

Pilgrims of St Francis



Chapter Theme 2024

What would St Francis say today?

The great challenges

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Asking ourselves the question of the challenges we face today is already something we do. Welcoming and proposing challenges can only be done to the extent that it is clear that a spirituality such as the Franciscan spirituality, beyond its survival over the centuries, continues to be a possibility and something to offer for the person of today. A spirituality is alive to the extent that it is recreated. Francis himself said that "it is greatly shameful for us, the servants of God, that the saints did the works, and we, by narrating them, want to receive glory and honour" (Admonitions 6,3). This keen observation encourages to recreate the spirituality in the world in which we live. The only feasible way to take up challenges is to have a sense of hope. Whoever welcomes challenges is someone who, still open to life, shows the desire to listen to the heartbeat of his time and wants, in some way, to walk on the path on which he breathes.

Can we welcome the challenges when spiritualities seem to be shrinking and weak in our western culture? Yes, for the above-mentioned reasons and because welcoming - proposing challenges - is not primarily the task of the brave, but of the trusting. Indeed, this task requires trust in the individual and in human groups. How can one accept a challenge that comes wrapped in fear?

Finally, we need to go one step further: perhaps today we need to think that the challenges are not only for the individual, but also for the community. There have always been people who, as individuals, have welcomed and proposed challenges with true dedication, sometimes at the risk of their own lives. But perhaps the time has come for the followers of St. Francis to listen to these challenges. The world today needs not only prophetic individuals, but prophetic lifestyle communities. Unless the personal call comes from the community to the person (not the other way around), we will not achieve the ultimate goal of engendering lifestyles capable of recreating Franciscan spirituality today.

THE GREAT CHALLENGES

Spirituality will always be threatened by the temptation to live in a "bubble", to entrench itself in its "castles", as the Brazilian bishop Pedro Casaldáliga would say. But this would lead to a widening of the gulf between this spirituality and the river of society, which flows unstoppably through its own channels. Hence, not only out of humility, but also out of basic realism, it will be necessary to focus on social facts, secular prophecy, common ethics.

These are the challenges:-

- The challenge of being itinerant, of walking.
- The daily challenge of peace and active non-violence.
- The challenge of the causes of poverty.
- The persistent challenge of migration and of not considering anyone as illegal.
- The challenge of building civic friendship.
- The challenge of being alongside ethical issues in a gentle way

1.- The challenge of being itinerant, of walking.

One of the great challenges facing life today, perhaps the most immediate, is to take on the challenge of being itinerant, roaming. What is being itinerant, roaming?

It is to walk along the road, to be always ready to change, to move forward.

It is an inner attitude that leads one to the conviction that the world is one's home, the human family is one's own, creation one's sister.

In an increasingly globalised world, the movement of people and societies, of work and production, of religions and cultures, has reached levels unimaginable a hundred years ago.

We will have to learn to be mobile in places, in ideas, in cultures so that we come to believe, like Francis, that the Franciscan has his home anywhere. Being settled is not only a geographical phenomenon, but a cultural one. It requires an openness to modern culture, being itinerant towards the ways of understanding life in today's society.

We must abandon placing ourselves in positions that derive from "centre" cultural attitudes, routines. The concept of immobility is not only physical. A more radical immobility is found in habits of thought and evaluation, which often become obstacles to true conversion. These obstacles can be formed by rigid

theological thinking, a mentality incapable of change, theological fundamentalism, and can prevent people from finding God 'outside the camp'.

Francis asks us to have a positive attitude, an attitude of openness, of welcoming what is happening and what is happening to us. This attitude is what we call being itinerant. There is a beautiful old song by Mercedes Sosa, an Argentinian singer. It is called "Todo cambia" (Everything changes). And it says that, in life, we have to be ready for any change. The only thing that always remains is, the song says, "my love, the memory and the pain of my town and my people". If love remains, we are ready for any change.

