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THE PROMOTION OF SAINT FRANCIS IS VITAL FOR OUR TIMES *SAINT FRANCIS, ICON OF JUSTICE, PEACE AND THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION*

Let us be clear right from the start: One cannot promote St Francis of Assisi without promoting Christ. Saint Francis is so utterly transparent Christ shines through him like the sun through a stained glass window. Anyone who refuses to understand this and thinks that devotion to Saint Francis gets in the way of our relationship with Christ simply does not know Saint Francis.¹ Saint Francis leads us, by his way of life, his prayers, his letters, his rules of life and his mystical experiences, directly to the suffering crucified Saviour. For him, Jesus is our brother and our God.

If we have a true appreciation of Saint Francis and his spirituality, we will understand that the person and the message of St Francis of Assisi are vital for our times. His titles: Patron of Peace, Patron of Animals, Patron of Nature, Patron of Italy, Patron of Ecology, place him before the entire world, as an inspiration for the tasks of the 21st century.

No one knows better than Pope Francis the importance of Saint Francis of Assisi for the beginning of this new millennium. It was startling that he, a Jesuit, broke with two thousand years of history and chose “Francis” as a papal name. It was not after Saint Francis Xavier, the great Jesuit missionary or Saint Francis de Sales, the gentleman diplomatic saint, but the *poverello* of Assisi.

Saint Francis of Assisi is an icon of **Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation** (JPIC). If we do not realise this, then again we do not know Saint Francis. By the grace of the Holy Spirit in his life, Saint Francis meditated with delight on the humility of **Christ**, incarnate in the crib - our Peace. He contemplated with deep sorrow the suffering **Christ**, crucified on the cross – our justification. He focused in humble adoration on **Christ**, consecrated on the altar – drawing each day, all the joyful, sorrowful, glorious and luminous moments of our lives to himself. Jesus Christ takes to himself all of creation in his sublime offering of Eucharist – thanksgiving “*through him and with him and in him*” to the Father. The stunning reality of the Eucharist had Saint Francis struggling for words in his Letter to the Entire Order:

*O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!
O sublime humility! O humble sublimity!
The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself
that for our salvation He hides Himself
under an ordinary piece of bread.²*

It is this belief in the timeless witness of Saint Francis to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, held in common by so many people, that has welcomed the Franciscan initiative to the United Nations. If the message of St Francis is to give the world new insights and hope, as we face the challenges of this new millennium, then we must promote the person of St Francis of Assisi by initiating various projects that make him accessible to everyone. These projects, spreading knowledge of his life, his vision and his spirituality to children, teenagers, and adults, should be our primary task as Franciscans. Our saints are our true heroes! The great sadness is that they are not known and loved by our children.

The media, always hungry for financial profit, presents mythical and magical heroes with super powers to entertain our children. Fortunately in the Comic Book world good always triumphs over evil, but none of us will possess such imaginative superpowers. In the midst of this fantastic world of Marvel Comics something amazing happened in 1980. Marvel Comics accepted the challenge to produce for the 800 Anniversary of his life (1282 -1982) “*Francis: Brother of the Universe.*”

Over 1 million copies were sold (15 million readers, according to Marvel’s statistics) and the comic book was

¹ This is true of all the saints or the Church would not have canonised them.

² The Saint. Letter to the Entire Order 27

translated into French, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish (two different editions), Portuguese, Afrikaans, Swahili. The last copies of the English version finally went out of print in 2007. Franciscan scholar Raphael Brown, in a late review of the Francis comic book, wrote, "Already more people have been introduced to the life of St. Francis through this publication than through any other book since the time of Francis."

The example of the saints shines forth down the ages. It is for this reason that Elizabeth Goudge began her life of, St Francis of Assisi, with the memorable words:

It is never the beginning of the story to say a child is born, nor is it the end to say a man had died. A long preparation leads up to every birth, and a death leaves behind it a power for good or evil that works on in the world for longer than the span of life from which it grew. In the case of those whom we call the saints this power is immeasurable. In this life we cannot know how much we owe to saints we have never heard of, or to saints who live with us unrecognised, but there are a few saints whose light sends such a beam through the darkness of this world, that the darkness not only cannot extinguish it, but is forced to recognise it and cannot forget it. Francis of Assisi is one of these.

The light of St Francis, entrusted to the whole Franciscan Family, is its great treasure. The seraphic fire, found in his writings, and the many legends of his life, preserves the memory of St Francis for posterity. Today, perhaps more than in any age before, that heritage has been collected, critically translated, edited and presented to us in our languages for everyone to study. This scholarship has been made even more accessible through the Internet. This reading is extremely important if we are to understand the mind and heart of Saint Francis of Assisi and give life to his spirit in the world.

