



General Secretariat For the Synod of Bishops



Franciscan Spirituality

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Discernment in Franciscan Spirituality

I believe that some considerations on the life and spirituality of Francis of Assisi are essential for understanding Franciscan spirituality and the contribution it can make to the synodal process today. Even for our contemporaries, in fact, Francis continues to be a constant source of inspiration. Finally, the history of Franciscanism can also be read as an inability and failure to live community discernment: the tensions between 1400 and 1500 between the two tendencies (Conventuals and Observants) within the single Franciscan Order led not to reconciliation, but to separation, to the fracture in 1521 between the Conventuals and the Observants as 2 distinct and completely autonomous and separate families. This situation still persists today in the Order of Friars Minor and the Friars Minor Conventual. Certainly from these traumatic experiences we can draw many lessons for our theme.

The personal experience of Francis of Assisi

From the biographical events as well as from the writings of St. Francis we can intuit some essential elements of his way (and that of his brothers, disciples and followers) of discerning the will of the Lord. In fact, from the very beginning of his religious experience, Francis carried within himself the need to discern in order to understand what to do and what is pleasing to God. I will highlight some episodes with numbers, by way of a list, in order to be more schematic and - I hope - clear.

1. Francis himself states in his Testament that no one told him what he should do, but that the Most High Himself revealed to him that he should live according to the form of the holy Gospel. This same quest, however, was born of an encounter with a leper whom Francis felt inspired to embrace and kiss. We know from his biography that this inspiration and awareness to follow the Gospel (in the particular form of the apostolic discourse within the context of the beatitudes: go, proclaim the Gospel, don't wear two tunics or a staff, etc.) matured with clarity as he listened to the Gospel at Mass, at the church of the Porziuncola, in an episode that recalls an account reported by Saint Athanasius regarding the vocation of Anthony the Great.
2. We also know from his biography that the very beginning of his conversion and his first evangelical choices were motivated by a dream, the one he had in Spoleto - during his journey to Puglia to participate in a military campaign and win the title of knight - in which the Lord appeared to him and asked him: *Francis do you want to serve the servant or the master?* And Francis answers: *The master.* And the Lord - still in his sleep - continues: *then go back to Assisi and there you will be told what you have to do.*
3. One of the characteristics of the process of discernment that constantly accompanied Francis was ecclesial confirmation. Cited in court before the bishop of Assisi by his father for having given

considerable amounts of money and precious fabrics to the poor, he stripped himself publicly, returned his clothing to his father and placed himself under the protection of the bishop who, in welcoming him, confirmed him in the goodness of the divine inspiration he was following.

4. A couple of years later, after gathering his first companions around him, he went to Rome to ask Pope Innocent III to approve their style and form of life (which will become the “canvas” for the future rule of the Friars Minor), composed in reality of little more than a few sentences from the Gospel, which was the inspirational text of the new spiritual experience of the friars.
5. There is another significant episode regarding our theme. A few years after the beginning of the Minorite experience, Francis was assailed by a doubt regarding whether he should continue his work of itinerant preaching or whether he should retire to a hermit's life. On this occasion, he asked some trusted people (some companions and Clare of Assisi) to pray for guidance from the Lord in this matter. This episode seems to recall a bit the dynamic of the choice between the good and the better, typical of the second week of the Ignatian exercises.
6. Towards the end of his life, when tensions were high within the Order about how the rule was to be interpreted and about the lifestyle of the fraternity to which his (Francis') experience had given rise — although he felt humanly sidelined by the new leadership of the Order (cf. the very famous story entitled “Perfect Joy”) and he perceived that fraternities of the friars were distancing themselves from his original ideal — even in this case he referred (not without personal effort) to the judgment of the Church as manifest by the Cardinal Protector, the then Cardinal Ugolino, who would soon become Pope Gregory IX. The orientation was thereafter to adhere to the process of conventualization required that the papacy required of the mendicant orders.
7. In some moments of his life in which his illnesses and the care of the friars "force" him to mitigate his austerity, he believes that the criterion of transparency is always essential: one remembers the episode in which, because of the cold, the friars ask that he accept having a piece of fur sewn into his cassock to cover his stomach. Francis accepted, provided that the fur is visible from the outside, so as to avoid the risk of hypocrisy.

