



OFS-USA

NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER-USA



The Holy Children with a Shell

by Bartolomé Esteban Perez Murillo (1617-1682)

NATIONAL MINISTER'S MESSAGE

by Jan Parker, OFS

SEE CHRIST! BE CHRIST! GOING FROM GOSPEL TO LIFE AND LIFE TO THE GOSPEL

What happens when we open the Gospels? For one thing, it can transform us. That is the power of God's Word. I'd like to share a story about what happened when I opened the Gospel one day — but perhaps it's more a story about conversion, and how we are re-made as the Spirit moves in our lives.

Early this year, I became fascinated by the fact that June 24, the date on which our OFS Rule was approved, is the same date on which we celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. I began to think of many interesting connections between St. John the Baptist and our Secular Franciscan Rule, and even with St. Francis himself. We know that Francis was given the name John at his baptism, and that he always celebrated the feast of St. John the Baptist in a special way.¹ Perhaps Francis had a devotion to John the Baptist? I could imagine St. Francis reading the Gospel accounts of John the Baptist and being inspired. After all, when you think of John the Baptist you think of repentance, austerity, and one who heralded Christ. Sounds like Francis to me! I was intrigued and decided that this connection between John the Baptist and St. Francis would be an interesting subject for an article in the *TAU-USA*.

The day came to write my article. After my morning prayer, I picked up my Bible and began to read everything I could find about John the Baptist. Hours passed as I studied Bible commentaries, learning more about the Gospel stories of John's birth, his preaching in the wilderness, his baptism of the Lord and Jesus's own testimony about him. I pondered John's life, his call, and his heart for Christ. There was so much here that connected with our Franciscan way of life! I sat back in wonder. How would I ever capture all of this in a brief newsletter article?

I set my writing aside, and searched for an image of John the Baptist to put with my article. This painting, pictured here, caught my eye, for it echoed all I had contemplated that day. Here we see John who, from his birth, was devoted to God's will — a bold messenger, radically committed to the preaching of repentance, a herald of the coming Kingdom — one to whom Christ was everything. Here, too, is Christ, the Incarnate, the Light shining in the darkness, reaching out to John to share with him the water of Life, inviting him to glory. John humbly bows and drinks, his gaze upon the Lamb. Christ's gaze upon John is one of tender love and compassion. There is so much symbolism in this beautiful painting, but what captivated me was what I cherished from my reflections that day: It's all

¹ See *St. Francis of Assisi, A Biography* by Omer Englebert, pg. 12

about a relationship with Christ! John the Baptist had this relationship — certainly Francis did, too. I quickly imagined Francis of Assisi taking John's place in this painting. That was easy to do. As I saw Francis there, I thought of his words, "We are spouses, when by the Holy Spirit the faithful soul is united with our Lord Jesus Christ."² I could feel the intimacy between them. I then dared to go a step further, and I placed myself there. I bowed humbly as Jesus reached out to me, offering life-giving water. I drank, and my heart was filled with a renewed desire to conform my life to that of Christ's. I offered a prayer of thanks for this contemplative moment. I realized at that moment that my day was no longer about writing an article, it was about an encounter with Christ in the Gospel. The Holy Spirit had led me to what I needed that day — not to write an article, but to spend time in prayerful reflection on the Scriptures.

What happens when we open the Gospels? We are transformed.

Some time ago, our sister Mary Bittner shared a memorable quote that speaks to the heart of this:

Whenever we come together to listen to the Word of God, what we are seeking at bottom is not mental information or moral instruction or even a sentimental influence that will make us "feel" the presence and goodness of God. What we seek with all our soul, rather, is the possibility of opening ourselves up in prayer to God's transforming action. Whether we are fully conscious of it or not, in other words, we desire a change of life, a conversion from what we presently are to a more precise embodiment of the likeness of Christ at the center of our being, radiating out from us through all our thoughts, words, and actions.

This is why the life of contemplation is the boldest and most adventuresome of undertakings, for what could be more radical, more truly earth-shattering, than the willingness to be dismantled and created anew, not once or twice in a lifetime, but day after day? "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." (2 Cor 5:17) But being created in this sense is not a passive work. Our "clay" is the spiritual stuff of our will and freedom and thoughts and feelings and desires, and all of these have to be surrendered every day anew to God's power. We cannot become new creations without actively participating in our remaking by the Holy Spirit.³

As this quote points out, this is not a passive work. We are blessed to have a Rule that calls us to this bold undertaking of contemplation — a Rule that call us to devote ourselves to the Gospel and to seek to encounter with Christ."⁴ We also have a theme for this year which can help us as we go from Gospel to life, and life to the Gospel — "**See Christ! Be Christ!**" These four words truly sum it all up! Let us open our eyes to **see Christ** — to contemplate Christ — in the Gospel, in the Eucharist, in our brothers and sisters, and in all the ways he is present in our world. Let us then surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit within us, committing ourselves to ongoing daily conversion so we might **be Christ** in our world.

*"But when the kindness and generous love of God our Savior appeared,
not because of any righteous deeds we had done, but because of his mercy,
he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,
whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our Savior,
so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life."
(Titus 3:1-7)*

² *Exhortation of St. Francis to the Brothers and Sisters in Penance*, Prologue of the OFS Rule

³ Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *The Way of the Disciple* p. 18

⁴ Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, Articles 4, 5, 8