

Lifelong Formation for Franciscan Men in the U.S. in service of God's Mission
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"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Musings from the Margins

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Gospel: Mark 1: 9-15

It happened in those days that *Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan* by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, *"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."*

At once the *Spirit drove him out into the desert*, and he remained in the desert for *forty days*, tempted by *Satan*. He was *among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him*.

After John had been arrested, *Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God*: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Good evening to you my dear Conventual, Capuchin, Third Order Regular, Atonement and OFM brothers, Brothers of the Renewal, Secular Franciscans, Franciscans of the Anglican Communion, and to all others who are present. Whenever St. Francis of Assisi would greet a group of people, especially while engaging in popular preaching, he would call for the peace of God to descend upon them. Perhaps this was something he learned during his brief visit to Egypt 800 years ago, staying for a time in the camp of the Muslim military leader al-Malik al-Kamil. I hope that this same peace might descend upon all who are participating in this symposium.

It is a great joy for me to be here with you in and to participate in this symposium dealing with the question "What it means for us Franciscans in general, and those of us who share an identical rule and charismatic origin, and indeed for all who have embraced consecrated life and the public profession of the evangelical vows to be engaged in a lifelong process of conversion?" Perhaps the more difficult question we must face is "What forces from the heavens will be required for of us to *be convinced* that the journey upon which we have embarked is lifelong?"

Mark 1: 9-15: Jesus' Lifelong Vocational Journey of Conversion.

I would like to take a moment to reflect on the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, which deals with the initial moments in the life of Jesus where he moves from a private life in and around Nazareth, to a public life that would eventually lead him to Jerusalem, the center of religious and political power, and to his death. I believe Mark's text offers some clues about the nature of our religious profession, and presents us with elements necessary for the lifelong journey upon which those of us who are religious have embarked. However, I also believe this applies equally to all disciples, as Pope Francis has made clear in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*.

In the opening lines of the text, Jesus goes from Nazareth to the Jordan river where his cousin John is conducting some form of ritual purification, an initiation into a new form of life, one involving a personal conversion, and entry into some new type of community. Jesus 'goes out' in

search of John. Can we speak of Jesus feeling the pull of the Spirit, a desire to understand more fully the purpose of his life and his future?

No matter what response we give to this question, what we can affirm in Mark's understanding of conversion is that it always has a social or public dimension and is not simply a private or individual matter. Through baptism into 'the way' of Jesus, one receives a new identity that must be deepened, developed over a lifetime of decision-making, of choosing to place God at the center of one's life. Discipleship in the community of Mark is about embracing the gift of the calling Jesus offers to each and every person. It also is about undertaking this new way of life that one has received as gift, one that is understood as it is lived together in a community of others who also have received the same gift, and together with the one who accompanies and helps to explain the significance of the gift, the rabbi (Jesus).

Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark is experienced as an unfolding of the mystery of God over the course of a lifelong process, with Jesus as the first and model disciple. This unfolding takes place most powerfully in the constancy of exchanges, of praying, eating and drinking, and walking along with the Master who shares his life with his disciples, teaching them to follow his example.

Franciscan reflection: If I might step out of the biblical text for a moment, I find some key elements in what we have seen in this first part of the text of the Gospel of Mark present also in the spiritual intuition and life practice of our founder, St. Francis of Assisi. Francis' own calling begins with the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Bro. Cesare Vaiani, General Secretary for Formation and Studies for the Order of Friars Minor, in a recent symposium, argues that for Francis, God is experienced as the 'first author of our formation and guide of our evangelization' ("Riflessioni sulla formazione iniziale e permanente nell'Ordine oggi," 6 June 2018, p. 4). After only one year, Francis and the brothers, feeling pressure from without to explain what their Gospel life was about, prepared a short document that was presented to the Pope for his approbation. This document no longer exists but the brothers, gathered in annual chapter, continued to add to the initial text what they were learning about their life with God, in fraternity, and their engagement in mission (preaching, social service, etc.). Upon his return from Egypt, Francis felt pressure to prepare a document that could explain to them the life into which they had been called, the vocation they had received, and the responsibilities that came as a result. In 1221, St. Francis and his brothers prepared a text that, fundamentally, presented their way of life modeled on the way of life of Jesus presented in the Gospels. This *Regula non bullata* (Early Rule) was to serve to inspire the brothers to commit to follow Jesus. Francis did not want his brothers to be guided by a set of rules to which the brothers were to conform their lives. He wanted them to remain in deep communion with the poor and crucified Lord Jesus, and for them to seek to live this experience of deep communion by living among brothers and sisters who were poor, excluded, exploited, powerless and landless. Still, this document for evangelical living did not receive sufficient support from the brothers, which meant that Francis was required to prepare yet a third document, the *Regula bullata* (1223) that could provide sufficient security to his followers that the way of life they had professed met with the approval of the Church. Perhaps the brothers were acting in good faith, trying to protect the movement from being quashed by the hierarchy of the Church who sought to root out evangelical movements that were critical of the structures, and others that proposed a way of life that, according to the Church's understanding of its identity and mission, was inconsistent with the received faith. Francis complied with those seeking a stricter description or 'rule' to govern the movement, with the help of friars trained in Canon Law and the assistance of Cardinal Ugolino. However, Francis would not relent in his conviction that the Gospel provided

the fundamental vision and means for achieving what God had asked of him, and what he was convinced God was asking of all of the brothers.

Thus, Francis transformed the concept of rule into a way of life, modeled on the life of Jesus discovered through his personal engagement with the biblical texts, from moments of intense prayer and contemplation, and from ‘practicing’ the way Jesus proposed to his disciples and to Francis. For this reason, Francis’ document on living the Gospel is entitled *Rule and Life*. The *rule* is grounded in Jesus’ experience of living in a particular way what he received from the Father in the waters of the Jordan and that was further developed in all succeeding moments of his life, the choices he made to love God and love all that God had created, the ‘golden rule’. Francis added a few canonical additions to ensure its approval by the Holy See.

