

## Conference of National Spiritual Assistants

*Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis (OFS)*

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### A Spiritual Message for February 2024

Let us look for a moment at the fact that no sooner was Mary told by the Archangel Gabriel the fantastic news that her much older “kinswoman” Elizabeth was already six months along with her childbearing than Mary sets out to go and care for Elizabeth.

Although Mary knows she has just become pregnant with the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, a stunning revelation with enormous consequences, she goes off to assist Elizabeth. The journey from Nazareth to “Ein Karem”, where Zachariah and Elizabeth live, is about 130 km.<sup>1</sup> What an example of love, devotion and energy Mary shows for her ageing “kinswoman”!

Am I just getting old? Where does this instant motivation come from – whence comes this energy? The youthful Mary is off and running; she does not coddle herself in wistful dreams and idle moments because she is pregnant with the Messiah; no, she is already on the Way.<sup>2</sup>

As I look around, I see that I am surrounded by many people distracted by things seemingly more important than family, friendship, and fraternity. Perhaps the English poet William Wordsworth was right when he penned:

*The world is too much for us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:-*

Despite their promised commitment, on the day of their permanent profession, to attend the fraternity meeting once a month, many of our Secular Franciscans are unable to make an effort to meet with their fellow Seculars or support in any way the exercises of the fraternity, like attending an annual retreat or chapters or the days of profession of new members.

Although this commitment to meet together is the proof of our relationship with God<sup>3</sup> and the touchstone of Secular Franciscan life, many have become so isolated that the only way we may know they have gone to God is if one of us unhappily sees their name among the Funeral Notices in the Newspaper. Many live so obscurely that most relatives and friends do not even know they are Secular Franciscans. Attending the fraternity meeting declares that we are part of the Franciscan Family. Being a Secular Franciscan is not meant to be only a part of our life; it is intended to **be** our gospel Way of life.

St Clare says in the very first lines of her Testament: *“The Son of God became for us the Way which our Blessed Father Francis has shown and taught us by word and example.”* Clare also says: *“Among all the gifts which we have received from the Father of mercies, and for which we must express the deepest thanks, our vocation [as Franciscans] is a very great gift.”*

What, then, is wrong with us? Why are we so lethargic, so tired? Is it only that *“the world is too much with us.”* The ideal is clearly before us; we are to live our lives: *“Gospel to life and life to Gospel.”* This is our way of formation, the process by which we become Secular Franciscans,

1 Ein Karem is about 5 km from Jerusalem. Zacharia as a priest has duties to perform in the Temple in Jerusalem.

2 “The Way” namely the Way of Love, is what Christianity was first called. It is what St Clare also calls “the gospel life.”

3 This may be a little too black and white because there are many valid reasons why they cannot attend meetings.

and it is the Way our lives are to be lived. As Franciscans, we are called on to constantly ask, in each situation, the question: “*What would Jesus do? What would our Blessed Mother do?*” But where can I find the energy to face the challenging situations?”

What was Mary’s secret? Can we learn from the mother of Jesus? Yes, we can! Although she is human, she is free from the effects of Original Sin – she is the Immaculate Conception! Precisely, what does that mean in terms of living daily life?

Mary lives in a state of grace, open to God and His influence. She is alert to the nuances of the Spirit. Mary can respond without restriction or hesitation to God’s initiatives, so much so that when the Archangel greets her, he says, “*Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.*” She is open to accepting the will of God; she only asks how this can come about. We, too, take up the Angel’s Salutation by greeting her, “*Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with you.*” Our prayer to her also has a petition: “*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*”

The Angel declares her “*full of grace*” even before she becomes the mother of the Lord. What, then, is grace? Well, that is a vast question that caused an enormous debate in the Church during the time of Saint Augustine. Without going into the historical details of the back-and-forth between theologians, we can say that God gives grace as a pure, undeserved **gift** to all so that they may become who they are meant to be. So that they, too, may follow the Way of love. Indeed, all we need to do is learn to *cooperate* with this assistance. In the Western Church, we divide Grace into Sanctifying Grace (the indwelling of the Holy Trinity) and actual grace (the loving power to complete a task). In the Eastern Church, there is no distinction. Grace is always the action and power of the Holy Spirit. I like the simplicity of the Eastern Church’s explanation and the idea the Holy Spirit is always willing to help if we only ask. Perhaps St Patrick’s prayer captures this best of all because it is a prayer for a journey:

I arise today,  
through a mighty strength,  
The invocation of the Trinity.  
Through belief in the Threeness,  
Through confession of the Oneness  
Of the Creator of creation.<sup>4</sup>

What the Gospels teach us about Mary and also St Joseph is that they both could respond immediately to the urgings of Grace.<sup>5</sup> There is no hesitation in them; they are ready to act according to the grace of God immediately. It is almost as if they have practised love so often that virtue comes naturally to them. It is not a stylised politeness, a code of courtesy; it is a sincere and authentic Way of love.

I pray that we are always open to receiving the grace that God wishes to give us, that we can respond to the urgings of the Holy Spirit, and that we are able to share that grace- that Love - with all those around us.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/st-patricks-breastplate-prayer-irelands-patron-saint>

<sup>5</sup> The Capuchins Friars, to whom Pope Leo XIII gave the task of spreading devotion to St Joseph, sum up the life of St Joseph with the letters J.M.G.I, which stand for **J**esus, **M**ary, **G**race and the **I**nterior life.