

Conference of National Spiritual Assistants Secular Franciscan Order

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A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY 2022.

Discovering Christ (Part 2)

Saint Francis learned from Christ that happiness comes from serving others. Through service, we grow in psychological maturity, spiritual integrity, and the perfection of charity towards wholeness of personality – holiness! This transformation of personality into the fullness of what it means to be human, taking place during life and, if necessary, after death in purgatory, makes us fit for heaven.

“Who hammered you, wrought you
from Argentine vapor? –
“God was my shaper.”¹

Three experiences transformed Francis. The confrontation with the mysterious leper on the plain revealed to him the humanity of each person, the mystical vision of Jesus crucified that left him internally impressed with the passion of Christ.² Then the Lord spoke to him audibly from the San Damiano Cross.³

From that moment, Francis had a clear vision of what he must do - repair ruined churches. However, the process of restoring the three small chapels: *San Damiano*, just outside the town walls of Assisi; *San Pietro della Spina*⁴ and Our Lady of the Angels,⁵ down in the valley below Assisi, is only the beginning of this profound change. Francis understands that his mission is to serve the poorest of the poor, the lepers, the outcast, the sick, and the dying. He grasps the importance of fraternity from them, which he now sees as the foundation of all human society.

The two churches *San Pietro* and the “*Portincola*,” are vital because they provide the context for what has happened. They are near the leper hospital at the church of Santa Maria Maddalena in Arce. Rebuilding a church is hard work but caring for the sick requires the constant exercise of charity and all the virtues.⁶ Francis understood very well that the sick and dying suffer, and those who serve them also go through a purification process. Later in his life, he writes:

“Those weighed down by sickness
and the others wearied because of them,
all of you: bear it in peace.
For you will sell this fatigue at a very high price
and each one will be crowned queen in heaven with the Virgin Mary.”⁷

¹ “To a Snowflake” by English poet and Catholic mystic Francis Thompson (16/12/1859 -13/11/1907. “*What heart could have thought you? Insculpted and embossed, with His hammer of wind and graver of frost.*”

² Bonaventure Major Life Ch 1: Lesson 4: “*The memory of Christ’s passion was impressed on the depths of his heart.*”

³ Ibid: Lesson 5. “*He left the town one day to meditate outdoors.*” The text reflects Genesis 24:63 where Isaac first sees his bride to be Rebekah. St Bonaventure puts the San Damiano Cross event at the beginning of a love story – beautiful!

⁴ The little church of St Peter of the Thorn dating back at least to 1122, exists today but only as a ruin of walls with no roof. The property and surrounding land belong to the Minciarelli family from Spello. The bell from the chapel with an effigy of St Peter and St Anthony was donated to the Convent of Rivortorto by Chiarina Minciarelli who died in 2006.

<https://www.iluoghidelsilenzio.it/san-pietro-della-spina/>

⁵ It is also called the “Portiuncula” or “Little Portion.”

⁶ Salutation of the Virtues. “*who can possess any one of you without dying first.*”

⁷ The Canticle of Exhortation for the Ladies of San Damiano No 5 & 6.

Up to this point, Francis saw all this as his personal mission given to him by the Lord of the San Damiano cross. He was so dedicated to his task the fact that it was beyond the capacity of one person did not seem to enter into his head. Various other people had come to help him rebuild the churches, but what happened next surprised him.

The request of Bernard of Quintavalle to join him changed everything. Francis is so caught off guard that he suggests they go to the Church of San Nicolo and ask the priest to open the Gospel Book⁸ three times so that they may know what the Lord wanted them to do. He puts it simply:

“And after the Lord gave me some brothers,
no one showed me what I had to do,
but the Most High Himself revealed to me
that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel”⁹

Those three gospel texts become the foundation of the simple rule he writes down and takes to Rome when the number of his brothers reaches apostolicity, the number of 12.¹⁰ Now he understands his mission. It is to restore the gospel life of fraternity in the Church.

Discovering Christ, fraternity, and the gospel life, bring with it something very special for Francis. He realizes that this revelation is not possible without the supreme grace of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

He embraced the Mother of the Lord Jesus
with an inexpressible love
since she made the Lord of Majesty **a brother to us**
and, through her, we have obtained mercy.
In her, after Christ,
he put all his trust
and made her the advocate
of him and his brothers.¹¹

Having already died to self and marked with the sacred stigmata, Saint Francis approaches his own death by saying, “*Welcome Sister Death!*” He saw her as a blessing because she would take him home finally to God. Well, did he know his scripture:

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death is your sting?
But thanks to God,
Who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ!”¹²

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap
National Spiritual Assistant.

PLEASE DISTRIBUTE THIS MESSAGE TO YOUR FRATERNITY
INCLUDING ISOLATED MEMBERS

⁸ The 840-year-old, richly illuminated Latin Gospel Book of San Nicolo still exists today. It is not however in Italy, but in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, USA. It only recently underwent a painstaking two-year conservation effort aimed at repairing centuries of wear and tear. An inscription inside the manuscript notes that the book’s donor lived in Assisi in the 1180s and 1190s. The church of San Nicolo was torn down after being destroyed by an earthquake in the 19th Century. All that remains today is the church’s crypt. Henry Walters, whose art collection became the basis for the Walters Art Museum, purchased the St. Francis Missal from an art dealer in 1924. As conservators worked on preserving the manuscript, each page was digitized so anyone with Internet access around the world can view and study the book. It will be available through the Walters’ Ex-Libris webpage. <https://catholicreview.org/walters-exhibit-showcases-medieval-missal-used-by-st-francis-of-assis/>

⁹ Testament 14.

¹⁰ “Apostolicity” Did I just invent a word? No, it is in Wiktionary.

¹¹ St Bonaventure The Major Legend Ch. 9:3. Here is the proof that the Friars Minor are a Marian Order. The Immaculate Conception is our patron.

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:55-57. Referring back to the Prophet Hosea 13:14. “I will deliver this people from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?”