The *life* involved the daily re-commitment of Francis and the brothers to seeking the way of conversion and transformation. This *Rule and Life* applied equally to all brothers, those at the beginning of their vocational journey as well as those in the middle or nearing the end of their journey. In the mind of Francis, there was no distinction between the responsibilities for receiving and living the way of life of the Gospel set out in the *Rule and Life* between novices and professed members of the Order. Nor was it the case that the older, professed friars were to transmit a set of rules, norms and regulations to the younger members and novices. What mattered most in the mind of Francis was the centrality of living what the friars professed. They were to be living signs of the very life they publicly professed, which means they were to be men grounded in a life-giving relationship with God, to be men of prayer. They were to show love and mercy to one another through the daily living out of the Gospel in the fraternity, the privileged place for the revelation of God in the life of the friars. And they were to open their lives in a special way to God’s poor, living among those who were discarded, exploited, marginalized. And they were to pursue a life of penance – *metanoia* – that would further open them to the mystery of God present everywhere, present even in the followers of Islam, in the self-serving political and aristocratic classes, and present in all of creation. This progressive conversion process could only take place if the brothers were to come to understand that their vocational journey ran from the moment of their first calling to the day when they would depart from this world and be welcomed in to paradise (cf. *Admonitions, Letter to a Minister, and Testament*).

Mark 1:11: “You are my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased.”

Mark then tells us that Jesus submitted to the ritual purification and baptism in the waters of the Jordan River conducted by John the Baptist. Mark does not miss the opportunity to inform us that something amazing happens in the life of Jesus: whatever awareness he might have had of his identity and mission prior to the event of baptism, we will probably never know. But the moment Jesus re-emerges from the waters of the Jordan the Spirit of God descends upon him “like a dove,” and a voice cries out from the heavens: “You are my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased” (Mk. 1:11). Jesus receives confirmation of a new identity, one that is given to him as gift from God, and that, according to the evangelist, forever changed the course of his life. While Jesus initially took the initiative to leave Nazareth and go into the desert in search of John, here Jesus no longer is in charge; the Spirit of God now assumes the role as the chief protagonist. This does not mean that Jesus is exonerated of all personal responsibility, submitting blindly to the will of God. Rather, it means that the calling he received, and I would suggest that all religious receive, begins with God. What follows is a lifelong partnership, God doing what God can do, Jesus walking with us at each stage of our lives, doing the same for us as he did for the disciples of Emmaus, opening our

eyes to see the handiwork of God, God's provident presence in our lives, and enabling us to remain constant in our vocational journey.

Before I continue, one critical comment is required. We know that the Gospels are not meant to serve as an historical account, a daily ledger of what transpired in the life of Jesus, his early disciples, and all those who witness his life and work.

What Mark and the other evangelists provide is unity of identity and action: who Jesus is from a theological point of view; and the meaning of his life, words, and actions not only for his life but for the life of all who would follow in his way. What emerges from the Gospel stories is a 'narrative unity', revealing that each decision, each action of Jesus forms part of a cohesive whole. Jesus' going to Galilee where he preached about the kingdom of God was a consequence of the decisions he made earlier, which took him to the waters of the Jordan where he was confirmed for God. This action of going into the waters of baptism and being confirmed by God is what then led him to be 'driven by the Spirit' into and through the wilderness/ desert. Radcliff calls this a "narrative unity" (cf. "The Identity of Religious Today," CMSM, August 8, 1996).

"To have an identity is for the choices that one makes throughout one's life to have a direction, a narrative unity. What I do today," continues Radcliff, "makes sense in the light of what I did before. My life has a pattern, like a good story."

Jesus' life has a pattern; it makes sense from beginning to end. This is precisely what the evangelists perceive in the life of Jesus. Mark has embraced the same call as the one received by Jesus, namely, to become a disciple of the Father. He recognizes that discipleship in the community of the Lord Jesus is an invitation to receive the gift that Jesus received, and to enter into an entirely new way of perceiving (insight), seeing, leading to a new way of living and acting. Jesus' life becomes the model *par excellence* for a lifelong commitment to conversion of mind, heart, and deeds required of all Christian disciples. "Come after me," "follow me" (Mk. 1:17; 2:14), "for there were many who followed him" (Mk. 2:15). This 'following' of Jesus will lead to many crises, and to the cross but also to the resurrection. Does this have any bearing on our life as consecrated religious today?

Crisis as the Way of Christian Discipleship and a Model for Religious Life

What takes place next in the Markan text is actually quite disturbing because it suggests something fundamental and fundamentally perplexing about discipleship lived in the community of the Christ. Jesus is immediately *driven* into the desert by the Spirit of God where, we are told, he will remain for forty days and undergo temptation at the hands of Satan, the devil. The text also tells us that he will be accompanied by wild animals and angels who minister to him. Mark's understanding of Christian conversion is actually quite radical. Jesus's own 'conversion' and transformation take place under very strenuous conditions. The desert, no matter how glorious some recent spiritual writers have tried to make of it, was no joking matter. Without stretching the text of Mark too far, and taking into account the narrative of this same event in the Gospels of Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13), I believe we can say that Jesus participated in a formative process that progressively helped him to understand and to embrace that which the Father expected of him and, as a consequence, would be required of him. The first expectation was that he embraces the new identity that God, in the Spirit, was offering to him: "My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." What was 'requirement' was that he place his entire life at the disposition of God's action and God's intention for him, for the sake of this disciples and for the same of the world.

