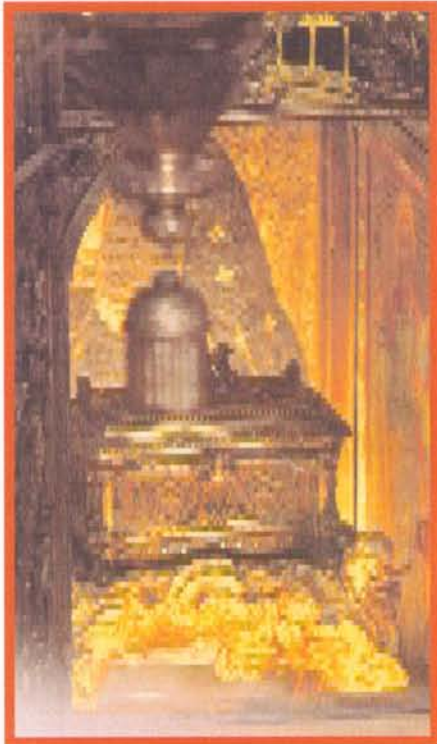


The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans - Assumption BVM Province

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Spirituality and the Places of Our Lives TOMB OF ST. PETER Francis Seeks a Foundation for His Life



Tomb of St. Peter, the Apostle

Dear Sisters and Brothers, Just a few words concerning this and subsequent newsletters. An attempt will be made to *relate reflections on a Franciscan place to the SFO Rule and General Constitutions*. This is intended as encouragement in helping us live the Secular Franciscan Life as described in the official SFO documents and also guide lay Franciscans in embracing their role in today's

Church and society. The spirituality of the 21st century has been identified as *Franciscan*, and the Secular Franciscans are key players in bringing this spirit to our everyday world. The SFO Rule clearly states: **"Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel."** (Chapter II, 4)

This Newsletter focuses on the centrality of faith as the foundation and life-giving source for all we are and do. We look to Francis and his incipient efforts to root himself in the faith witness of the Apostles.

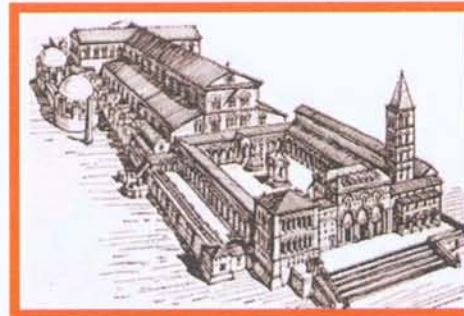
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Between 1202-1206, as Francis was trying to figure out his life, he made a pilgrimage to Rome. The first thing he did was visit St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles. *The Legend of the Three Companions*, 10, state:

...He yearned to be in another city... as someone unknown... At this time he happened to go to Rome on pilgrimage. As he was entering the church of Saint Peter, he noticed the meager offerings made by some, and said to himself: "The Prince of the Apostles should be greatly honored. Why do they make such meager offerings in the church where his body rests?"

Thomas of Celano, 2C8, repeats something similar:

Once on a pilgrimage to Rome, out of love for poverty he took off his fine clothing and dressed himself in a poor man's clothes. He happily settled among the poor in the square in front of the church of Saint Peter...



The Basilica, shown in this sketch is the Constantine Basilica that Francis knew. This magnificent but ageing Roman structure, however,

was dismantled in 1570 and replaced by the even more spectacular Renaissance Basilica of St Peter which still occupies the same spot today. What is important about this Basilica is that it housed the Tomb of St. Peter. The remains of Peter presently under the main altar of the current Basilica had been here in the former Constantine Basilica. Whether or not Francis prayed before the actual Tomb of Peter as we see it today is unimportant.

