

A MESSAGE FROM LOUISE

With these chapters as guidelines, you begin your formation as a Franciscan Missionary of Jesus Crucified. This formation is intended to guide you on your journey to God as a member of the Institute. As you study and prepare to give yourself to our Lord through the evangelical counsels, I urge you to do so in a spirit of prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit. By way of introduction, I would like to share some thoughts with you.

Let us begin with what you already know, yet often forget, and that is that God created you, gave you life, loves you and chose you. Actually your formation began with your Baptism and, since then, you have been drawn ever closer to God. By His grace, you have been given a vocation to a life of consecration. Why God chose you is part of what our Constitution refers to as His mystery of charity.

When God gave you your new life in Christ at Baptism, He set you apart as another Christ and gave a mission to become perfect as His Heavenly Father is perfect, and to announce the Good News to all humanity. Like Christ your Model, the goal of your existence must be only to do the will of the Father. As Jesus' humanity was elevated by His divinity, yours must be elevated by the Christ-life within you.

You have been called to a life of consecration as a member of a specific religious family, the Franciscan Missionaries of Jesus Crucified. As a member of this particular Institute you are called to share in our Lord's sufferings and to help Him carry His Cross. As you progress in formation and in living our life, you will learn much about the theology of suffering and the spirituality of following Jesus Crucified.

There are four other characteristics of this vocation that I would like to discuss with you now: *consecration*, *secularity*, *the spirit of Francis*, and *community*. Through these characteristics your life must speak to those with whom you live, work and minister.

Consecration is the total giving of yourself to God and it affects your very being and how you live. As a Franciscan Missionary of Jesus Crucified, your consecration must be expressed to the whole world in a rather specific manner, according to our particular charism. Our poverty is the detachment of the consecrated secular. Your life of poverty should tell the world that you can live among temporal possessions, and use the means of civilization and progress without being enslaved by them. Rather than disdaining the things of this world, you must use them to care for yourself and to help your neighbors, especially those in whom you see Jesus Crucified. Because you do not receive financial support from the Institute, you experience the insecurities of our times and show the world that radical dependence on the providence of God is possible.

In chastity you must draw on God's love and dedicate yourself to everyone without tying yourself down to any one person. Through your chastity, you must love as God loves and show the world the possibility of disinterested and all-embracing love forever.

Self-fulfillment comes only by doing God's will, not our own will. Your obedience must show

the world that you are available to do God's will as expressed every day in many ways. You must learn how to discern God's will for you. When the world and those around you do not accept or understand your way of life, remember that Jesus was treated the same way.

Once when Pope Paul VI talked to the Superiors General of secular institutes, he said that *secularity* is our way of being Church. Secularity means that you are called to live your consecration in the world and that the world is your place of Christian responsibility. Your secularity is expressed by your willingness to identify yourself with the world and to bring to it the message of the Gospel. Because we do not have common dress or common life, we express in a particular way the hidden life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

When I think of the *spirit of Francis*, I think of a man who took our Lord's message to heart, and simply and fully lived the Gospel. Francis believed and lived the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord! Believing himself to be the instrument of Christ, he called himself the herald of the Great King. You, too, must be a herald of the Great King and, like Francis, you must be intent on doing "His" thing not "your" thing.

Francis was a realist who could see the world as it truly was, with all its follies and errors. But Francis never forgot that the world as it was created was good, and that Christ was the center of this creation. Francis was loyal to the Church while at the same time reforming her. As our Institute grows, we must never forget that we exist in and for the Church, and we must always seek her blessing and guidance in whatever we do.

The last characteristic of our vocation that I would like to discuss is our fraternal communion or *community* within the Institute. Community means that you are not alone but that you have fellow travelers. Here again we can take Christ as our Model because He had twelve Apostles. Francis started with a few companions and then he had many. We are just beginning, but, with the help of God, we are growing. There are two things which are essential to the sharing of community -- common sense and a sense of humor. Without these, you will probably find things difficult.

Within the Institute you will experience three relationships, all based on your relationship with God. These relationships are with yourself, with other members of the Institute and with your Ministers (superiors). Each of these relationships must be based on the virtues of faith and trust. The quality of these relationships will be determined by the depth of your relationship with God. To grow in your relationship with God you must become a woman or man of prayer, or rather, you must become prayer as Francis was.