If the vision of Saint Francis is clearly presented, it will give a special clarity to the movement towards universal fraternity and peace among peoples, races, and creeds. It will speak directly to issues of unity of heart, justice, and peace. This was clearly the aim of Pope John Paul II when he invited the leaders of the world's religions to meet with him in Assisi at the Shrine of Saint Francis and pray together to God the Creator, for the well being of all peoples and peace on earth. Despite theological differences, historical animosity, and cultural diversity, these men, and women of faith came together in an extraordinary, symbolic gesture of good will and fraternity at the tomb of St Francis of Assisi, who called even the sun and the moon his brother and sister.

St Francis' message of universal love and brotherhood, calls out to all of us, to respect the dignity of each person, indeed every creature. It calls for justice that recognises the essential equality of all people, for a genuine reconciliation, forgiveness and the rebuilding of trust that flows out of compassion. It calls forth in us a generosity and self-sacrifice that comes from a sincere love of others, and hope that recognises the potential in every person for good. This message of universal love and fraternity will give peace of heart to all people of good will who accept it and cherish the memory of Saint Francis.

The Franciscan message is vitally important for the whole world, but it is especially important for our country of Australia. It is important for us because we are a multicultural nation where the values of universal fraternity are essential if we are to respect and even to delight in the differences of culture and the variety of the people who enrich our lives. However, while we Australians show ourselves in many ways to be a magnanimous people, our prosperity has cushioned the negativity that can raise its evil head in difficult economic times. Let us not be complacent about this, or the future will find us a nation beset by civil troubles. The message of universal fraternity and the fundamental dignity of every person regardless of colour, race or creed is a life-giving message for our time. The exploitation, or abuse of the just rights of our brothers and sisters, our fellow citizens, is nothing less than an open door for our personal exploitation now or in the future.

Let us understand then, that this Gospel message of universal love, so clearly given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, and reiterated so wonderfully in the poor man of Assisi, is a message for all time. Saint Francis, like all the saints, makes this message sparkle in a special way. He adds his own particular flavour to the Gospel way of life. In his rather, Italian way, which is poetic, beautiful and dramatic, yet utterly down to earth and fraternal, Saint Francis brought the Gospel to life again for the people of his time. To him, every creature spoke about the attributes of God. Creation in all its wild beauty sang to his heart, of the grandeur of God. He saw Christ in each person and loved each person because of Christ, even the most terribly ill leper.

Those of us who call ourselves Franciscans must understand that this message, which has the power to change us, is greater than we are. This torch of seraphic love is passed to us. The message must be heard. Like drops of rain in a river, if we add our effort to its proclamation, the Gospel message, revitalised by our cooperation with the Holy Spirit, will continue to go out to the entire world. It will, as it has done in the past, help to shape the world to be a better place.

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Summary of the Article

Saint Francis of Assisi is completely transparent. He leads us directly to the crucified Christ. The person and the message of Saint Francis is vital for the tasks of the 21st Century.

Pope Francis knows that the *poverello* of Assisi is an icon of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. Saint Francis better than anyone else can speak to all peoples.

The Holy Spirit focused Saint Francis on the **Crib**, the **Cross**, and the **Altar**. In this Saint Francis understood that all things are offered to the Father.

It is Saint Francis' witness to JPIC that has welcomed the Franciscan initiative to the United Nations.

We must promote the person of Saint Francis and make him accessible to everyone. Our saints are our true heroes! It should not surprise us that the comic book "*Francis: Brother of the Universe*" is the most read life of Saint Francis.

The example of some saints shines down through the ages with an immeasurable power that cannot be extinguished. Saint Francis is one of these saints.

The treasury of St Francis is found in his writings, and legends. They contain the memory, the mind, heart, and soul of the seraphic saint.

The Internet unlocks the scholarship of the critical sources for the life of Saint Francis to all of us who seek to know him better, but it is in a spirit of prayer and devotion that we meet him personally and understand his spirit.

If the vision of Saint Francis is presented clearly, it will bring unity of purpose to all movements towards universal fraternity. This was the vision of Pope John Paul II in bringing world leaders to pray together in Assisi.

This message of brotherhood, calls for respect for the dignity of each person - indeed respect for every creature.

We, in Australia, are a multicultural nation where the values of universal fraternity are essential if we are to not only respect others, but to even delight in the differences and variety of the people who enrich our lives.

The Franciscan message of universal fraternity is a life-giving message for all time. The seraphic torch is passed to us. The message must be heard. Then it will work like a leaven in the midst of the secular world.

The good news of Gospel fraternity, revitalised by our cooperation with the Holy Spirit, will go out to the entire world; It will shape the world. Fraternity will be one of the foundations of universal peace and good – and our Franciscan greeting will be not only be a prayer, but a prophecy fulfilled.

PAX ET BONUM

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LOCAL MINISTERS, PLEASE DISTRIBUTE THIS MONTHLY SPIRITUAL MESSAGE TO ALL MEMBERS
OF YOUR FRATERNITY BOTH ACTIVE AND NON-ACTIVE MEMBERS.