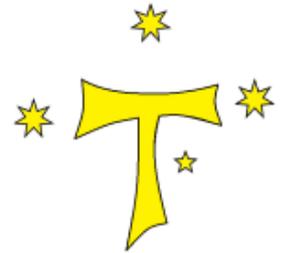


OFS – Conference of National Spiritual Assistants - Australia

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Intro

We may not be able to live this high spirituality of St Francis, but we need to know and understand it. Please note that the Omnibus translates this letter: “*We may wish them to be a better person*” but the latest translations say, “*We should not wish them to be better persons*” it is only a few words but it is a completely different attitude.

Monthly Spiritual Message MAY 2015

Further along the Way of Perfect Joy

So you are a professed Franciscan - a Secular Franciscan; you have finished your formal formation. Now you want to know how you can continue to grow in Gospel Fraternity. You are wondering if maybe you should step up and accept greater responsibility for the fraternity you belong to, if you are asked, at the next Local Chapter. St Francis teaches us that accepting responsibility to minister to others, in all kindness and patience, is a much faster way to learn to die to self and reach the perfection of charity than - to run away to a hermitage. So this is both a wonderful challenge and also a warning. This is the tough love of St Francis and it is here we discover that being a Franciscan is not all sunshine and flowers in the fields.

A Letter to a Minister. Date: (1221-1223)

1. To Brother N.,¹ minister: *May the Lord bless you.*² 2. *I speak to you, as best I can, about the state of your soul.*³ You must consider as grace all that impedes you from loving the Lord God and whoever has become an impediment to you, whether brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you. 3. And may you want it to be this way and not otherwise. 4. And let this be for you the true obedience of the Lord God and my true obedience, for I know with certitude that it is true obedience. 5. And love those who do those things to you 6. and do not wish anything different from them, unless it is something the Lord God shall have given you. 7. And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians. 8. And let this be more than a hermitage for you.

There is a spirit of total self-sacrifice here, a spirituality of martyrdom, of dying to self so as to be transformed into Christ and minister to the other person as Christ would. All the power of authority here is directed towards helping the other person. This is Francis at his best, leaving the other person totally free to respond or not.

Martyrdom, plain and simple is a single act of faith, hope and love. The spirituality of martyrdom however is an ongoing process where we learn to surrender to the events that bring us *perfect joy* each time and demand of us perfect love for the person who is difficult to deal with.

In the Rule of 1221 Chapter 22 we read:

Therefore, our *friends*⁴ are those who for no reason cause us trouble and suffering, shame or injury, pain or torture, even martyrdom⁵ and death. It is these we must love, and love very much, because for all they do to us we are given eternal life.

¹ There is some indication that the person this letter was addressed to was Br Pacificus, first Provincial Minister of France.

² Nm 6:24a. This is the blessing of the High Priest Aaron and it is very significant in this context in wishing the minister peace.

³ This is a letter of Spiritual Direction and this line is a clarification of the whole text for the Minister, obviously has wished to be relieved of the responsibility of his office.

⁴ The exact words of Jesus to Judas when he betrays him with a kiss are difficult to understand: “My friend, do what you are here for!”

⁵ This is the only time in all his writings that St Francis uses the word “martyrdom”.

Here, St Francis uses the word “martyrdom” in the context of friendship. There is a powerful link to the *Letter to a Minister* and his teaching on *Perfect Joy*. He exhorts us to reach beyond our self, beyond all our natural concepts of friendship. He actually asks us to see, through a spirit of compassion, our most bitter enemy as a *friend*, because through this person we are given the greatest gift of all – a true indication of our own growth in virtue – and a vision of life everlasting. The use of the title “Friend” is richly ironic in the best sense of divine irony, with a deep sense of tragedy in the case of Judas.

Here we see expressed the process of transformation through acceptance of Perfect Joy – when everything goes wrong. This process of utter self-giving and generosity, this dying to self, this self-emptying, this poverty and humility, this willingness to forgive, to endure, to bear with tribulations, revealed in Christ and grasped by St Francis is the hard way of the Cross. No wonder they say St Clare died of Compassion. No wonder they call St Francis’ love for God Seraphic. No wonder they say he sits on Lucifer’s throne.⁶ No wonder the Lord has promised that the Franciscan Order will last to the end of time. No wonder the church cherishes our spirituality, because it is not our spirituality, it is the spirituality of the Church.

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap
National Spiritual Assistant

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