



IFC-TOR General Assembly 2013

ROOTED IN CHRIST, ON FIRE WITH THE SPIRIT, GO... TRANSFORM THE WORLD!

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In my talk I will focus on the four verb forms that make up its title: rooted, on fire, go, transform. I will try to speak to them from a biblical standpoint, in the light of Franciscan spirituality.

1. ROOTED IN CHRIST

The expression “rooted in Christ” is very meaningful, it sums up the Pauline theology of insertion in Christ (*en Christō*) which is developed extensively in the letter to the Romans. But the participle “rooted” (*errizōmēnoi*) is very rare: it recurs only twice in the NT. The text that comes closest to it in meaning is the letter to the Colossians, where the Apostle exhorts believers to walk in Jesus Christ Our Lord, “rooted in Him and built upon Him” (Col 2:7). In Ephesians 3:17 we find a similar expression: “rooted and grounded” (Eph 3:17).

These are the only two passages of the New Testament in which the verb *rīzōō* (“to root”) appears, and in both cases we notice the intertwining of two biblical metaphors: planting and building.¹ Christ is the only foundation on which believers are rooted and built.

Being “rooted” means that one’s roots sink deep into the ground.² A tree with frail roots will be swept away by the first hurricane that hits it, but an oak, with deep and strong roots, is unlikely to be uprooted. Furthermore, roots nourish: they absorb nutrients from the ground and feed the plant.

So to us the notion of ‘radicalness’ has a deeper and more basic meaning that goes beyond the ethical meaning that is usually attributed to this term. *Radicalness* understood as the courage to make choices that are absolute and final - so that one speaks of *radical* choices, of the consecrated life as a “radical response” (Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, n. 14) - is preceded by a radicalness that speaks to the **nourishing roots of being**. And we are here to deepen and revitalize this fundamental radicalness. For only if the roots are strong and capable of absorbing nourishment shall *radical* men and women bloom who are capable of an authentic evangelical and Franciscan radicalness.



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From this perspective I would like to speak of a threefold rootedness in Christ:

- biblical roots
- mystical-sacramental roots
- ecumenical, cosmic roots

1.1. Biblical roots

Being *rooted in Christ* means being rooted in the word of God. Christ, in fact, is the living Word of God, the Word incarnate, the Word that has “broken the silence”, according to a beautiful expression used by Ignatius of Antioch. “God makes himself known to us as a mystery of infinite love in which the Father eternally utters his Word in the Holy Spirit” (*Verbum Domini*, 6).

This Word was progressively revealed in creation and in salvific history as testified by the Sacred Scriptures. The Old Testament contains the New Testament, and the New Testament fully reveals the Old, as the Second Vatican Council teaches us (*Dei Verbum*, 16).

Jesus himself interprets His own mystery, which is enshrined in the Scriptures. In fact, what does the Risen One do on the road leading from Jerusalem to Emmaus? To the bewildered disciples who wonder “what happened” he reveals the Christological meaning of the Scriptures: Moses and the Prophets speak of Him, of the sacrifice of His death and of His resurrection (Lk 24:25-27). Paul says that all God’s promises find in Christ their Amen, the complete and final yes: “The Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was proclaimed to you by us – he writes to the Corinthians – was not “yes” and “no,” but “yes” has been in him. For however many are the promises of God, their Yes is in him; therefore, the Amen from us also goes through him to God for glory” (2 Cor 1:19-20).

We know how passionate Francis of Assisi was about the “fragrant words of the Lord” (*Letter to the Faithful*, FF 180). His writings are imbued with the Word;³ but even more so than his writings, his very life was filled with the Gospel. Radical Gospel, *sine glossa*. So how can we revitalize the biblical roots of our Christian and Franciscan identity? Are we familiar with the practice of the Lectio divina, with the prayerful reading of the Word?



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1.2. Mystical roots

The rootedness in Christ is of a “mystical” nature in the deepest sense of this word, which indicates the *mystērion* (*sacramentum* in Latin). We are rooted in Christ through Baptism. “Are you unaware – Paul writes to the Romans – that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

Baptism introduces us to an unsuspected unitive dimension, of a “mystical” scope.⁴ So that what Paul says of himself applies to all baptized people: “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

From Baptism to the Eucharist, from rootedness to nourishment, so that Christ may “re-main” dynamically and vitally in us and us in Him: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6:56). Rootedness in Christ is the essential condition for bearing fruit, as the metaphor of the vine and the branches points out: Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit” (Jn 15:5).