Mark's brief text makes reference to the number 40, used symbolically to recall the events of Moses, exodus, the desert wanderings, struggles, and sufferings of those who united their lives and their future hopes in the mission of Moses, following him into the desert in order that God's promise of fullness of life might come to pass in their their lives, and the lives of their descendants. The 'promise' to which Moses and the Israelites committed their lives, literally risking their lives, was composed of three central themes or benefits. First, the promise offered to them an opportunity to undergo a transformation of the conditions of security for their lives with the dawning of a new reign of peace and tranquility. Second, they hoped that by leaving all behind in order to follow Moses, and by consequence to follow God that their lives would be richly blessed, a material improvement and guarantee that all of their basic needs would be satisfied. And third, they believed that by following Moses in pursuit of God's promise, their lives would be become righteous and holy. As with Moses, so with Jesus, both were considered to be God-fearing and God-centered men of faith. But this did not mean that because of their personal holiness or faith, they would be able to find shortcuts to the promised land. There are no secret directions for how to get to the promised land, no quick access to the promise of coming into the freedom that God offers to those who love and follow him (Cf. Romans 18:18-21).

What is fundamental to the stories of both of these God-fearing men is that there is no shortcut to the promised land; there is no way to short-circuit what is required in order to be *set free from* all that is not of God, and to be *set free for* living God's dream for all of humanity and the created universe. Forty days, forty years – they are just another way of saying that to enter into the life of discipleship offered by God to each of us is to enter into a lifelong engagement to seek conversion of heart, holiness of life, the pursuit of the justice and the peace of God.

There is a further theological dimension to what Jesus experiences in the desert and that prepares him for his lifelong journey. For Mark, crises and suffering, the result of choosing daily to follow Jesus with an undivided heart, contain the seeds of a redemptive grace, God as it were unleashing his love and mercy upon all peoples, leading to the transformation of human history and the conversion of each disciple who has undertaken the 'way' of Jesus. Is there something that we could learn from this theological understanding of 'redemptive suffering' presented in Mark's version of who Jesus is, and who we are as disciples of the crucified and risen One? Is there some way we might include the redemptive aspects of suffering in what has, among some programs for Ongoing Formation among Franciscans as "Plans for Fraternal Life and Mission," which might help us to embrace with conviction and commitment a way of life that helps us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, only Jesus! In what way might the theme of redemptive suffering help us to understand and create ways for living better together, suffering with one another in fraternity/community, and encouraging one another to pursue a lifelong commitment to penance and conversion? Does this theological theme of redemptive suffering also have something to offer us as we seek new ways to enter into encounter with all peoples, especially those who are poor, excluded, who have suffered all forms of violence in their lives, who have had to run for their lives and for the sake of their family, abandoning their homes and countries in search of a place where they might experience peace, security, fraternity/brotherhood, and where they also might be able to live productive lives? Perhaps we might do well to reflect on the transformative power of the cross in the life of Jesus, his early disciples, and countless Christian followers over the course of two millennia, in order that we might allow the power of the cross to transform our ways of living together and giving witness through evangelizing efforts to a wounded humanity and planet.

Franciscan reflection on Crises and Opportunity:

In my service as Minister General, I have been struck by the difficulties that arise within the lives of the brothers when confronted with adversity. Perhaps it is a sign of the times but the capacity for brothers to recognize new opportunities for growth through the experience of suffering, self-doubt, disappointment (with self and others) - falling in and out of love; losing zeal for the evangelical life and for missionary evangelization; inability to relate in an adult, healthy manner with those who are in the service of authority; inability to share one's life with brothers in the same community - seems to be seriously limited, if not altogether absent. In a recent private meeting with one brother of the Order, he informed me that he could no longer live with the brothers of his local fraternity and that if the Provincial did not move him to the community where he wanted to live, and if I as General would not intervene on his behalf, he would leave the Order. On another occasion, a brother informed me that, after conducting a "serious discernment" regarding his vocation and his future – the 'serious discernment' consisted of spending several hours in prayer, talking with his sister, with a close friend, and even with a priest he never before met - he had decided he could no longer tolerate the local guardian and that he would be moving to another fraternity. When I asked him whether he had spoken with his local fraternity or with the guardian, he informed me that he did not trust any of the brothers, that they all were 'under the thumb' of the ill-willed guardian. I also asked him whether he has spoken with his provincial. He told me that the provincial "is a weak, old man who does not make any decisions." In the event that he actually moved to another fraternity, the provincial would do nothing except try to 'calm the waters after the storm'.

What is the point of me telling these real life stories? Is it to shock you? If you have been living the consecrated evangelical life for a period of time, there is probably nothing that will shock you. The best and the worst of humanity is on display in our local fraternities/communities. Is it to tell you that the brothers [or sisters] no longer respect authority in religious life? Or is it to confirm what you already know: the religious life project our founders received from divine inspiration, a life project to which we are – or are not – committed is in serious trouble? The crises experienced in religious life should be recognized for what they are, and for what they are not. They are clear signals, the 'smoking gun' pointing to the urgent need for us to revitalize our personal and fraternal/collective lives. These crises actually can serve to fortify us, to clarify our understanding about our own lives and the public commitment we have made, which must be continually purified and translated into the way we relate to God, to our brothers (and sisters), and to God's people. They form the 'quotidian' of our lives, the locus of formation to Franciscan – indeed to all – religious life.

In a recent interview by David Brooks, political commentator, popular speaker, and author of a book entitled *The Road to Character*, he points to one of the key building blocks for the construction of human character, namely, the ability to discover in weakness the road towards authentic identity. Brooks writes:

"Through history, people have gone back into their own pasts, sometimes to a precious time in their life, to their childhood. And, often, the mind gravitates in the past to a moment of shame, something committed, some act of selfishness, a lack of courage...You go into yourself, you find the sin which you've committed over and over again through your life, your signature sin out of which the others emerge. And you fight that sin, and you wrestle with that sin. And out of that wrestling - that suffering - then, a depth of character is constructed. And we're often not taught to recognize the sin in ourselves. And we're not

taught in this culture how to wrestle with it, how to confront it and how to combat it” (<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=532841680>).”

