

in times of uncertainty

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I've often said that "life is one big decision." And it's true. We decide to get out of bed each day. We choose what to wear, what to eat, how to get to school or work, how to solve a problem with a family member, what to believe about the universe and even – do I choose to believe in God, the holy catholic Church, the Communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting? Yes, we make decisions all day long, even to the point of deciding whether I want to watch both weather and sports or to skip both and dive into bed.

What, or rather, who, helps you in these many, many moments of decision? We all know there are levels of decisiveness. Choosing a kind of cereal is slightly less intense than choosing to publicly protest the sale and use of assault weapons. So who is it (or what) helps **you** make these daily choices? Who enlightens you about your moral integrity? What are the elements that go into deciding which pair of shoes to wear?

There's a charming legend about Francis of Assisi and decision making. It's Chapter 11 of *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*. Here's my short version of the story ~

One day Francis was walking with Brother Masseo and they reached a three-way crossroads that led to Siena, Florence or Arezzo. Masseo asked Francis which road they should follow and Francis told him to decide by spinning around like a child until the holy man told Masseo to stop. He did out of obedience and fell down a number of times, but kept spinning until Francis told him to stop. "Where is your face pointing?" Masseo said, "Toward Siena." Francis said, "That's the way God wants us to go."

Ridiculous? As it turns out, Siena was being torn apart by battling factions within the city. When word got out that the saint was near, people carried him and Masseo to the palace of the bishop. Francis preached his message of

forgiveness and peace. The bishop of Siena heard him and invited the friars to spend the night with him. Early in the morning Francis insisted they leave without saying thank you to the bishop; Masseo thought that was very rude and told Francis off. And he had something to tell Masseo!

"If you hadn't spun around in the road and helped us decide to go to Siena, the people would not have heard God's words of peace. They would have continued to battle and kill one another. Masseo, try to remember your grumbling today because it's a good way to learn. Remember that you were vain and proud, forgetting that God directs us through life in many ways."

Masseo remembered this experience and that the spirit of divine Wisdom guided Francis in all his actions. Masseo learned to trust God.

I don't advocate spinning around at Clark & Madison to make daily choices, especially if you're older than 12! However, I believe the point of this story is that it may seem crazy at times, but we can honestly trust that God will guide us through life and help us make healthy, solid decisions.

December 7 of this year Pope Francis gave instructions to those at his general audience. One of his suggestions in discernment is that we should take time to rest with the decision made before we act on it. Wait for signs that disprove or affirm the decision brewing in our hearts. One of the distinct signs that a choice made is the right one is "a peace that lasts in time, a peace that brings harmony, unity, fervor, zeal. You come out of the discernment process better than when you entered it." Pope Francis offers even more help to all of us, ideas that confirm our good decisions.

"The decision is seen as a sign that I have responded to God's generosity toward me. No fear remains and gratitude is evident."

“**Tranquility comes** that gives me a feeling that I am part of a larger plan and I want to make a contribution to that plan.”

“**I remain free** with regard to the decision. I can still question it or even give it up in prayer as I learn and trust that God will do what is best for me.” [That’s a tough lesson.]

“**We only love in freedom**, which is why God created us free. When we trust and are



willing to let go of our own desires or choices, we are then free to “live our decisions in the best possible way and in truth, as a gift God has given us, as a sign of his great goodness, knowing our lives are in his hands.”

Try to recall a particularly difficult choice you’ve had to make in life. A really tough choice. With the words of Pope Francis in mind, bring the pain and pressure of making that decision to the forefront of your mind now. Who were significant people involved? What were some of the factors you had to consider? Don’t worry about particular details but try to recall the overall experience of the time and energy that challenge demanded of you. With the memory fresh in your mind, try to remember if your decision brought about the tranquility Francis talks about. Was there the element he mentions that you were still free to question your choice? Did you find yourself trusting God and that God would bring you satisfaction? Did you have any inkling that you were part of God’s plan for your life? Did you realize you’d made a solid choice with the gifts God gave you when He created you?

In this address of early December Pope Francis also includes a nod to the reality of our human feelings that we experience during these periods of discernment. Have you ever woken up at 3:00 a.m. and your brain is in overtime with minute details, an inability to capture any sense of order and then – you cannot in any way get back to sleep? Oh yeah! I’ll bet every one of us has had those nights. They’re nerve wracking and energy draining, aren’t they? And those sleepless nights

and beat up pillows take a toll on our waking hours and our feeling of equanimity, don’t they? I’ve learned something over the years and I’d like to share it with you. It may just save you a few tablets of Tylenol PM!

Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16

When you are flipping around in bed or your head is hyperactive and totally distracted while watching tv, try your best to go back in time. Remember a night when your child was very ill, or a relative was off the wall (that does happen, you know) or a time when you felt financially buried and lost, or someone you love died. Let all those doubts, questions, and emotional floods and mental torture come to the forefront. Then give yourself the time to remember just how you survived the darkness, the pain, the loss, the heartache. It doesn’t take much time to recall and understand that it was God who gave you courage, strength and even the right words to keep walking, to keep living.

Every one of us will eventually come to know what human death does to us. It hurts so badly sometimes that you can physically feel your heart being pulled through your chest, right? The tears appear without any provocation and even sounds come from within that we’ve never heard before. In the midst of all this mess, where life as we know it just stops – I believe these are the moments in when we are touched by the heart of God and the great mystery of human existence is splayed open before us. The power of remembering is hard to understand but in the mess of calling to mind these horrible incidents or periods of life – we find God. We become free. We are filled with peace. We are filled with the tranquility that Pope Francis spoke about: the feeling that “I am part of a larger plan and we discover that we want to make a contribution to that plan.”

Years ago, when I was in one of those ‘tail spin’ moments, I was confiding in a friend. She

listened well and asked: “Has God ever disappointed you?” That question bowled me over and I’ve remembered it for over 40 years. It was my induction into the Trust in God Hall of Fame, which is a life-long process. One of the reasons I encourage people to remember painful memories is that he or she can also see how God just may have been the catalyst for healing. That doesn’t mean a miraculous removal of pain but most often (in my experience) we come to see and know the power of God that flows into and through us so we can face the future with a certain amount of equanimity. Mystery remains but we are built up to keep living without a spouse, we can live with a disease and still be happy, we can get past the loss of a job and move into a new phase of life...the list goes on when we **let God be God!**

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my right hand. Isaiah 41:10

Okay, let’s get real here. The experience of the Covid pandemic shut down the Loop for an extended period. The thousands and thousands of people who worked downtown just disappeared overnight. A classic photo of that dark period captured a coyote walking by itself down Michigan Avenue by the Water Tower! That was a perfect mirror of the painful abandonment we came to know. Our daily income here vanished overnight and still continues to plague our day-to-day operations. We can only offer three weekday Masses instead of seven; three weekend Masses are offered, not four or five. Our income has been greatly reduced because of radical changes in the business world and in the Church herself. Programs that brought in some financial help were halted, as were other gatherings.

Bear with me here because I am aware that St. Peter’s asks for financial help with Christmas and Easter appeals, our annual Gala and more. But I bring this painful experience to you because the flip side of our empty coffers is that we friars depend completely on the goodness of people that comes our way because of God’s grace.

Franciscans can beg for money, yes, but behind that is the ultimate trust we have. Look at the 175 years of St. Peter’s and how God’s power has carried us through little problems like the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 or the plague of Covid 19 that took one million lives in the United States alone in 2020. Little problems? Not quite! Whether it’s constantly repairing things that break in this ageing building, like boilers and plumbing or adapting liturgical praxis to a different population for now – Franciscans learn more and more each day that **God will do what it is that God does.**

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9

The legend from *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* about him and Brother Masseo – it’s cute, yes. But there is truth in every story, even if the story is not true. Francis teaches us, his brothers, to completely relinquish fear and rather foolishly step into the future with that peace Pope Francis spoke about in December. Trust in God does bring inner peace and tranquility; that, in turn, gives us the freedom to love others with a heart filled with the Lord’s joy. Not the Snoopy-on-the-doghouse kind of joy but the knowledge that we live freely without many things because God knows what we truly need - before we even start to whine about what we don’t have! Trust me on this, friend! Read the Scriptures and see how many times the phrase “**Do not be afraid**” is said by an angel or Jesus himself.

We friars here pray for you who support us in so many ways every single day in our own prayers and at every Eucharist. My prayer for you, on behalf of our friar community, is that God will fill you with confidence, trust and love in 2023. We will see more change but the Changeless One will hold us and love us into the future, as always. Happy New Year, dear friend. Pace e bene. Peace and everything good ~ *Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*