In Franciscan spirituality the mystical-sacramental roots are very strong. In the mystery of the Eucharist Francis contemplated the continuation of Christ’s incarnation and passion, the abyss of God’s humility: “O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! That the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under the little form of bread! Look, brothers, at the humility of God and pour out your hearts before Him! Humble yourselves, as well, that you may be exalted by Him. Therefore, hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves so that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally” (FF 221).

1.3. Ecumenical, cosmic roots

Being **in** Christ means partaking of the new creation, as the Apostle wrote to the Corinthians: “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). And this radical **novelty** opens up to boundless, ecumenical, cosmic dimensions.



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They are, first of all, ecumenical roots because Jesus Christ gave His life to “gather into one the dispersed children of God” (Jn 11,52). Furthermore, rootedness in Christ involves a cosmic dimension. “We know – Paul wrote to the Romans – that all creation is groaning in labour pains even until now” (Rom 8:22).

I believe it is significant that the expression “rooted in Christ” comes from a letter to the Colossians, which clearly reveals a cosmic approach (Col 1:15-20). Christ is the Lord of the cosmos, the *Pantokrator* to whom everything is subordinate. He is the “head of the body” which is the Church and embraces the cosmos.⁵ Through Christ all things were created, reconciled and brought to unity. In God “all the **fullness** was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him” (Col 1:19-20).

Against this backdrop shines bright the figure of Francis, who in his praise to the Almighty speaks for all of creation. He praises the **beauty** of the cosmos, and experiences and celebrates most radically the fraternal bond that unites all creatures. It is significant that John Paul II chose the city of Assisi as the venue for the inter-religious gathering. Francis, the universal brother, invites all people (believers and non believers) to dialogue.

2. ON FIRE WITH THE SPIRIT

Baptized “in one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13), we are called to be fully men and women of the Spirit, letting ourselves be guided and animated by the Spirit.

The Spirit is always life-giving, like the breath (*ruah*) that God blew into Adam’s nostrils (Gen 2:7). Through the Spirit we partake of the very vitality of the Risen One, which is “poured” into us, as it were, because “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

So being on fire with the Spirit means living through the Spirit and consequently “walking”, that is acting and behaving “following the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). And the spirit we have received is essentially one of freedom and filiation.



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Paul wrote to the Romans: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, "Abba, Father!" The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15-16).

I would like to mention three aspects that could be discussed during group work:

- the law of the Spirit
- freedom of spirit and freedom in the Spirit
- one Spirit, countless charisms

2.1. The law of the Spirit

Christian existence is governed by one law, that of the Spirit: "The law of the spirit of life **in** Christ Jesus (*en Christō Iēsou*) has freed you from the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:1-2). Paul calls the liberating principle the "law of the Spirit of life" (*to pneūma tes zōēs*), a unique expression in the NT.

A negative system of life (the law of sin) is replaced by a positive one (the law of the Spirit). As the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekial had announced, "I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts" (Jer 31:33); "I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you ... I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes" (Ezek 36:26-27).

The Spirit is the new Law, which is no longer written on tablets of stone but on the tablets of the heart. According to Paul, having God's Spirit dwelling in us necessarily means having "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9). Consequently, having the same sentiments as Jesus Christ (Phil 2,5), sharing His way of thinking, evaluating and acting.

The Spirit is like the wind, Jesus says (Jn 3:8). It blows and takes us where it wills, guides us to the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13), makes the Gospel of Jesus relevant, conveys His words to the memory of the heart. The teaching of the Spirit is always exquisitely evangelical. Its fruits can only be love and peace: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22).



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2.2. Freedom of spirit and freedom in the Spirit

In our contemporary world great importance is attached to “freedom of spirit”, understood as an internal dimension that characterizes the individual who is not influenced by the dominating power, by trends or by pressures exerted by the surrounding environment. One admires the freedom of spirit of those who challenge the public opinion, have the courage to think with their own head and act accordingly ... Freedom of spirit also leads some to martyrdom and no doubt characterizes men and women like Francis and Clare of Assisi.