“Out of that wresting - that suffering – then, a depth of character is constructed.” I would like to suggest that one of the most critical aspects of the formative process, from beginning to end, from postulancy to end of life, is that of creating a space within our religious fraternities/communities where we actually help one another learn how to confront the truth about ourselves, those areas of life requiring further conversion. Our beautiful formation documents speak loftily about this confrontation with self. They speak about the centrality of interpersonal relationships, for which religious are “experts in communion” (cf. *Vita Consacrata*). These same documents tell us that communion is the most vital way to giving concrete form to the evangelical councils and to the quality of our witness before the world. Still, no matter how much these documents call our attention to our identity as “a living organism of fraternal communion” (“*Fraternal Life in Community: Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*,” CIVISA, Feb. 2, 1994, 2.c), our efforts seem to be frustrated by a serious lack of sustained attention to and formation for interpersonal, fraternal living. Many of us struggle with the forces of individualism present in our fraternities/communities and in our work for evangelization. The strong pull of individualism creates serious difficulties because the individual – “I” – becomes more important than the collective - “we”. The struggles posed by individualism are further complicated by a vision of our identity and mission and ministry comes under the spell of a misguided clericalism, one that seeks privilege, concentrates power, and progressively excludes others from fully participating in the lifelong process of building conditions for the realization of the kingdom of God. In far too many cases in our religious life, fraternity, collaboration, and communion are pushed to the margins, leaving the glorified individual at the center. In this same scenario, even God becomes an unwelcomed stranger.

The three Minister Generals of the First Order (Capuchins, Conventuals, OFM) spoke about the impact of individualism, and also of clericalism, on all programs of formation, initial and ongoing, and the impact it has on the discernment process among men coming to join our way of life. Too many men join with the idea of becoming clerics, priests, using Franciscan religious life as an instrument for attaining the ultimate goal: priesthood. The negative consequences of this attitude upon fraternal life and mission can be devastating, as some or many of you might already have experienced. I have often thought about asking the Vatican whether we could suspend all ordinations in the Order for five years, giving time to the brothers to focus on developing the central vocation God has given to them (to us), the call to a radical evangelical life, cultivated and nourished by prayer, a strong fraternal life, and engagement in the missionary activities of the church. This last ‘missionary’ dimension is grounded in the social doctrine of the Church, in the promotion of integral human development, a new way of speaking about the inseparable relationship between faith and justice, prayer and peace, and lifelong formation to the evangelical counsels. Clearly, the missionary dimension will require of us to live among and be formed by those who are poor, excluded, migrants, all those who are living on the front lines in the struggle for human dignity, justice, truth, and reconciliation (cf. *Pilgrims and Strangers: Resources for Formation*,” OFM Curia, Rome, 2008, pp. 23-24, 31-32, 39-40, et passim).

Franciscan Religious Life: A battle for God

What if religious life were not about embracing lofty ideals, and even less about living a protected, pampered life but rather about choosing to enter the desert, to embrace human and spiritual battle as a necessary consequence for having chosen to place one's entire life in service to God and the Kingdom? If we fast forward to the chapters 14 and 15 of Mark's Gospel, we are presented with two texts that deal directly with the suffering Jesus willingly embraced as a consequence of his decision to remain grounded in God, walking towards the Kingdom. In chapter 14, Jesus has to face the prospects of an ignominious, violent death. "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will" (Mk. 14: 36). And in chapter 15, we are presented with one of the most troubling of memories: the cry of Jesus from the cross, one of desperation, confusion, the sense of having been left all alone to face the consequences of his ultimate decision to abandon all for the sake of God's cause, God's dream.

"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (Mk. 15: 34), "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" There does not appear to be anything glorious or redemptive coming from these words of desperation, uncertainty, absolute loneliness, a perfect description for the 'hell' or 'Gehenna' of the biblical texts. And yet, the cry of Jesus makes sense from within the context of all the choices he made, the way he lived and share his life with his disciples and group of friends and other followers, discovering God and placing living stones for the temple of the kingdom through a life of evangelical nurturing. There is a narrative unity to the life of Jesus, the same narrative unity we find in the lives of the founders of Orders, Congregations, and religious Institutes. God is the author of this 'book of life' but Jesus, and each of the great charismatic founders were the co-authors. This co-authorship, this invitation to work with God in the continuing elaboration of the unity of our human, spiritual, and Franciscan narrative allows us to see the pattern of the divine, the sacred operative in our lives, most especially when we ourselves are unable or unwilling to do so. Those moments when we actually step back and behold what God has been doing in our lives and our world, in our religious communities – among the brothers [and sisters] – and in and through our feeble efforts to care for the 'flock' entrusted to our care, we actually catch glimpses into this narrative unity. Things 'fit in', although not necessarily all things at all times. Nevertheless, there is a great possibility that we will even catch a glimpse of where we are heading, the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus found in the Gospel of St. John 10:10, fullness of life, an abundance of meaning and purpose, the inheritance of a capacity for love greater than we could ever ask or imagine.

