

Francis, a Father who introduced us to the joy of the Gospel

As we bid farewell to Pope Francis we become aware of what he has represented for us all, especially for us superiors general and for all consecrated life.

In these twelve years of his pontificate the most evident thing is that Francis has been our companion on the journey. He has walked with us, dialogued with us, on a truly synodal path, to help us better understand ourselves, our vocation and mission in the Church and for the world.

Pope Francis was a religious, a Jesuit. He understood us from his own experience of consecrated life, but also of life as a superior, as a pastor in religious life. He understood us as a man who has had experience, certainly also painful experience, of how arduous it can be to lead a flock of brothers and sisters who wish to respond to a call to follow Christ closely in order to go out to sea with Him.

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has offered the USG ample and frequent opportunities to meet. He would regularly convene us for a morning in which he would dialogue with us, listen to our questions, and answer them in confidence.

That is why he wanted the meeting to be just between us, without the press, without other officials of the Holy See. He wanted us to feel free, he for one, to say what was on our hearts. In these dialogues, after all, he was helping us to become aware of what he wanted to convey to the entire people of God by associating us with his passion for the mission of the Church.

Perhaps one of the most illuminating concepts about Pope Francis' pastoral method is what he wrote in *Evangelii gaudium*: **that it is more important to initiate life processes than to conquer spaces of power** (cf. EG 223). This conviction can illuminate our memory now, sad and grateful at the same time, in these days of farewell from him. It is important to do so in order to understand on what path Pope Francis leaves us, on what process of life he helped us enter, in what direction he helped us take our first steps. It is a bit like when the disciples of Emmaus saw Jesus disappear, after He had accompanied them for a long stretch of the road, conversing with them and loving them until their hearts burned with the desire to be with Him always. The two disciples understood that Jesus had accompanied them to show them a way, a road to travel, on which to run, a road that from his word and the broken bread of his life given would give their whole existence a joyful direction of witness and communion. The disciples of Emmaus set out again because from that companion they received a direction to follow with their whole life and also a new energy to travel it.

That is why it is important now to meditate on the life processes that Pope Francis has initiated with us in the Church. It is not important that these processes have reached their completion. After all, a life process never ends, but it has the positivity of giving our journey a meaning, a direction, the energy to follow it.

Pope Francis has initiated conversion processes with us, especially in consecrated life. He has offered us clear lines on where we are called to convert again and again to the Gospel. He has thus introduced us to processes of humble recognition of our shortcomings and frailties, of what in our progress, in our history, in the behaviour of the members of our communities, especially those in positions of responsibility, is still not faithful to Christ, t Francis thus began with us a process of new awareness of our mission. A mission made of welcoming, of encountering, of putting our person, our communities, at stake with the man, with the poor whom we often do not see, because he is on the edge of the road or behind our closed doors, and who silently asks to enter the path of our life and vocation.

Pope Francis was not concerned that we have so many vocations, but that we all respond to the vocation of walking together and with the poor, because our vocation is our brothers, our sisters, with whom we live a fraternity, a communion that is always greater than the enclosures of our Orders, our communities, our pre-established missions.

All of this means that Francis has also begun with us a process of renewal of mysticism, of walking with Christ present, in love with Him; a process in which consecrated life, like all Christian life, is renewed within a friendship with Jesus, ever more intimate and dilated. Certainly, his last Encyclical, *Dilexit nos*, on the human and divine love of the Heart of Jesus, turns out to be for us like the last testament of a father who wishes his children to live to the full by letting himself be loved and loving without limits. A testament that is a testimony, that is transmission from the heart of the father to the heart of the children, of an inheritance that is not material: it is a love to live, a love to love.

If we welcome and live the inheritance of these processes of life that began with him, which we have the responsibility to carry forward, that is, to transmit in our turn, certainly the fruit of the journey with Pope Francis will be a new vitality of our vocation, which does not depend on strength, numbers, or abilities, but is a gift of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The legacy of the Holy Father Francis will not make us protagonists of power games, which today increasingly dominate the world and are insensitive to the true needs of humanity and peoples; it will make us protagonists of the ever new Kingdom of Christ whose law is the Gospel of love.

We can bid farewell then to Pope Francis with a renewed joy of living the Gospel - *Evangelii gaudium* -, certain that in these processes of new life our father and brother will continue to accompany us with his great heart and ardent prayer.

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