In this way, it seems to me that some fundamental characteristics of the process of discernment in the life of St. Francis emerge and become the patrimony of the spirituality that emanated from him.

- a) The process of discernment never starts from abstract questions (at the table), but from concrete provocations of life, from inspirations and thoughts that arise in the encounter between the needs and provocations of life and the sincere and deep desire to be pleasing to God and to do his will.
- b) Francis is constantly listening to the Church, because he believes that in it God reveals His will (even if it is not in tune with the views of Francis himself): in its institutional instances (the bishop, the Pope, the cardinal protector), in the voice of the men and women of God, and finally in the words and gestures of the simple and the least. One recalls this episode in which Francis affirms that he is willing to obey the last novice who entered the Order because God likes to reveal his will precisely in the little ones and the least.
- c) Discernment is a process that accompanies the whole of Francis' life and leads him to a progressive divestment from himself, even from the original intuition of his vocation, in favor of an ever more radical and total adherence to the Paschal Christ.

For the purposes of our day of reflection, in fact, the process of both personal and communal discernment in Francis's life and in the early Franciscan community is particularly significant. In the last years of his life, in fact, there is talk of a "great temptation" that afflicted Francis for about two years. Contemporary historians maintain that it was precisely his fatigue to accept the "charismatic" changes within the Minorite fraternity (supported by the Church) which, however, Francis and his first companions saw as a betrayal of the original ideal.¹ It seems that the temptation consisted in the possibility of asserting his identity and his charism as founder (and his well-known and unassailable evangelical coherence) to impose his views and his will on the "reforming" group. Francis - in a personal way - "resolves" this temptation to use the "gifts of God" to impose himself, through the mystical experience of the stigmata, in which he understands that his vocation is that of adhering to the crucified Christ (con-crucified with Christ, paraphrasing St. Paul) and not to use spiritual goods to fight a worldly battle (which is precisely the imposition of his own will and his own views). In a way, this is the transition that tests the intellect, will and love in the second week of the exercises of Saint Ignatius. As I mentioned earlier, the story of "Perfect Joy" is in some way the mature fruit of this new awareness and adherence in his own flesh to the Easter of Christ on the part of Brother Francis: an awareness and adherence that are at the same time the fruit of a true discernment and criterion for new choices and attitudes, both personal and communal.

The community experience of Francis and the first Minorite community

In fact, as we know, the main question regarding any discernment is the criterion used, the "taste" of God, as many spiritual authors define it, which touches precisely on how the intelligence and the heart adhere to the Pascha of Christ, so that this Pascha might unfold not only in one's personal life but also in the events of communal and ecclesial life. The key to communal discernment is, first of all, authentic adherence to Christ's Pascha in the personal lives of Christ's followers. St. Francis highlights and shows this awareness particularly in his *Admonitions* (which were probably just exhortations made to the friars in the context of chapters, meetings, but certainly also in ordinary life, and which are considered a bit like the Franciscan Beatitudes). In these texts, addressed to the friars gathered in assembly (often to make decisions) a recurring element is the dynamic between two mentalities: the *spirit of the flesh* and the *spirit of the Lord* (to use Francis' own words). In today's terms these two mentalities could be called spiritual worldliness, on the one hand, and an ecclesial/communal mentality, on the other. The spirit of the flesh, against which Francis warns the friars, is precisely the temptation and the tendency to protect oneself above all, even by means of religiosity, spiritual gifts, one's own virtues, etc. However, *the spirit* (written as *the spirit of the Lord*) is not the spirit of the flesh. Vice versa, the *spirit* (written with a lower case because it refers precisely to a *mentality*) of the Lord is the paschal logic of the seed which knows that if it does not die, it remains alone and is fruitless. In this case, the criterion of good and evil is not the self, but relationships: fundamentally, the relationship with the Lord, which is mediated, verified and nourished by the relationship with our brothers and sisters and vice versa. In our Franciscan tradition, therefore, we have preserved the custom of accompanying the processes of communal discernment with paths of spiritual formation that nourish and deepen the heartfelt adherence to the Pascha of Christ as the criterion for the fruitfulness of one's own life on a personal and communal level, because this adherence can never be taken for granted.

