the call of God: come rebuild...

If things were o.k. in the sense of spirituality and morality, I am sure there would be no economic crises.

This is also showing us the way how to start it. “Francis, go, repair my house, which, as you see, is falling completely to ruin.” When the house is in ruins, we must not start the repair with the roof, but with the basement, then the structural parts, and we have to accept, that these parts are those not very much looking. Furthermore, if we do our jobs well, they will be hidden by the end. But we must do them, otherwise the whole building will be falling into ruins, even if looking very attractive. I am an architect, so this example is really not very far from me.

This is a crisis of the values, a crisis of the priorities. We have to do penance and see, what are our values, what are our priorities. Also, we have to look around and see where the world is going, discover, day by day, where we are living, where is God calling us to go, what is God calling us to do.

What is Europe like, today? What are the most important aspects and challenges for us, Secular Franciscans?

Christian roots of Europe

Truth does not depend on its being announced. Many believe that truth is what is announced more and more loudly, what is proclaimed more visibly. God doesn't need this, his truth is deep and independent.

Europe has Christian roots, it is a fact, and it doesn't depend on whether it is announced or not, accepted by politicians or not. It is very important to be aware of this, primarily not for God – he knows it very well – but for us.

Unity and diversity

One of the greatest challenges of Europe is to bring diversity and the desire of unity in harmony. There are more than 100 different languages, more than 50 different cultures. One of the strongest bond that links these nations, these cultures, these languages, is Christianity. We have a lot of common things, we have common Christian roots, and many parts of our cultures are common. We have to strengthen this common sense of belonging. We have to

However, this age is an individualist age. The individual persons are said to be the ideals, who are independent, who do not have bonds. It is a virtue not to have bonds, neither to a society, nor to a local community, to a fraternity, nor to family members offering to live together as a family, nor to another person by the sacrament of the marriage, even not to God either. But losing the bonds is the way to lose hope. *At the root of this loss of hope is an attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ. (Pope John Paul II., Ecclesia in Europa, 9.)* This total misunderstanding of freedom has led to the present situation of the man. Furthermore, since “*no man is an island*” (Thomas Merton), man has been created to live in relationships, to have bonds, this is something that cannot be stepped over, and thus instead of the dependence from God there are new bonds: the independent man is depending from passions, depending from material goods, from money, became addict.

As far as I am convinced, I know only one answer to this challenge; it is to restore the communion with God in its various visible forms, i.e. in the sacrament of marriage, the christian family, the fraternal life, the belonging to the Church, the belonging to God in the personal conversion– all the forms of communion.

We have to live a true fraternal life in our fraternities, we have to experience the fraternal life, the life-giving union with each other.

This is an opportunity to bear witness that turning to each other, to seek community and live a fraternal life is the solution to the problem of the fragmentation of the society, for the lonesome victims of the age of individualism. This is particularly important, when we are facing the problem of ageing in the Order, offering the experience of the community, of the fraternal spirit. The man of our times is suffering from independence, from the lack of human relations, so let us offer them our fraternal experiences.

All over Europe, crisis has been a headline news for a long time. But we have to see, that financial matters make diversity being misunderstood. We, here in Europe, have a treasure, this great variety of the nations, but also we can see that this variety is very much misunderstood. There's rivalry instead of collaboration and complements. Differences are coming into the front and similarities have been pushed back, common roots and common values are put aside. North is against south, west is against east.

Possible partners are made enemies to one another. There are deep contradictions under the veil of the superficial smiles.

Certainly, there are some particular challenges that our Order is facing, beside the beautiful and encouraging examples of young, vivid fraternities of the OFS and YouFra in some countries. Like the whole Catholic Church in Europe, also our Order is going down in number, particularly in some

countries. We must not neglect the problem of ageing, while many fraternities have the experience of far not being attractive to others, particularly to young people. Since the first orders are struggling with the same problem, the question of the spiritual assistance is a more and more significant challenge.

So, let us see, what we, Secular Franciscans may, can and shall do. There are many sources we could turn to, but I think our Rule is the best source for us.

And when I say, 'we', I mean both all of us individually, and also our fraternities, as living signs of the Franciscan spirituality in the world. Let us keep in mind, that we have to give testimony, we have to respond to the challenges of our times both individually and also in our fraternities. Neither this nor that must not be missing.

All who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength, and love their neighbours as themselves and hate their bodies with their vices and sins, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance.