A personal story of the life of a Friar

I remember recently speaking with a Franciscan friar who had suffered much in his life at the hands of the Communists in the former Easter Block countries. He spoke of all forms of deprivation: food, lighting, heating, being harassed by the local police force, subject to physical beatings, and spending extended periods of time in prison. What amazed me is not that he survived these deprivations and difficult moments, which stretched over many years. What amazed me was the peace that reigned in his heart. He told me the more difficult crisis he faced was a crisis of forgiveness and love. Early on in the experience, he remembers praying for the death of his 'persecutors'. At some later stage, he remembers being faced with a situation with one of the very people who had done harm in his life and who was experiencing many challenging health issues. Although he did not want to do anything to help the very person responsible for harassments, privations, and physical abuse, still he could not reconcile his refusal to help in light of his being a disciple of Jesus and a follower of the Saint Francis. In the end, the Franciscan friar helped the suffering victimizer.

What leaps out from this story is not the heroic actions of a man who could have chosen to turn his back on the plight of his oppressor. What emerges from this real life story is that of a Franciscan religious who came to an understanding that he was on a lifelong journey. In some mysterious way, the violence perpetrated by the Communist politician/police officer was transformed into a powerful spiritual tool for reclaiming the dignity that the abuser(s) tried to rob from him. In effect, the positive response of the Franciscan friar to help his victimizer contributed to the further interior healing, which, I believe, provided him with a greater capacity to live and to forgive. Life in abundance! One other detail: this Franciscan is known for his care for the other Franciscans in his local community, and for his faithful service of care for brothers more elderly than he, visiting them, encouraging them, sharing his personal journey with them, inviting them to seek the way of healing, restoration, and renewal of their vocational commitment to be disciples of the risen One. This is what, I believe, St. Paul is speaking about in his letter to the Ephesians (3:17-19):

“...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3: 17-19).

Talk about a clear understanding of a narrative unity!

Mark 1:13: “He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him”

One of the most basic needs of human beings is to feel welcomed, recognized, part of something greater than oneself, loved and nurtured in an environment that enables or facilitates growth in all dimensions of life. As with other human beings, so too with Jesus. In the midst of the desert, a place that normally should be devoid of life and companionship, Mark introduces two sets of ‘characters’ who will provide spiritual and physical companionship to Jesus during his ‘time out’, a time of purification, a time to clarify his identity and mission, and a time to prepare himself for a very different future. Some biblical scholars suggest that the wild beasts and angels arrived at the last minute, as Jesus was completing whatever experience was necessary for him to undergo – let’s call it his novitiate. Other scholars argue that, following Mark’s theological bias for painting discipleship in the plural, i.e. that discipleship is lived within the context of community, the wild beasts and angels were present with Jesus throughout the entire time. For reasons that will become clear, I subscribe to the latter theological interpretation.

We see that Jesus did not undergo his novitiate experience alone. In Mark’s theology of discipleship, Jesus is surrounded by wild animals and messengers of God, the angelic beings who are perceived to be close to God and close to human beings. For Mark, *all discipleship is accompanied*. Whatever ‘stages’ one might wish to speak of in the early community of Mark (inquiry, catechumenate, illumination, or mystagogic), the pedagogy or formative experience provided to those who came to Christ was deeply personal and personalized. Its goal was to provide accompaniment to the individual as he (she) drew closer to Christ and closer to the community of the missionary disciples. It was meant to be life-changing. It also was meant to create within the individual a spiritual ‘docility’ in which their hearts might become ever more open to Christ speaking in and through his Word, in and through personal and shared life events, and in and through participation in the sacramental life and mission of the Church. Aidan Kavanaugh, in his book entitled *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, Pueblo, New York, 1978, p. 182 et passim), states that the process of the rites of Christian initiation, in whatever form they existed in the early Christian communities spoken of in the Gospels and the

other texts from the New Testament and from early Church practice, served as “a structure of Christian *nurture*.” He argues the need for the Church to recover this understanding of the conversion process leading the baptized to a lifetime process of conforming oneself to the mind and heart of Christ.

Nurture as a Permanent Condition for Franciscan religious life

The concept and practice of nurture as a foundational element in the process of the Christian Rite of Initiation finds a deep echo in the thinking and structures of permanent and ongoing initiation and growth into Franciscan religious life. We have already pointed to one of the key elements of this process of nurture, accompaniment. Franciscan friars who have been living in a diversity of intentional Franciscan communities, primarily in Europe, slowly developed a series of reflections on their experiences of a qualitatively different way of living their vocation. The qualities of these ‘new forms for living Franciscan life’, according to them, revealed the following elements: cultivation of a life of prayer that is more explicitly intense and shared; structuring of frequent occasions for encounter between the members of the local fraternity/community, allowing for greater sharing of life; the desire to live in greater simplicity of life, one that creates within the friars of the fraternity greater awareness and sensitivity to the plight of the poor, excluded, and those who suffer other forms of marginalization and suffering; going to the ‘margins’ with a clear message of hope, love, mercy, an evangelizing life that is fundamentally itinerant and not connected to big structures; and reaching out to laity and involving them together with the friars in shared projects for missionary evangelization in new or older, or more classical, forms.

Following a series of bi-annual meetings, and working closely with the OFM General Secretariat for Missions and Evangelization, a group of friars who were members of one of these intentional fraternities – ‘new form for Franciscan living – prepared a short booklet describing their experiences and proposing a series of fundamental ‘qualities’ necessary for the nurture of living a more authentic, passionate, and joy-filled Franciscan life. This document published in 2014, and updated in 2017, is entitled *Ite, Nuntiates* (OFM General Curia, Rome). I would like to state in a more systematic manner the ‘values’ or ‘characteristics’ that the friars from these various intentional fraternities/communities suggest are conditions sine qua non for promoting a greater sense of, and commitment to, lifelong formation and nurture of the vocation we have received: Among these seven nurturing values are:

- (1) Primacy of the life of prayer and listening actively to the Word of God;
- (2) care and attention to the nurturing of deep fraternal bonds that witness to a testimony of the faith life of the fraternity – the instrument of regular house chapters to discuss the movement of the Spirit and the quality of relationships between the brothers assumes a privileged role;
- (3) A simple, sober life-style witnessing to minority and total dependence on God and interdependence on the brothers of the fraternity;
- (4) Welcome extended to all those in need and sharing of life and fraternity with them;
- (5) Participation in the evangelizing mission of the Church ‘inter gentes’, through itinerancy, and seeking to associate one’s life with those who are poor, suffering, excluded, with a special attention to discovering new frontiers for evangelization (e.g. interreligious dialogue, intercultural encounter);
- (6) Communion with the local Church and collaboration with the laity; and
- (7) Openness to working closely together with members of other branches of the Franciscan family, and with others.