The development and practice of discernment in the life of Franciscan communities today

Within the cultural and social context in which our Order was born (that of the late Italian Middle Ages above all), the fraternity has always been characterized by a strong democratic imprint. Important decisions must

¹ In the social context of urbanism and the growth of cities in 1200, the papacy saw in the mendicant orders (including the Franciscans) a precious resource for evangelization and spiritual care of the new urban classes. This, however, entailed a transformation of the original lifestyle into a conventual, sedentary existence - not a mendicant one - guaranteed by the possession of economic income, in large convents, with *Studia* for the study and teaching of theology to candidates. And all this, compared to the itinerant life and "abandonment to Providence" of early Franciscanism, could seem like a real betrayal.

always be the result of the consensus of the majority and must not be imposed by authority. There is a shared awareness that the highest instance of authority is the chapter itself (whether at the local, provincial or general level) with respect to the personal authority of the guardian (local superior), the provincial minister and the general minister. In a structure of this type, in which the higher authority is precisely that of the chapter, the question of convergence and of slow and patient community discernment is essential. The main tools in this regard are: the transparent sharing of information on the question to be addressed; ad hoc in-depth studies, entrusted mostly to "external" and therefore impartial third parties, especially during specific extraordinary fraternal assemblies; the possibility of sharing pros and cons both in small groups and in the assembly. Decisions are then usually referred to the ordinary chapter assembly, which takes place at a later date, so that there is adequate time for the decision to mature and be as much as possible a shared decision.

In a process of this kind, conflicts and differences of opinion are the order of the day and the path usually followed is, once again, the patient dynamic represented by the following:

- a. Path of personal and communal "purification" from the exaggerated attention to the ego for a more communal and evangelical vision of the issues (spiritual and intellectual formation on the issue)
- b. Listening to all those involved (on three levels - personal, small group and assembly)
- c. Taking into account the needs expressed by dissent (which is always free) and which is considered useful for a deeper understanding of the issues and for developing decisions that are as shared as possible.
- d. Postpone the decision - with the risk, however, of immobility - until a shared vision (even before a decision) becomes clear. In order to avoid this risk of immobility, authority tends to establish reasonable time frames within which the decision must be taken.
 - a. An example of this process was the elaboration of the new Constitutions of the Order, which involved all the friars and all the communities (for about 4 years) through questionnaires and the sharing of working drafts in various languages. The final draft was then entrusted to a commission of experts. The text was then approved in 3 successive moments by the Minister General with his council, by the General Chapter and finally by the Congregation for Religious. The whole process took about 7 years.
 - b. Another example follows: In order to avoid the risk of immobility, at times the decision is made to resort to the chapter of a higher authority. In some cases, such as the decision to downsize some of our provinces, there was an impasse at the local level. Because of this, discernment was undertaken and the decision for downsizing was made by the general chapter. This communal decision made it possible for the communities and friars involved to accept (in some ways willingly) the decision itself. Certainly the same adherence would not have been experienced if the decision had been taken individually by the General Minister or his council.

In this context, one of the main roles of the authority of superiors is to encourage this process of mutual listening, to encourage personal and community involvement and to help listen to the objective requests coming, for example, from the Church.

Another of the risks of this Franciscan method is certainly that of being a bit general: one agrees on principles or general values, but it is more difficult to move on to the operational level, given the different cultural, social and ecclesial contexts in which the friars live.

In synthesis, I believe that key elements within the context of our reflection today include:

- a. Care for spiritual formation that nourishes evangelical choices in a paschal logic according to the community spirit (the spirit of the Lord, St. Francis would say) and not based on the criteria of worldliness (even worldliness of spirituality).

- b. Listening to everyone and the firm will take into account, as much as possible, every need expressed, including that of the most marginal persons.
- c. Encouraging the constructive expression of dissent
- d. The logic of convergence: to allow the good to be chosen and done to emerge from the bottom up from patient and open dialogue, to the extent possible, for an increasingly global consensus.