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Franciscans' global leader: Pope's Assisi trip time to consider church reform

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When Pope Francis travels to Assisi on Friday to visit the home of his 13th-century namesake, he might consider how St. Francis emphasized the individual person over institutions, the leader of the main group of the world's Franciscans said.

Franciscan Fr. Michael Perry said as the pope makes the pilgrimage with the eight cardinals he appointed to help him change the Roman Catholic church, the group should keep in mind a central message of the saint and the Gospels.

"I think the message from the Gospels is clear," Perry said. "Don't let any temptation of power or loss of prestige or loss of supporters -- don't let any of that get in the way of trying to respond honestly to what God might be calling the church to live and to give witness to today."

As the minister general for the Order of Friars Minor, Perry leads 15,000 of those who follow in the footsteps of the medieval saint. He spoke in an interview with *NCR* Tuesday.

An Indianapolis native who previously served as an adviser to the U.S. bishops and as a missionary to the Democratic Republic of the Congo for 10 years, Perry was elected to lead the order in May.

Speaking from his order's headquarters in Rome, Perry focused on how the Franciscans are interpreting the first pope to take the name of their founder and how they see his trip to their home.

The visit takes place Oct. 4, the day the church celebrates as St. Francis' feast day. The pope will be accompanied by the group of eight cardinals who have been meeting in Rome this week to advise the pontiff on reform of the Vatican bureaucracy. The pope appointed the group, officially known as the Council of Cardinals, in April.

Among the group is Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley, a member of a separate order of Franciscans known as the Capuchins. While the Vatican has not confirmed whether the cardinals will travel with the pope Friday, they have been invited to make the trip.

During his conversation with *NCR*, Perry mentioned some of the highlights of a pilgrim's trip to Assisi, including the church of San Damiano, a 12th-century monastery where St. Francis is said to have heard an apparition of Christ tell him to "repair my church."

Perry also focused on what he said he thought was a key need for Christians today.

"We're living in a time now where all of us need to reassume our Christian identities," he said. "We need to clarify what that means for our lives. We need to reframe the questions -- the way we think about our own lives,

our use of resources, our relationship with others."

Following is *NCR*'s conversation with Perry. It has been edited for clarity and length.

***NCR*: As the head of the Franciscans, what does it mean for the pope to go to your home, to Assisi?**

Perry: Obviously, it signals to me something very spiritual. In fact, the whole day, if you look at the program of the day, much of what will take place is taking place quietly. The pope is going to be praying while he's there. He's going to retrace the steps of Francis' life, beginning with San Damiano and the call to rebuild the church.

And I think this is significant because he's not going alone; he's going with the commission [of cardinals] he's called to look at rebuilding the church. And then he's going to end with the place where St. Francis died -- he's going to end in Porziuncula.

More importantly, I think for me, what this signals is Pope Francis trying to tell us three things:

No. 1, that Francis of Assisi -- his message is a message that still speaks to the world today. No. 2, I think he's trying to remind us that our life as Catholics, as Christians, as believers, is a spiritual pilgrimage. And No. 3, he's not just going to visit the sites; he's going to serve the poor of Assisi while he's there.

So he's telling us that the relationship between faith and the social doctrine of the church -- reaching out to meet the needs of the world -- these two have to go hand in hand.

I think we've seen that already in other things he's said and in ways that he's demonstrated in his own life -- that the faith has to be a faith that changes the world, that proposes something to the world, that's positive and hope-filled and also is very challenging.

You're talking a lot here about the spirituality of the journey. There are lots of Americans who don't get to go to Assisi. What's the feeling the first time you go to San Damiano or the first time you go to the crypt where St. Francis is buried?

For people who don't have much of a background, the one thing that many people have told me when they left Assisi, without being able to say anything specific to the life of Francis, they've been able to say: When I was there, I felt peace, I felt a sense of sacredness, and I felt that God was speaking to my heart.

Those are the three things I've heard consistently from pilgrims.