To this list, I would add one further dimension that is vital to the goal of deeper conversion and the nurturing of a more authentic Franciscan life (consecrated life):

(8) Heightened sensitivity to issues related to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, integrating all of the prior seven values into unified vision of Integral Human Development, as demonstrated in Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, and his Encyclical on integral ecology, *Laudato Si'*.

The process of nurture that *Ite, nuntiate* seeks to promote recognizes that all the brothers of the fraternity are responsible for the care and growth of one another. The role of guardian is to live in fidelity to the life he has professed; be open to listening and accompanying each brother, encouraging them, correcting them, and seeking to promote opportunities for the growth of each and of all in the fraternity in what it means to be free in Christ Jesus (cf. "You Have Been Called to Freedom: Ongoing Formation in the Order of Friars Minor, Rome, 2008, p. no. 48 et passim; Gal. 5:1, 13-14).

Keep it Simple: The role of the Daily/Quotidian in Revolutionizing the World

The context for living these eight central values, which are necessary for the nurture of our evangelical vocation, "is that of ordinary life in the local fraternity, inserted into the cultural, social and political world (cf. *You Have Been Called to Freedom*, no. 25)." Franciscan formation is experienced in the daily rubbing of shoulders, the celebration of liturgical life, contributing to the upkeep of the house, cooking a meal, attending to a sick member, taking time to listen to the brothers, reaching out to someone who has experienced some type of family or other tragedy, enjoying a beer as an occasion to share life and personal narratives of what God is doing in the lives of each person, participating in the regular life of the fraternity, making ourselves available to others (the brothers) so that we might become more available to the Other, God (cf. *Vita Consacrata*, 69).

It is by living a style of life that is grounded in a spirit of nurturing, one that gives priority to the 'normal' rather than the 'exceptional', that celebrates moments of grace in the small things – these are the ways that we slowly but deliberately create conditions for allowing the members of our fraternities, our Provinces, and our Orders to experience God, to experience their and our humanity, and nurture the desire to engage with the world.

I think we could agree that we want to welcome new vocations to our specific form (way) of religious life. Not all would agree that each of our fraternities/ communities are living a sufficiently healthy quality of spiritual, human, fraternal, and apostolic life. For this reason, the Orders and Congregations 'cherry pick' those communities where there is some semblance of the living out of values we profess. Candidates are taken to meet friars living in these 'boutique' fraternities/communities. The problem, however, is that our Franciscan life is not about creating 'boutique fraternities', something that is also true for all other forms of religious life. It is about generating a desire among all members – all friars – to want to live daily, in some way or another, the central values that should guide our personal and communal lives.

The more we are able to create and expand the number of fraternities founded on the most basic of our evangelical values, the easier it will be for all of our brothers, most especially our younger brothers in 'Initial' formation, to experience the continuity that should exist between 'initial' and

'ongoing' formation. Far too often, friars 'transitioning' from the initial to the permanent stage of formation – lifelong formation - discover a wide gap between these two moments. Speaking of 'mind the gap', an allusion to the London subway, far too often religious life cultivates a mentality of those 'on the journey' and those who 'have arrived'. One friar once sarcastically referred to houses of initial formation as 'fantasy islands'. He added: "We need to teach them what Franciscan life is like in the 'real world'." For religious of a certain temperament, the 'real world' is the place where little is expected, even less is shared, a place where religious live and die in isolation, loneliness, apathy, and even bitterness. God is calling all friars/all religious of the same Order/ Congregation, to assume our responsibility for creating conditions necessary so that we might help one another continue to choose to welcome God's gift of our vocation each and every day as something new and potentially revolutionary for our lives, our Orders/Congregations, the Church, and the world. It is in this way that our fraternities will become centers for human and spiritual growth; a place where we can practice what it means to be alive for the Gospel; and a place where we can learn new ways to invest ourselves in the life of the world. We must remember that Jesus goes to Galilee and other regions once he has welcomed his vocation and taken steps to purify and deepen it. Jesus reveals a willingness to put into daily practice the deepening of his vocation – his intimate relationship with the Father- together with those he called to "come after me" (Mk 1:17; 2:14). It is from this deep experience of being evangelized that Jesus and the disciples undertake the mission of preaching and giving witness to the kingdom of God. Clearly, within the context of the Gospel of Mark, we witness the difficulties the disciples experienced in trying to understand the full implications of the vocation each had received, and the challenge that Jesus places before them to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (cf. Mk. 8:33-34).

Called to Live "According to the Pattern of the Holy Gospel" (Francis of Assisi, *Regola bullata* 1.1)

In 2012, the OFM Order initiated a study of the situation of the 13,000 friars living in 121 countries in the world. A questionnaire containing 153 variables (questions) was forwarded to 1,500 friars who represented the broadest of age, region, apostolic engagement, culture, language groups present in the Order. Ninety-three percent of those who received the questionnaire responded. More than 40% of the friar respondents that their lives had become dry; that they had 'run out of gas'; and that their connection with God was weakening. A smaller percentage of friars felt they lives were progressively overrun with activities and activism, producing within them a sense or feeling being, somehow, 'out of place' in Franciscan and religious life. As a consequence, a similar number of respondents were concerned by the fact that they felt very little emotional attachment to their brothers in the local fraternity, the province, and the Order. Some said they were living on the 'fumes of the desire and experience of intense prayer' they experienced before joining the Order, or perhaps experienced in novitiate.