2. The daily challenge of peace and active non-violence

At this point it is obvious to state that the greatest source of suffering throughout human history has been violence. From the most hidden wounds to the greatest disasters that the human race has had to deal with, the common root is violence in all its forms. The long human journey of more than four and a half million years has been mixed with violence, engendering infinite suffering. Only in very short periods, in very specific people, has peace and joy nestled together. Perhaps that has been enough to fuel the utopia of a world without violence in which the source of suffering can dry up forever.

The writer J. Cortázar said in 'Rayuela' that "hope belongs to life, it is life itself defending itself".

This defending of life against its own violence is the greatest support that those of us who long for a world without violence and therefore without suffering can have. From this springs the possibility of maintaining the certainty that suffering is not inexhaustible because evil does not have to have the last word. These dreams, so often shattered and mercilessly violated, are the purest part of the human soul, that which reconciles us to ourselves. Without them, what would the future of life be like?

Everyday life is the space where the relationships we have established with others and with nature in order to satisfy our needs at a given historical moment are shown in all our actions and behaviours.

It is the area where life takes shape in a thousand actions, repeated daily and which we take as something so familiar and known that we do not stop to think about what is hidden behind this normal way of doing things, even to the point that we live it as the only possible reality.

But behind this apparent normality, everyday life hides a field full of invisible conflicts and discomforts that we do not usually analyse beyond their effects. Only a critical attitude towards this "normality" can provide us with the keys to understanding the genesis of this everyday space where our social formation takes shape and where we are simultaneously the product and producers of our environment. Everyday life represents an ideal field in which to investigate and work for a profound social transformation towards the construction of a Culture of Peace

It is in our daily lives that we have to check whether this culture of peace comes to life in our personal and community actions.

We need to get out of a situation of passivity that makes us, yes, lament violence but not move in practical ways in the direction of peace. We must be infected by this decision and know that, as long as we do not act, the edifice of peace will not progress. The simple decision will gradually dispel the paralysing question of "what can I do", to see that there is always the possibility of collaboration in this enormous task of building a peaceful life. "Blessed are those who build peace". This is the best beatitude that the Franciscan message proposes to us today.

It is clear from the Franciscan writings that Francis' reaction to the violence of the system, and in which he himself participated, is what we would today call active non-violence. Francis' option, in fact, cannot be diluted in an inner pacifism that does not materialise in anything. As José A. Merino, university professor and writer, says, Francis developed a kind of pacifist strategy. This is shown in the Rule of the Third Order in which he forbids secular Franciscans to carry any kind of arms, to swear oaths with a warlike component and encourages them to make a will to prevent their goods from going into the coffers of the warlords.

3.- The challenge of the causes of poverty

The scholastic aphorism that "there is no effect without a cause" is old and true. Poverty has been a companion of the human journey, in various forms and with different, always adverse, consequences. Many humanitarian agencies have worked hard to alleviate the devastating effects of poverty. Their merit is great, even if the results have been small. But few of these people have seriously questioned the causes of poverty, the structural social mechanisms that cause poverty and make people poor. The system rubs its hands together when it sees many people working boldly against poverty without aiming their darts at the real causes of poverty. Poverty-stricken people demonstrate and even revolt against their respective governments, demanding that they fix such injustice. In reality, however, it is not the governments that cause poverty today, even though they may increase it through their mismanagement, but the big multinationals, the huge food companies, the big oil corporations, the arms manufacturers and sellers, etc. These institutions emerge unscathed from every difficulty and generally increase their profits as a result of the crises they themselves cause. When the world food crisis was at its worst and many world leaders from all over the world meet in Rome under the auspices of the FAO in 2008 to discuss the problem, it was known before the meeting was over that food has just become more expensive. As the crisis deepens, executives continued to distribute handsome profits. It sounds like sarcasm, but it is a reality.

There are those who point in the direction of the causes, as did the Swiss J. Ziegler, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, at the aforementioned FAO meeting: "The Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and IMF), with the US government and the World Trade Organisation, even refused to recognise the existence of a human right to food and imposed on the most vulnerable states the Washington consensus that favours liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and the reduction of states' national budgets. This model, which generates even more inequalities, (...) has particularly catastrophic consequences for the right to food in three of its aspects: the privatisation of public institutions and services, the liberalisation of agricultural trade and the market-based model of land reform". But most of those who could say a word against this issue look the other way.