Paul knew this type of freedom well. His letters reveal a strong sensitivity and a great appreciation of “freedom”, as it was intended in the Greek-Roman cultural environment. But Paul also knew another type of freedom, which can be referred to as “freedom in the Spirit.”⁶ The Spirit makes us free, of the same freedom as God who is Love. The Spirit expresses and conveys the love of Christ, so that the Apostle can say: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17).

Paul does not hesitate to put the young Church on the path of the Spirit – “Do not quench the Spirit!” (1 Thess 5:19) – and on the other hand, with the sound realism that characterizes him, exposes an illusory freedom: “You were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love” (Gal 5:13). He can say about himself, “Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all” (1Cor 9:19).

The First Letter of Peter, which is especially dear to Saint Francis, also speaks of a freedom that is expressed through service: “Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake” (1 Pet 2:13). In fact, the Christian has a “debt of love” towards everyone (Rom 13:8).

2. 3. One spirit, countless charisms

The Church that is born in the wind and fire of Pentecost immediately experiences how the one Spirit is the soul of many languages and charisms: “There appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim” (Acts 2:3-4).



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The Spirit comes unexpected and by surprise, like a strong wind. It manifests itself like tongues of fire that come to rest on each one of the people present, the apostles as well as the women, the brothers and the mother of Jesus. Some one hundred and twenty people, according to Acts 1:15. It happens within the walls of a room, but the way Luke describes this event evokes the great theophany of Mount Sinai (Ex 19:16-19; Deut 4:11-12). The word of God carried by the wind is like *fire*.⁷ Fire has come to cast the Lord Jesus on the earth! (Lk 12:49).

The birth of the Church is marked by a strong charismatic experience: **on fire with the Spirit!** The spirit arouses prophecy and song, vital dynamism and multiple charisms.

“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts – Paul writes to the Corinthians – but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes” (1Cor 12:4-11).

And as we know, charisms are given for the common good, for mutual edification. So charisms and ministries are closely related. Peter the Apostle wrote (entirely in keeping with Paul): “As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards (*oikonomoi*) of God's varied grace. Whoever preaches, let it be with the words of God; whoever serves, let it be with the strength that God supplies, so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1Pet 4:10-11).

No sterile comparisons that make room for envy and jealousy, no *charismatic pride*! Instead, we are exhorted to show gratitude and sense of responsibility, like good ‘stewards’.⁸ The charism of each must be invested in a service of love. For only love can edify and transform the world.



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3. GO ...

Go: that is the verb of the mission, evangelical and Franciscan itinerary!

From “I go” to “we go”. The ecclesial we, the we of fraternity.

This “go” takes us back to the origins of the Gospel, the itinerary of Jesus with His men and women disciples. Indeed, Luke recounts that Jesus was accompanied also by a group of itinerant women, Mary Magdalene *in primis* (Lk 8:1-3).

Jesus is followed by men and women who share his lifestyle. Theissen talks about “itinerant charismatics”.⁹ This expression also befits the origins of Franciscanism. Were not Francis and his friars itinerant charismatics? Free as the birds in the sky, poor and jesters like Jesus! Won over by God’s love, fascinated by the Gospel, they travelled the roads of the world proclaiming the good news with their own life.

So itinerary is coded in the very DNA of Franciscanism. But how is it to be interpreted? “Go” does not just mean setting out on a physical journey. It is first of all an attitude of the soul, a spiritual movement. It requires the attitude of those who freely choose to “follow in the footsteps of Christ” wherever they may live, even inside a cell or blocked by infirmity. It is not by chance that in the title of this conference the imperative “go” is followed by three dots (...), which I interpret not as an empty space, but as indicators of ways, in line with the instructions given by Jesus to those he sends forth (see Matt 10:7-13). So:

- *Let us go:* in our circumstances of life, ministry, educational work, social and pastoral services ...

- *Let us go:* in poverty and simplicity, trusting completely in the Father’s providence, in mutual love, taking care of each other.

- *Let us go:* with Franciscan joy and gladness.

What does this “let us go” entail within the context of the new evangelization?



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4. ... TRANSFORM THE WORLD!

The purpose of this *going* (which is mental, psychological, spiritual, before physical or virtual) is expressed well by the last verb: “transform”. That is the meaning of the evangelizing mission: to transform the world! Which is far more demanding than simply preaching or teaching.