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women ... (Exhortation of St. Francis to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance)

This is the beginning. Love the Lord, turn to the Creator instead of turning only to the creations, turn to each other instead of turning inside, and doing penance, striving to a permanent conversion. This shall be the spiritual base of everything we do, and without this there's nothing we can do. The renewal of the house has to be started with the basement, as I said before.

They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words.

Called like Saint 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)

When the Church is less and less respected in Europe, this article 6 of our Rule has a particular importance. We belong here! We have to show that we are members of the Church. Not only to show that we are members of a great organization, that has billions of members and is widespread all over Europe and all over the World, but primarily because it is the body of Christ. Confessing the belonging to the Church means that we confess our belonging to Christ. As an organization it is far not perfect, otherwise there wouldn't have been any need to call Francis: go, and rebuild my Church. Our testimony is essential. Our fraternal spirit and our humble participation in the society has to show that the Church is not offensive, what is often said as an accusation.

We have to strengthen the Church. The Secular Franciscan Order cannot exist without or outside the Church. When we love our Order, we love the Church. When we worry about the future of the Order, we worry about the future of the Church. When we build our fraternities, we build the Church. We have to be inserted into the various ecclesial communities – parishes, dioceses – otherwise our fraternities will not have any future.

As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do.

Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ. (Rule 8.)

On this road to renewal the sacrament of reconciliation is the privileged sign of the Father's mercy and the source of grace. (Rule 7.)

Participation in the sacramental life of the Church is much more than a pious behaviour, moreover, has more than only spiritual aspects. Participating in the sacramental life means to participate in the society, living a secular life, that has a profound sacramental base, which has an impact on our acts, attitudes and responses to the challenges of our times.

Baptism is the primary reflection on the question of the protection of life. Becoming the child of God is the elementary decision of God for the man. This is the expression of God's 'yes' to life. Our response is our 'yes' to the very first call of God instead of saying 'no' to the gift of life. We have to promote to accept the gift of God instead of refusing it.

In the Eucharist we experience the real presence of Jesus Christ, and this presence gives us the strength in the world that denies this existence. All our life has to shine the joy of Christ. Look, how sad they are those who are living without God. Eucharist is the sacrament of communion. No community can exist without this real presence of the Lord.

In the sacrament of reconciliation we can give witness to the forgiving love of God: when God forgives our sins in the sacramental ambit, it must give us an inspiration to reconcile with ourselves and to reconcile with others. These three goes together: to reconcile with God, with myself and with my neighbour. Without the first two we cannot bring peace to the society, what is a part of our vocation: being bearers of peace. The franciscan testimony in situations of opposition is rather to convince than to win, as God does it with us.

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Gen 1:27-28) Do we see, that the image of God is a couple, a community, a family? It is considered to be very contemporary to live unmarried, to be single, to live together without marriage, while this misunderstanding of independence makes people become lonesome, even though if living a very active social life. The seal of the marriage seems to be today a hidden treasure, but it is only God who can overcome the problems of this kind. Let us rediscover and let rediscover, that God is the very first example of community, of the family relationships.

Anointing of the sick is the sacramental sign of life, the expression of the love of God in his real presence, standing on the opposite side of the euthanasia that critically under-evaluates the life of the sick an elderly.

When giving testimony of this sacramental life we offer our franciscan response to these challenges. This secular franciscan approach of the sacramental life is much more than experiencing the liturgy of the sacraments inside the Church (building), it is a part of our vocational journey so that the power of God provided through the sacraments may become a reality also in the world by offering ourselves as instruments of the Lord.

*United themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed his will into the Father's hands, let them faithfully fulfill the duties proper to their various circumstances of life. Let them also follow the poor and crucified Christ, witness to him even in difficulties and persecutions. (Rule 10.)
Let them esteem work both as a gift and as a sharing in the creation, redemption, and service of the human community. (Rule 16.)*

Politicians are challenged by the matter of economic balance right now. Economy is ruled by the financial markets, and the really lucrative areas are far away from the decent honest handwork and from those fields giving result of the heavy, toilsome work.

We, Secular Franciscans never strive to get to the higher classes of the society. While some values are virtual, money is virtual in the world, God is very concrete. We have to respect the value of the honest work and to do our best to see “the fruit of the work”.

Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith. (Rule 15)

This is in a close connection with the question of social justice, both inside the individual countries, and also among the different countries. Who is rich and who is poor? Who are our friends? And when quoting the Rule speaking of difficulties, we must avoid thinking only of the personal needs, the personal difficulties, the personal persecutions. We always have to stand on the side of the outcast, of the minorities, of those groups in grave difficulties – who have lost their jobs, their homes, their families, their money, their hope, their faith, and finally their awareness of being able to love and to be loved. We have to see both the individuals and the whole groups, accepting that each one of us has a different capacity and a personal mission.

There is a wide horizon opened for us.

Society is suffering from the ecological, environmental issues. Care of the creation, pollution, the exportation of garbage, of pollution, of underdeveloped technologies, from west to the east, the pollution of the seas – grave problems, and we already have seen wonderful examples in our Order how to face these challenges.

High tech is too high. There is a temptation that we know too much, we are God, we do not need any gods any more. We very easily separate ourselves from God. Also, this high-tech excludes a lot of people from the society. You are nobody if you do not have an e-mail address, a bank account, a cell phone, a credit card or the newest widgets. This affects generations, specially the weakest ones: the youngest and the eldest, but also those who cannot afford it. Exactly whom we have to accompany. Let us explain them, that God is not asking for a Facebook 'like', and let us stand for them, also by our personal example.

Civil life is a privilege for us. We have to live with the opportunities of the democratic societies (whenever and wherever we have them). Active citizenship is a must. We have to promote peace, we have to promote justice, we have to be active in the civil life, in the public life of the society.

Being – acting

I have to talk about one more fundamental problem. Nowadays acting is preceding the existence, the 'being'. This is the time of the devaluation of the being, and the dominance of acting.

Only those are valuable in the society who are active, who are productive. The more you produce, the more you act, the higher you will be respected.

We have to re-establish the value of being. God is being. "I am who am". The self-determination of God does not include any reference to his acts, to his creative power. He is the existence, this is what he finds the utmost important to tell us about himself, even though there isn't anybody more active than him.

We have to rediscover the value of those creatures of God, who are unproductive: the babies, the elderly, the sick, the handicapped. They are not valuable because of any pious "Christian" or human sense of love. They are valuable because they are the image of God, as everyone is. Essentially they are not less than anyone else.

The values of – living or any other - creatures are not based upon their expedience, upon their usefulness. If it weren't so, what would be with the arts, with the nature, with the beautiful sites? Let us recall the attitude of St. Francis, and follow his example!

Moreover they should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which bear the imprint of the Most High, and they should strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship. (Rule 18)

This attitude is also an expression of the contemplative nature of our vocation. *As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do. (Rule 8.)* Living a contemplative life in a secular state of life? Yes, it is not only possible but recommended. It is a real

challenge – also here, in Europe, on a continent of material and technical development – to discover the value of 'being', and admiring the creative power of God, who has created everyone and everything around us. It is one way of living a contemplative life by separating oneself from the world in a total dedication to the prayer focusing not only the spiritual eyes but also the bodily eyes on God. There is another way, opened for us, seculars: to contemplate God in all his creatures, and praise him for all whom and all that we meet in the world, dedicating us to live in our secular state of life, in a family, having our professional work on a daily base, finding our missionary duties in the family, at work, in the ecclesial community. This is how we, secular franciscans can join Francis in his desire to be always with the Lord, while he was obedient to go to the world for the sake of others. (*Fioretti XVI.*)

Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon.

Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others. (Rule 19)

Our weakness is our strength. We are not powerful. We must get strength from the grace of the Lord, and from the example of those secular franciscans, who have given this testimony of the franciscan spirit in the world, from St. Elisabeth, the king St. Louis, throughout St. Angela of Foligno, and others, up to the secular franciscans of our ages, like László Batthyány-Strattmann, Konrad Adenauer or Franz Jägerstetter.

We belong to an Order. Order means that what is first is put first, what is last, is put last. Things have their place. We have a certain priority, we have the house built in a correct way, built on a rock.

Belonging to an Order is a grace. We have to be thankful. Being secular franciscans is a vocation, a way of life, where we can acknowledge and be aware of the values, we have our priorities. This is our chance to face the challenges of Europe today.

We often think that we are weak, we are old, we are few, how can we stand? But let us never forget, that we are not alone. Even though our ark seems to be very fragile, we are here, in the Church and in the OFS. We have our Master and Lord, who is inviting us: set out to the deep.

DUC IN ALTUM!

Lisieux, 2012.07.10.

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