This same story of 'running out of gas' and feeling disconnected from the fraternity and values of Franciscan life among some friars is also present in the reports from Canonical Visitation to the entities of the Order. We hear about tired, angry, sad, lonely, lone-ranger friars who feel that their experience of living in a friary/local community is more like living in 'Hotel St. Francis'. They live like a registered guest, consume food and drink, and have all the comforts necessary for survival. At the same time, they also do not assume any responsibility for the life of the local fraternity. They take and take without giving.

Unfortunately, this story applies not only of older OFM members who perhaps have had a different type of formation to Franciscan religious life, one that promoted individualism and a mentality of the 'survival of the fittest'. Even today there are regions of the Order – and I would venture to say this is true in the other Orders and other forms of consecrated life – where the friar/religious lives alone, justifying a lifestyle of individualism while hiding behind the argument that they are “responding to the needs of the local Church and to the people of God.” When I sometimes speak with the “people of God” and with the bishops, I hear a very different story. They talk about the ‘long ranger’ religious who listens to no one and who is always too busy with things that have little to do with meeting pastoral needs.

In religious life we also must confront situations where friars/religious spend more time on personal maintenance, making sure their world is structured in a way that they are seldom challenged to grow, and surrounding themselves with walls and barriers that are composed of brick and mortar, and increasingly of fiber optics and ‘likes’ (reference to the “Facebook phenomenon”). The net result of all of these forms of self maintenance is a distancing from God, from the fraternity, and from the people of God among whom we are called to live and share good news. This also emerged from the 2012 Questionnaire on the “State of the OFM Order”. How hard it is for religious who are consumed with self maintenance and creating a safe, secure, and ‘luxurious’ environment to imagine that Franciscan evangelical life is not about security, stability (the 4th vow, in case you did not know), stagnation, about allowing the dream they once received, the vocation they once nurtured, to die. The words from the song “I Dreamed a Dream” come to mind:

“I dreamed a dream in time gone by, when hope was high, and life worth living.
I dreamed that love would never die, I dreamed that God would be forgiving.
Then I was young and unafraid, and dreams were made and used and wasted.
There was no ransom to be paid, no song unsung, no wine untasted.
But the tigers come at night, with their voices soft as thunder,
As they tear your hope apart, as they turn your dreams to shame.” (Anne Hathaway, *Les Miserables*)

Recovering the Dream: On Discernment

When I was provincial in St. Louis (11 months of service), I met with a friar who had been doing the same service in the province for more than 25 years. I asked him to embark on something entirely new and different, one requiring that he learn Spanish, share life with a faith community composed to a large measure of Catholics from Mexico, and be open to eating the food, drinking the beverages, and enjoying the sounds of music of the people among whom we have being asked to go. His first response was that of anger. He asked me: “How could you take me away from the work I have been doing, doing so well, and from the life I have built for myself? This was less a question than an indictment against my decision to ask him to move on to a new fraternity and ministry. I explained to him all of the reasons why I thought he was the right person at the right time for what I believed would become the right fit for him, for the friars among whom he would live, and also for the people of God. He asked for time to ‘discern’ his response. A week later, he came to me and presented a laundry list of motives for not accepting the change of ministry and fraternity. In the end, he accepted the change, more out of a sense of obedience to his superior rather welcoming new opportunities for fraternal living and evangelization, for further growth for

his religious vocation. I met him three years later after moving to Rome to serve the Order. He came and gave me a big hug. “Thank you! I did not trust you, nor did I believe the new work and fraternity to where I was to be assigned would be good for me. I must tell you, I have never been happier in my 40 years of Franciscan life. The new fraternity and ministry have opened my eyes to see just how old and self-centered I had become.”

Mark 1:14: “After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God”

The Gospel of Mark concludes the initial stage of Jesus’ formation/conversion process with movement. For Mark, conversion to God’s kingdom agenda is initiated by God, received by the disciple – in this case, his beloved Son – shared among the disciples with the Master (rabbi Jesus), and proclaimed to the world. For the evangelist, the formative process towards discipleship in the community of Jesus promotes unity with God, fraternal communion as an expression of this spiritual unity, and the desire and responsibility to communicate to others the good news one has received and in which one has placed one’s trust. In each of the Gospels, an explicit link is made between movement towards God, towards fellow members ‘on the way’ (in the community of disciples), and movement outward towards the world. There is no authentic evangelization without unity and communion lived with God and among the disciples. But neither can one come to a deeper understanding of who God is, and the nature of God’s mission, unless and until we join in the movement. Each contributes to the completion of the other, leading to deeper faith and spiritual maturity, and to a deeper understanding and acceptance of one’s own humanity and that of others. Perhaps it is for this reasons that the OFMs have discovered the direct link between Fraternity and Mission. The documents of the Order speak of all communities of friars as “Fraternities-in-Mission”. There is no disconnect between living the radical life of discipleship in Jesus Christ, being a member of the Body of Christ, the Church, and being a member of the Order of Friars Minor. All converge in the experience of evangelical life when it is lived as a continuation, a deepening, of the primary call to be missionary disciples (Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 24, 40, et passim).