I remember the first time I went, but I went as a Franciscan so I had some background already. And I simply went to place myself in the space of the cross that's found near St. Clare, to allow the cross to speak to me today. It was a little bit different experience because I came obviously being in the Franciscans, having made the novitiate, having taken some courses on Franciscan history and spirituality. So it said something very different to me.

But I think the other piece is the joyful Christ. This is the Christ who sits on the cross but who leaps off the cross in a sense and wants to jump back into the world to say that there's hope for the world, there's joy, there's reason for joy.

I know in recent days, there has been a lot more talk of the pope as a Jesuit. But he still has the name Francis. What signs are you seeing in the pontificate or in the way he's acting of a Franciscan spirit or of that name?

What's clear is that this pope has demonstrated, much like other people of faith who are willing to enter honestly

into a journey of faith and a journey of life, that he's been transformed. He's been transformed by going and witnessing the strife of people who are hungry, of people who have been mishandled brutally by police or by military, who have experienced war and conflict, who are living with HIV and AIDS, who are under terminal illnesses.

If anything, the name that he chose in a sense is already emblematic of how he's lived his life over the years, taking the subway instead of the cars, living simply in a small apartment instead of a palatial building.

And then on top of that, the challenging words that he's offered to all of us, that faith calls us to be responsible for the world -- for creation, for the poor, for those who are homeless and migrants and refugees. Even challenging us religious that might have empty spaces that we really shouldn't hoard these to ourselves. We need to offer these as a gift to humanity.

Whatever he's going to say in Assisi, to my mind, will be a continuation and equally challenging to what he's already said and done and demonstrated in his own life.

You mentioned the famous apparition to St. Francis at San Damiano of Christ saying, "Go, repair my church" and that the pope will be bringing with him these eight cardinals. Is there something from the Franciscan heritage that you'd point to for the group to consider during the process of church reform?

I think the message from the Gospels is clear as well: Don't let any temptation of power or loss of prestige or loss of supporters, don't let any of that get in the way of trying to respond honestly to what God might be calling the church to live and to give witness to today.

I think that's one thing that the Franciscans have struggled with throughout our heritage.

We have been dragged back -- always by the Gospel and the truth of the Gospel, and the poor -- to have to recognize that no matter how confused we've allowed our lives to get and no matter how we've allowed institutions to take on a role they should never have taken on, too big of a role, instead of placing the human person as front and center.

I think this is something from our own Franciscan experience. And already, I've heard something from the pope from his own sharing, that the Gospel and the dignity of the human person, these should be the things that lead the church.

If that group of cardinals and all of us in the church have the courage to place these in the center, I think we'll be OK.

Placing the person at the center of the church?

That's something the pope has recently said again, and he says this is what Jesus is and what Jesus did and what Jesus does. He places at the center of his ministry, the center of his preaching, the center of his entire mission the human person. And as Franciscans, we would extend it to the entire world. This is what the pope is telling us we must return to.

The institutions have a purpose they serve, but they're at the service of, always: The service of the message of the Gospel, of Jesus, and of the center of God's own mission -- that is humanity and God's creation, so it can be restored, that it can be rejuvenated, that it can be given, in a sense, its original beauty again, its original grace.

What comes with that is also a responsibility. It doesn't just happen. We have to work consciously and seriously at this as human beings and as disciples of Jesus in the church.

Perhaps one other dimension is that Franciscans, although we've struggled over the centuries, we've always remained within the church. So we believe that it's on this foundation that we can build. It's on this foundation that transformation is possible, that change is possible.

And I think this is something that the pope and the cardinals will demonstrate to us: that you don't have to go elsewhere. Catholics don't have to leave in order to have a deep, abiding experience of the Lord Jesus and to be able to live their lives of faith with hope and courage. It can be done inside the church.

In my own reading of St. Francis, there are many key themes. You mention environmentalism, but there is also a very prominent theme of nonviolence. What did you think of the pope's message on Syria and on seeking nonviolent solutions?