And the Church? And Franciscans? It must be recognised that, in general, Christian life, sometimes even in collusion with the system, has worked hard on the effects of poverty, but has ignored the causes. It is believed, with some naivety, that hunger kills, but what really kills is the inequality that causes it.

Are we still in time to listen to this challenge? Yes, we are, even if our actions can only be modest. The magnitude of the challenge should not obscure the need for a response.

4. The persistent challenge of migration and of not considering anyone as illegal

Although emigration has always occurred in human history because people are not like trees that have no feet, the fact is that, due to the growing gap between the countries of the North and the South, we are now witnessing a boom in emigration of a universal dimension, not only from Africa but also from America, Eastern Europe and the whole of Asia. The situation of poverty and war that we are experiencing will not stop the flow of migration, because need and poverty push people to emigrate in order to earn a living.

With so-called illegal migrants there is, yes, an administrative problem, but there does not have to be a human problem. We must bear in mind that every person has dignity and that inherent to that dignity are the basic rights to health, food, work, housing and education. Then we see how these rights are articulated in the concrete life of a country. But to call some people "illegal" is totally unacceptable. The inherent dignity of the human being makes every person legal. And, for the same reason, one cannot discriminate against those who do not have papers as if their dignity was inferior.

Does Franciscan spirituality support this view of people? Absolutely. In his First Rule (VII, 14) Francis says it very clearly: " And whoever comes to the friars, friend or foe, thief or robber, let him be received with kindness". How much more so if the one who comes to us is neither a thief, nor a

bandit, nor an adversary: he is a person like us, with our same needs, with the same rights. And, if possible, with some more because they come from the poverty and injustice that we have inflicted on them with our (still living) colonialist abuses.

Perhaps in order to embrace this spirituality we need to go down into the fundamentals of our truths and apply to ourselves that salutary principle of Brother Francis: "What a man is before God, that is what he is and no more", says Admonition 19.

In other words, we are neither our wealth, nor our development, nor our well-being, nor our so-called progress, nor our political influence (things that poor migrants lack).

We are, like them, in need of understanding and shelter, we are beggars for love, we long for a home in people's hearts, we want our tears to be respected and consoled. Here we are on an equal footing with every person, whether from this land or any other.

The Franciscans should not consider anyone illegal. And even more: they should treat with kindness those who come to us seeking a more humane life and be more capable of spreading joy in the houses of the poor.

The conclusions are clear: we must stand side by side with those who come to us with all their needs. We must campaign to welcome them without prejudice, not only to understand them for the right they have been deprived of, but to shake our certainties and restore our ways of understanding reality and faith itself. In some way we should make our own the slogan "We too are migrants", because deep down we are migrants. Finally, this is a decisive moment in the history of our peoples. It is not going to get any smaller because the North-South differences are growing. Let us not close our minds to this moment of social prophecy. It would be like closing ourselves to the Gospel. A whole task lies ahead.

5. The challenge of building civic friendship

All too often, the political panorama shows us the spectacle of people who, belonging to the same country, the same culture, the same people, sometimes even the same family, not only disagree in ideas and words, but who stage a break and a rejection that leave us perplexed. How can we, as fellow citizens, neighbours, relatives, treat each other so badly? How can we teach children respect, the values of coexistence, moderate language, calm attitudes if adults, even those of the highest social standing, go in opposite directions?

Adela Cortina, professor of ethics at the University of Valencia, has created the concept of "civic friendship". She defines it as follows: "Civic friendship is when the citizens of a state who, because they belong to it, know that they have to pursue common goals. Therefore there is already a bond that unites them and leads them to try to achieve those goals, as long as legitimate differences are respected and there are no comparative grievances". The evidence of mere coexistence should lead to a bond of unity and, by the same token, a bond of respect and friendship that makes it impossible to withdraw legal status, hold people in contempt or reject them.