What we can say with conviction is that he came to St. Peter's because he believed that the remains of the Prince of the Apostles were there, and he wished to draw inspiration and energy from Peter. Francis was searching for a foundation, a treasure, a rock, on which to set his whole life and he comes to Peter. Why? Perhaps because Peter is the first to have made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

The most important reality in life is the gift of faith in Jesus Christ. That holds everything together, and gives one direction and purpose. It is the source of energy for ministry and daily life. It is a source of comfort and consolation on difficult days, and often a source of joy and gratitude when awareness comes of what the gift of faith in God has meant.



Sepulcher/Tomb of Peter inside Basilica

Faith in Jesus is what keeps us going, no matter what. In other words the foundation of our life is not some structure, or religious laws, or an institution. The foundation of our life is faith in Jesus Christ, a knowledge and relationship with him. Because of that faith we are able to live within structures and institutions and be guided by laws, as was Francis.

These sentiments are reflected in the **SFO Rule** which states: *The Rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and center of his life with God and people. Christ ... is the **way** to the Father's love, the **truth** into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the **life** which he has come to give abundantly.* (II, 4) Faith in Jesus gives life to these words.

This declaration "...made Christ the inspiration and center of his life..." is perhaps the key statement in the entire SFO Rule. That grounded Francis and contributed significantly to Pope Innocent III's acceptance of Francis and his brothers in 1209. From that meeting the Franciscan family was born into the Church and the foundation pillars for the Secular Franciscans were laid.

What is important is to build moments of faith into our life so that one's roots are deeper and stronger. It has to do with stepping into the unknown. The following image might be helpful. Think of being at the edge of a field covered with freshly fallen snow. One needs to cross this field but cannot see the well-worn path underneath created by others. Neither can one see the obstacles or short cuts.

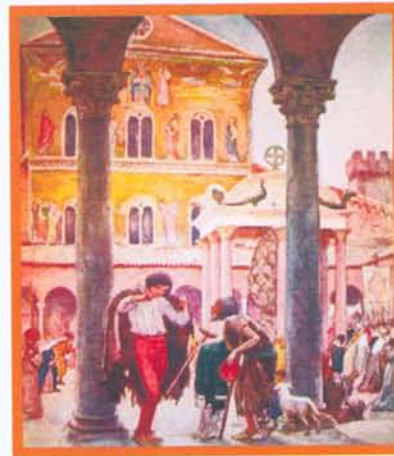
Yet the call of life, the call of love, says: "Come, step out, create new life, new paths." If faith is there, the person begins to take one step, then another. Only a wide open field and a virgin blanket of snow are visible. "What step shall I take, what pathway is safe." The key is making the decision to act and taking that first step. Often when talking about "living by faith," ideas and plans are discussed, and nothing more. Faith, however, steps in when one decides to take the risk, even before having solutions and resources to fulfill the plan.

Then after a time on the journey the realization dawns that the Lord has been one's guide, and that in his providence God has been watching and caring all the way through. It is, however, a realization or an experience of God one would totally miss unless one took those steps into the unknown to express trust and faith in God.

These steps into the unknown can take many different forms: asking forgiveness, sharing one's vulnerability, saying to someone "I love you," accepting a difficult ministry, pursuing a dream or vision that few support or believe in. These are ways we build moments of faith into our life's journey. As this becomes the basis for our life's pattern, our faith becomes firmer, stronger and rock-like. Likewise the conviction in knowing that God is truly a sure foundation for one's journey in life becomes clear and certain. Others feel and sense this steadiness and firmness in one's spirit which speaks of God.

All of this finds meaning in the words of the **SFO General Constitutions**, article 8: *The Secular Franciscans commit*

themselves by their profession to live the Gospel ... They seek to deepen, in the light of faith, the values and choices of the evangelical life according to the Rule of the SFO, in a continually renewed journey of conversion and formation, open to the challenges that come from society and the Church's life situation, "going from Gospel to life and from life to Gospel."



Francis changes clothes with a beggar at St. Peter

Francis came to Peter searching for a "rock" in his life, searching for a foundation. Francis wanted to get rooted in the faith of the apostles which is Jesus Christ. This gave focus to his life. It can do the same for us. Without faith in the person of Jesus nothing matters and one's life is pointless.

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