We have Franciscans who are still present in Syria, and they are staying there in order to demonstrate that peace and reconciliation are possible. They are taking care of people of all walks of life irrespective of their backgrounds, irrespective of their religions or otherwise. And I think this demonstrates the fact that we stay there, that the church stays there, that there is cause for us coming together as human beings and pursuing the life of peace.

It's a simple theme in the life of Francis. Every place that he went to, he first announced, "May the Lord give you peace," and then he shared whatever message he had received from God with the people with whom he spoke.

We've started a new initiative in Sudan, and one of the central themes is going to be putting into everything the theology and spirituality of peace and reconciliation as a way of evangelizing, as a way of discipleship.

You mentioned that the order has gotten several phone calls from the pope. If he calls here asking for advice, what advice would the Franciscans give?

Be strong and continue to give the tremendous public face of the church and the hope that the church can offer. And continue to offer your humanity to people. This is what's transforming and making people feel like the church has a new place in their lives and in human history.

I think more than anything else, the human side of this pope is what is helping people become excited again about being members of the church. He's been able to recognize this as the starting point, even for God. In Jesus, he's starting with the incarnation in humanity.

Placing the human person at the center -- this is something which is not a politically correct thing to do, and it's what God does. God's intention is that we live and become free, full of life, that we care for each other, that we care for creation, that we become instruments of peace -- that we re-humanize the world.

For someone looking from the U.S. at Rome these days, how do you summarize it?

There's tremendous excitement, and there's also fear. The excitement is the person of this pope and what he's been able to do to make people feel dignified. They feel that they're blessed by God and not condemned by God, that they're loved by God, that God is a God of mercy and forgiveness.

The Italians who I've talked to have seen this -- taxi drivers, bus drivers, other people I've met on the street -- they're all seeing this as a sign of something new for them. They're really excited about who this person is. Not

just what he's saying, but who he is.

You said there's a fear as well?

I think the fear is that he's unpredictable. We have some contact with the security who are supposed to guard the pope, and I'm certain they have some fears about his physical well-being. They have little control over this because he does not want to be blocked from meeting people, from being able to have a face-to-face encounter.

I've also heard fears from some circles, people working in the Vatican, that there are some laypeople who aren't sure about what's going to happen about the future of their jobs. People have invested money in the Vatican bank, and they're concerned about some changes that have to take place to make it more transparent.

There are people who are clerics, who have positions, and I think they're also uncertain. They don't know what this commission is going to suggest in terms of trying to respectfully renew and reinvigorate the structures of the church so that they respond to the needs of the world today in a way that's faithful to our tradition, to our identity in Jesus.

Is there something you wanted to say that we didn't get to?

One thing, more than anything else: I think all Christians, all Catholics, we're living in a time now where all of us need to reassume our Christian identities. We need to clarify what that means for our lives. We need to reframe the questions -- the way we think about our own lives, our use of resources, our relationship with others.

It should lead us to feel that there are demands being placed upon us: to open our lives, to open our homes, to become much more communitarian in focus. That we need one another, we need to build communities -- real communities, not virtual, where people are meeting each other and where we're placing this identity of who we are as disciples of Jesus.

This is something all of us have to think of. It's not just Pope Francis or the Franciscans.

And we need to start moving. We need to stop talking and we need to get moving. We need to start coming together and doing some concerted actions together and letting those actions help us re-establish the bridges for human community and for solidarity.

Actions?

I don't want to be too banal about this, but let's feed the poor, together. But in feeding the poor, let's know we're not just helping them. We're actually allowing them to help us recover our human dignity.

Let's reach out -- let's share our resources with the world that's still struggling on less than $1 a day. Let's pool our resources. What can we do to encourage our governments in times of tremendous challenge and fiscal restraint? What can we do to remind our governments that we have to help the poor and the suffering of the world?

It's not a choice. The choice is that we simply don't live the Gospel life, our discipleship. We live something else, but it's not that.

It's a choice we can make, but it's not a good one. It's not the option Jesus is calling us to, nor that Pope Francis is calling us to.

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