Was Francis a person of civic friendship?

Yes, in the manner of his time. He took part in the social struggles in his city between "majors" and "minors", an ally, of course, on the side of the "minors" because he was not of noble birth. This senseless struggle, like all struggles, made one thing clear to him: he had to take the side of the "minors", but not with weapons, but with fraternity. To this he dedicated his whole life's efforts. He respected, without judging, those who were of a different social class, "those who wore soft and coloured clothes". But that did not mean that he considered their positions of social oppression to be just. He never made friends with powerful oppressors. He believed, as St Bonaventure's *Sacrum Commercium* says, that "the world was his cloister", because he considered that a Franciscan could live anywhere in the world, feeling that he was a brother to everyone. He stressed, above all, his civic friendship with the excluded, with whom the least of us should "be happy". For these are the ones most in need of friendship.

6. The challenge of being alongside ethical issues in a gentle way

We are aware that the area we call ethical issues is very slippery. Issues such as sexuality in all its variants, the problems surrounding a dignified death, the wide and intertwined world of our moods and attitudes, the ever more acute question of the new genetic engineering, etc., are realities of the complexity that we are faced with. When we speak of Franciscans having to accept these difficult challenges in our culture today, we want to place ourselves in another landscape, in being alongside, understanding, helping and, in short, being gentle.

We believe that, effectively, one of the ways of trying to respond to this complex challenge is to place ourselves in the field of listening, being close, being alongside without judgement, even when positions or experiences are not understood or shared. And we need to do so with gentleness, with that feeling in which, the inner self connects with a person's complicated situation and establishes a harmony welcoming, supporting and appreciating. Moreover, this gentleness does not spring from a paternalistic feeling of superiority, but from the perception that, in some way, we are all in the same situation and that, despite the distances, everyone is in need of similar protection. True tenderness leads to harmony because it perceives the equality of situations. That is why it is free from any pride, contempt or feeling of superiority.

Often the official positions of the Church on these kinds of issues are characterised, globally speaking, by great clarity and a no less notable rigidity. The Franciscan spirit does not want to conflict with them. It respects them, but it places itself on another ground, that of the calling of fraternity and gentleness.

Conclusions

Perhaps after reading these challenges we are left with a bitter-sweet taste in our mouths. This is not surprising. Challenges, like prophecy, always have an acidity that makes them true. But they also contain the "sweetness" of being able to grow together, of the present utopia, of the bright horizon. Franciscan life today will have to swallow these challenges which, like the scroll of Revelation 10,9, taste sweet in the mouth like honey and bitter in the stomach. It is the ambiguity of all truth.

Perhaps it is also possible that by accepting some of the approaches set out above, we may feel a certain sense of guilt and defeat: the spiritual path of our Franciscan life may feel empty and we may have feelings of guilt (we have not been faithful to Francis) and discouragement (we will never be faithful) are generated. But a different reaction is possible: it may be true that Franciscan spirituality has not been at the level demanded of it in its history. But, even if we can no longer change the past, we can change the future. Therefore, instead of dwelling on historical mistakes, some of them still persistent, we must look to the future, knowing that today more than ever there is the possibility of living a Franciscan spirit that is valuable, comforting, capable of generating hope and of projecting itself into the future.

Entering into the dynamics of these challenges demands real clarity, being critical, and a desire to search. It demands being attentive to what is happening and to what is happening to us. To let go of this "sentinel" role is to allow oneself to make it routine and insignificant.

"You, son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel", says the Lord to Ezekiel (Ezek 33:7). Perhaps we are being appointed sentinels in this age of ours. The Argentinian writer E. Sábato says in his book 'The Resistance': *"We cannot forget that in these old times, with already worn out values, there are those who believe nothing, but there are also a multitude of human beings who work and continue to wait, like sentinels"*. May we be able to exercise this role of sentinels. Without facing the difficulties, without facing these and other challenges, it is impossible.

* Excerpt adapted from the book: *Challenges for Franciscanism in the 21st century.* Fidel Aizpurúa Donazar

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