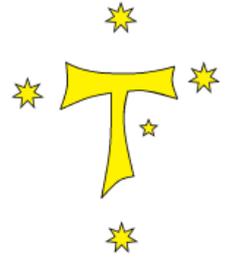


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Monthly Spiritual Message APRIL 2016

Finding a National Patron (Part 4)

Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance

Somewhere between 1209 and 1215, Saint Francis wrote what is called his “*Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*” which is also perhaps incorrectly called “*The First Letter to all the Faithful.*”¹ The Exhortation is more a letter of spiritual direction and encouragement to those lay people who like Lady Jacoba had already begun to follow him as a spiritual guide.

The Rule of the Third Order would not be formulated for another ten years. However, the pure essence of the spirituality of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance is here in Chapter One of Saint Francis’ First Exhortation to them. This first chapter is so beautiful that one would like to rip the exhortation in half and keep only the first half, for constant meditation. But the easy tendency of our human nature towards perversity, reminds us that the second half might be a necessary even if a harsh and blunt reminder of how easily we wander from the way of penance.

Such an early date for this Exhortation is given because after the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 almost all of Saint Francis’ letters have a particular focus on the Blessed Sacrament. This is because some of the Canons of Lateran IV gave a great deal of attention to the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and how the Blessed Sacrament was to be properly reserved in Churches. Saint Francis’ “Exhortation” does not have this same tone and focus although the Blessed Sacrament is certainly mentioned. What is historically daunting is that this letter, like so many of Saint Francis’ valuable writings, seems to have fallen into the oblivion of history and was almost lost until the 20th century.

What is important for us is that the Church, almost 800 years later, placed this exhortation/letter as a prologue to the New Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1978 and noted, in that context, its origin as circa 1210 – 1215. This fits very well with Saint Francis’ 1209 visit to Rome for approval of his Rule of life and before 1215 when he went to Rome for the Fourth Lateran Council.

So we have a situation where Lady Jacoba, seems to have been the very first lay person, at least in Rome, to seek direction from Saint Francis. Certainly she is involved with him and the Friars long before he founds his third Order, the Brothers and Sisters of Penance - the Secular Franciscans - in 1221.

His need to write an Exhortation to those people seeking direction from him at such an early date places Lady Jacoba in the very midst of a listening group of lay people, who were seeking direction in life from him, but had their reasons or responsibilities that preclude them from becoming either friars or contemplative nuns.

In fact, if some people are right, this Exhortation was written by Saint Francis with Lady Jacoba in mind. But certainly we also know that he already had a request from Blessed Luchesio Modestini and Buonadonna de’Segni, who had sought out his direction in their life together. It has been suggested that

¹ The manuscripts for this letter were not discovered and published until 1900. It was not included in a critical edition of Saint Francis’ writings until 1976. It could be said that for centuries it has had no impact at all on the Secular Franciscan Order until the New Rule was promulgated in 1978.

Saint Francis met Luchesio and Buonadonna from the town of Poggibonzi, as early as 1213.² Certainly Blessed Luchesio is the first Secular Franciscan raised to the level of “Blessed” by the Church.

Also, Saint Francis, in the power of the Holy Spirit, had preached so marvellously to the people in town of Cannara that they also had wished to join his order immediately, and he had to tell them to wait because he was preparing a third authentic way of living the Franciscan life for people just like them.

Lady Jacoba would have been one of the first to receive a copy of this Exhortation and understand its profound message, on mystical relationships, which true followers of the way of penance - the way of the Cross - have with Christ. So too because of their vow of obedience³ the Friars and the Poor Clares also would have had a listening attitude and grasped the sublime spirituality of this Exhortation.

Do not be surprised to see the vow of Obedience mentioned here. To grasp what is being said, it is necessary to understand the virtue of obedience and the vow of obedience, as an attitude of listening, to the Holy Spirit. Only when obedience is understood as a listening attitude does the full meaning of Saint Francis’ statement, “*The Minister General of our Order, the Holy Spirit also rests on the simple and unlearned*” become clear (2 Celano 193). This is why Saint Francis insists on the friars having at all times “a spirit of prayer and devotion” so that they can follow the inspiration and cooperate with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

This listening attitude, a virtue of obedience, if not the vow, is no less important for all Franciscans. It is with a lesser or humble heart, open and listening to the Lord that we become and remain Franciscans. Therefore, it is no small thing to say Lady Jacoba, one of the most powerful women in Rome was so humble that she happily followed the promptings of a sheep that Saint Francis had given her because she had a listening attitude, indeed a sincere gratitude, an open and sincere spirit of poverty, even if this way of expressing it may seem a complete mystery to some people.⁴

We can be certain that Lady Jacoba would have treasured this writing from Saint Francis and had it copied for others to read. This is what Saint Francis asked to be done at the very end of this letter Exhortation. We can be almost certain that she would have sought out and obtained and meditated on a copy of everything Saint Francis ever wrote and with her very special relationship with the friars, and not just Saint Francis, we may be sure that she obtained what she desired.

Having said all this, almost by way of an introduction, we must next look carefully at this Exhortation of Saint Francis and discover, if possible, its place among the sources of Franciscan Spirituality.

Br John Cooper OFM Cap
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PLEASE DISTRIBUTE THIS MONTHLY SPIRITUAL MESSAGE
TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL OFS FRATERNITY AND SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS

² Blessed Luchesio and “Blessed” Buonadonna were from the town of Poggibonzi. He was a greedy merchant, but his meeting with Saint Francis changed his life and eventually hers as well. They became renowned for their charity to the poor and the sick. The sources tell us that they both died on the 28th of April 1260 and he was beatified in 1273 and she by popular acclaim. They are listed and they are considered the first Secular Franciscans and rightly so because of their holiness.

³ The Online Etymology Dictionary says: The word “obedience” is from Latin obedire, oboedire "obey, be subject, serve; pay attention to, give ear," literally "listen to," from ob "to" (see ob-) + audire "listen, hear".

⁴ See: A Salutation of the Virtues: 14. For a better understanding of Saint Francis’ idea of the virtue of obedience.