Considering first your relationship with yourself, it is absolutely necessary that you accept yourself as you are at this time in your life -- not as you would like to be, or as you were yesterday, but as you are now. You are a human being and a man or a woman. You will never be an angel, although, hopefully, you will be a saint. You need to recognize your humanness and to realize that you have weaknesses; that you have your "down" days and your "up" days, and in spite of these God loves you. You need to realize that you must love yourself. Love is always shown in service and sacrifice. If you love and serve yourself, you will develop self-discipline, because without it you can do very little and what you do is always hard.

In your relationships with other members of the Institute, it is important to realize that you are part of our fast-paced American society and it is easy to look for instant holiness. There is a special temptation to look for instant holiness in others, if not in yourself. Just as you must accept yourself as you are and where you are, you must accept the other members of the Institute as they are and where they are. Accepting people as they are is especially important with regard to members who have variable physical conditions or progressive disabilities and illnesses which may cause them to respond to you differently at various times.

As a human being, you have a great need to love and be loved, and to be needed and appreciated. All of us have the same needs and they influence our relationships with each other. In particular, we must be considerate of our isolated Missionaries who have unique needs which have to be met. Those of you who are fortunate enough to live close to other members of your Local Mission, should not forget those who live further away and can not attend days of recollection. You must also be especially attentive to those who are too sick or disabled to attend the annual retreat. In addition to praying for those who can not share in all community activities, you should also frequently reach out to them and express your love for them in tangible ways -- even those who are not part of your Local Mission.

The third relationship you have within the Institute is with your Ministers, especially with your Local Minister. When things go wrong, it is easy to blame it all on the Institute or on a person in authority. You may feel that the Institute and your Ministers do not understand you. Though it is so easy to blame others, sometimes the problem may be with you. Try to understand your Ministers. There are so many things that they might have to do which they can't explain to everyone, even though they may want to in the interests of openness. You may feel that what your General, Territorial or Local Minister does is not good or not the best approach. But you must have faith and trust in them even though you might not like them personally. Like you, they are trying their best, but they are only human and bearing their share of the Cross. They, too, have their "down" days and their "up" days. When they seem unapproachable, give them another chance; you would want them to treat you the same way if you had their responsibilities.

Above all, I urge you to be open with your Ministers, especially your Local Minister. S/he is there to serve you, to help you understand your life as a Missionary, to help you deepen your life with Jesus, to guide you in helping Him carry His Cross. They can not perform this ministry of service to you unless they know you. Your Local Minister should not be the last person in the Local Mission to know what is going on; this may be good for her or his humility, but it does not build up community. Do pray for your Local Minister and all the Ministers of the Institute. They count on your prayers; they need your prayers. Prayer is essential for a good relationship between you and them, and a good relationship is necessary for all of you.

Do not be afraid to make suggestions or express new ideas to your Ministers, especially if they are for the good of all. The Holy Spirit speaks through each one of us, not just through those in leadership positions. Each member has responsibility for the Institute, especially for those in their Local Mission. Though ultimate responsibility rests with the Local Minister, decisions which affect the entire Local Mission should be made as much as possible through consensus.

Aspirants are the future of the Institute, God's gift to us. Those that have gone before you thank God for you and support you by their prayers. You, in turn, should pray daily for perseverance in your vocation. Pray each day to be faithful to the graces God is giving you. Try to avoid getting into the habit of saying you'll "do it tomorrow", for you may not be able to do it tomorrow. You will find it especially tempting to put off completing your formation lessons; but you must learn to discipline yourself in this matter, if you hope to have the discipline required to live the vows in the world. God is promising you many graces, be open to what He is offering you and do not put obstacles in His way. Try, also, to help your fellow Aspirants and the Missionaries on their journeys.

My prayer for you is that you remain faithful to what you have begun, so that in due time, you will be able to give yourself totally and completely to Jesus Crucified in chastity, poverty and obedience for the rest of your life. Please pray for me that I, too, may be faithful to what I have vowed.