Paul writes to the Romans: “Do not conform yourselves to this age but **be transformed** (*metamorphoūsthe*) by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect” (Rom 12:2). The transformation (literally ‘metamorphosis’) that the Apostle speaks of is a process that involves all of man and begins with a “renewal of the mind”.

To renew the mind – the late cardinal M. Martini observed – means to renew the way in which we see reality. “He whose mind is *transformed* sees the Kingdom of God at work in the world and interprets everything in a positive, optimistic way, justifying the gift of self and gratuitous service”.¹⁰

Such a transformation is never fully accomplished, it is a gestation process until Christ is formed in us: “*donec formetur Christus in vobis*” (Gal 4:19). This gestation involves all of creation, which is “groaning in labour pains even until now” (Rom 8:22).

So how can we transform the world? In the second letter to the Corinthians the Apostle speaks of a *luminous* transformation: “We are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

Only the fire of the Spirit is *transforming*. Only Love can really transform the world. “The fire of God is **transforming** fire, a fire of passion — of course — that also destroys much in us, that leads to God, but fire, above all, that **transforms**, renews and creates a new man, who becomes light in God” (Benedict XVI, *Meditation During the First General Congregation*, 8 October 2012).

“Only in fire is fire sown!” (Ol’ga Sedakova).



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Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a biblical icon, that of the deacon Philip who, on fire with the Spirit, runs down the deserted road on which the minister of the queen of Ethiopia is travelling.

We must let ourselves be guided by the Spirit along the roads on which man travels. It does not matter if these roads appear to be “deserted”. Philip is not afraid to leave the city of Samaria that accepted the Gospel with joy (Acts 8:5-8), in order to reach one man who is travelling to the ends of the earth.

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asks to the travelling minister (Acts 8:30).

On the road to Emmaus it is the Risen One who leads the two travellers to the full meaning of the Scriptures; on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza it is Philip who interprets in a Christological sense one of the most disturbing passages of the prophet Isaiah: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent ... ” (Is 53,7-8). This page speaks of Him and of us, of the Christ who continues his passion in the world ...



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“Look, there is water. What is to prevent my being baptized?” (Acts 8:36). From the proclamation of the Gospel to baptism, transforming sign, sign of the new creation, of regeneration in Christ.

“When they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more” (Acts 8:39). What a shame, one would be inclined to say. Just when they had reached such a beautiful and deep relationship ... The end of their encounter however is not marked by sadness but rather by great joy. The Spirit leads Philip elsewhere and the man who is regenerated in Christ continues his journey ... to transform the world!

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ENDNOTES

¹ The two metaphors are associated also in the first letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul says: “You are God’s field (*georgion*), God’s building (*oikodomē*)” (1 Cor 3:9).

² The Greek verb *rizōō* “to root”, derives from *riza* “root”; the same is also true in Latin, in which the verb *radicari* derives in fact from *radix*, “root”.

³ Cfr. C. Paolazzi, *Lettura degli “Scritti” di Francesco d’Assisi*, Bibl. Francescana, 2ed. Milano 2002.

⁴ Cfr. R. Penna, *Lettera ai Romani*, vol. II, EDB, Bologna 2006, p. 11.

⁵ E. Lohse, *Le lettere ai Colossei e a Filemone*, Paideia, Brescia 1979, p. 120. Philo of Alexandria already presents the *logos* that embraces the cosmos, fills it and determines it: the body of man needs the head to direct and guide it; likewise the “body” (*sōma*) of the cosmos.

⁶ Cfr. U. Vanni, *L’ebbrezza nello Spirito*. Una proposta di spiritualità paolina, Edizioni ADP, Roma 2000, pp. 115-126.

⁷ Cfr. E. Bosetti, *Come lingue di fuoco. Comunicare la Parola secondo gli Atti degli Apostoli*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Mi) 2009.

⁸ Cfr. E. Bosetti, *Prima lettera di Pietro. Introduzione e commento* (Dabar-Logos-Parola) EMP, Padova 2010, pp. 165-184.

⁹ G.Theissen, *Gesù e il suo movimento. Analisi sociologica della comunità cristiana primitiva*, Claudiana, Torino 1979.

¹⁰ C. M. Martini, *La trasformazione di Cristo e del cristiano alla luce del Tabor*, Rizzoli, Milano 2004, p. 92.