The same that can be said about discipleship in the community of Jesus can also be said about religious life. Movement is absolutely essential for growth in vocational awareness, for deepening one’s identity, and for experiencing greater freedom to live the Gospel life with love, peace, and joy. But one might ask, “How is this movement to be achieved?” Here, a healthy dose of creativity, spontaneity, and also risk-taking is necessary. Programs involving ‘stages’ or ‘flex mission’ or ‘overseas training programs’ (OTPs) are helpful instruments. They promote an opening of one’s life to new realities, new cultures, new languages, thus making a contribution to increasing one’s capacity to live ‘inter-culturally’, and I might add ‘inter-generationally’. These latter two are becoming ever more urgent as religious Orders/Congregations take on a more diversified face, welcoming new religious members from anywhere in the world, and as our provinces – at least those in the US – continue to experience aging and diminishment. All of these initiatives should be seen as tools vital for lifelong formation. No age requirements hold: all are welcome to apply!

True evangelical movement involves linking our lives to that of Jesus, to the lives of the poor and marginalized (cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 179ff.), to the Church, and to our fellow religious.) This movement opens our horizons to new possibilities for living the Gospel and the evangelical counsels with a new freedom, the ‘freedom to love’ of which St. Paul speaks in his letter to the Galatians 5: 13. This is precisely what Pope Francis has in mind by insisting on the

need for the Church, for all disciples, and for us religious, to 'go out' – '*uscire*' – to become a missionary community of God in service to all of humanity and to creation.

"I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (*Mk 6:37*)" (EG 49).

Conclusion: On 'Waking Up the World'

I must apologize for four shortcomings in what I have tried to share with you. First, I have formulated many of my reflections bearing in mind the members of the Order of Friars Minor for whom I bear a special responsibility. I also had in mind my brother Capuchins and Conventuals with whom I share both an effective and affective affinity and charismatic identity. My intention was not to exclude any other of the Franciscan groups present and with whom I share a close affinity. Rather, I sought to talk about something about which I think I know something about without inventing or projecting images about Franciscan groups of which I know very little. Still, I believe that many elements that apply to the OFMs and other members of the First Order and TOR also find resonance in the lived experience of other religious congregations of Franciscans.

Second, much of the language used by the Church and by our respective Orders and Congregations, formulated in 'Ratio formationis' documents, focus attention not only on the theological, spiritual, and ecclesial dimensions of formation to religious life but also provide a series of recommendations for how to promote lifelong conversion, the goal of all formation to religious life. Rather than simply repeat what is contained in these documents, I have opted to risk directly engaging with the events and theological significance of Jesus' lifelong conversion to the mission of God's kingdom presented by the evangelist Mark, and to which I have added my own creative flair. The reason I have taken this approach is that I am convinced the 'seeds' or essential elements for understanding the mission, scope, and methods for life formation towards union with God, with the brothers and all other human beings, and with all of creation are present in the opening chapter of the Gospel of St. Mark. If I were accustomed to act in a more classical manner, which I am not, I probably would have taken the image of the Transfiguration that guides St. John Paul II's reflection on the meaning and mission of religious life (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consacrata*). Mea culpa! It also is a valid reflection and opens to us other insights into the mystery of vocation and lifelong formation.

My third shortcoming: I have opted not to include in this presentation issues related to sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable peoples for the simple reason that it merits a particular attention that goes beyond the scope of the time allotted to me at this symposium. Our public commitment to the evangelical counsels and the search for integrity of life and mission require that we give

specific attention to life long formation for responsible living, as a matter of faith and justice. Thus, all programs of formation should integrate tools and methods for helping each of us integrate our sexuality and affective needs in a way that promotes healthy, holistic relationships among the members of our respective Orders and Congregations, and in all of our relationships that are created and nurtured through our missionary, apostolic activities.

A fourth shortcoming: I regret that my thoughts and recommendations might not be bold enough to help us move in a direction that not only respond to the call of Pope Francis to “Wake up the world” (cf. Pope Francis, *Catholic Herald*, January 3, 2014:

<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2014/01/03/key-quotes-from-the-popes-meeting-with-the-union-of-superiors-general/>) but that actually will convince us that in order to be passionate and faithful missionary disciples, we must embrace a way of living the Gospel that can actually render our hearts malleable, revitalize the quality of interpersonal relationships - a quality fraternal experience of life that is life-giving, and transform our apostolic/missionary outreach into a collaborative, two-by-two experience capable of reflecting a model of discipleship that is forged ‘on the road’ of daily shared life.

Parenthetically, at the last OFM General Chapter (2015), a proposal was brought forward by a number of brothers from entities in Latin America seeking to include in our General Statutes a recommendation that, where possible, our houses of initial formation, including novitiate, be located in neighborhoods where the inhabitants experience all forms of exclusion, deprivation, poverty, violence, and dehumanization. The motive behind this proposal was not based exclusively on the evangelical value of poverty and the promotion of simplicity of life in response to our charism and the call of Pope Francis for religious to embrace the way of the poor Christ by association with those who are excluded, although this certainly had some influence. Rather, the brothers’ call to move formation houses to the ‘peripheries’ was an invitation to radicalize our way of life and systems of formation, further enabling the young candidates, novices, and temporary professed to be afforded an experience of coming to a deeper awareness of their dependence on God alone, and interdependence on the brothers of the local fraternity, Province/entity, and Order. Personally, I welcome such initiatives on condition that *ALL of the brothers* of the Province/entity accompany and invest in such a move. It is one thing to send young lambs to the slaughter. It is another to send the ‘fatted rams’.

In whatever direction our efforts take us, I remain convinced that we can change the way we think about the formative conversion process in which all of us are engaged. We can find new and more effective ways to promote the active participation of all of our fellow religious/friars in giving specific shape and content to this process. And we can help one another discover and articulate the narrative unity that gives shape to our identity, offering redemptive possibilities to the way of life we have received as gift from God to which we are willing to commit all of our energies, in the best and the worst of times. Perhaps when we have done all we can to move ourselves in these directions, placing the crucified Lord Jesus at the center, we will discover that in fact, we already are acting as “Witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living!” I still ‘dream the dream’! Do you?