

THE YOUNG FRANCISCAN

Autumn Edition, March 2024
Vol #26

Charity

Lent is upon us once again, and this year it has crept up on us early. By now we should have made some resolutions as to what Lenten penances we will make, what foods we might fast from, and what charity we might like to make our yearly donation to.

When it comes to charities, did you know that there are over 60,000 registered charities in Australia? How do we know which ones to support?

If you think that is a large number, perhaps you might like to support one of the many unregistered Australian charities, which numbers somewhere over the twenty-five million mark—now that's a lot! That pretty much comes down to one charity per person.

But where will I find one of those twenty-five million charities, you may ask? Look at the person next to you, because in fact, the closest charity to you at any moment is probably not the local Saint Vincent de Paul centre down the road, but the very people whom we encounter every day, our friends, school mates,

work colleagues, family members—pretty much the entire population.

Charity simply comes down to two things, loving God, and loving neighbour. Charity requires us to place love as the foundation of all we speak, act, and think. The Catholic Church teaches us that charity is in fact the highest form of love, and that it is precisely the virtue of charity that gives us the ability to love. Without charity there is no love.

For Franciscans, the virtue of charity is held in the highest esteem. The Rule of the Secular Franciscans even places it as the very first virtue which they are called to live. Before all other virtues, those followers of St Francis are called to “strive for perfect charity in their own secular state.”

Did we just say *Perfect* charity? Perfection—that's a pretty serious call! Can anyone really live up to such a standard? Yet, that is the level of charity that St Francis himself prayed for when he asked God to “enlighten the darkness of our hearts and

give us right faith, firm hope, and *perfect charity*.”

For St Francis, reaching this goal did not come overnight, it was a lifetime journey that was only attained towards the end of his life when he received the crucifixion wounds of Jesus in his own body (the Stigmata), revealing his own mirror image of the perfect love of our Lord Jesus crucified.

Reaching such heights of perfect charity is a goal we must strive for daily. Working towards this goal is just like perfecting any skill or talent, the more we work at it the better we become. Charity is not an act that we make once a year in order to fulfil our Lenten obligation! It is an act that we must strive for on a daily basis, in every situation.

Perfect charity leads to perfect love. For any Franciscan this is the end goal. It is such a desirable achievement that the members of the Secular Order even profess this when they say, “I promise to live all the days of my life the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ... so that I may reach the goal of *perfect Christian love*.”

Embracing our 'Leper'

Imagine a life of charity in which we respond with love through every word, act and thought, towards every single person we encounter, every day, for the rest of our lives, without fail! Does it sound a bit exhausting? Yes, it certainly does! It almost belongs in the too-hard basket.

That was also the case for St Francis early on. Although there were times in his youth where he showed acts of love and charity towards the poor, there was however, one act of charity that he could not bring himself to as it utterly repulsed him to the core. It came from his disdain for lepers.

Perhaps without realising it, it was Francis' abhorrent repulsion towards lepers that kept him the furthest from the path of perfect charity; a defect that could only be overcome by embracing the one whom he despised the most.

And so it happened one day, while riding his horse near Assisi, Francis met a leper on the road. Filled with horror and disgust, he forced himself off his horse, approached the leper, and kissed him. Then, filled with compassion, Francis gave the man some money and returned to his horse. However, looking around, the leper had vanished. Only then did Francis realise that it was Jesus whom he had just kissed. Filled with joy, some days later Francis visited a

leper colony, and giving them a large sum on money he went around and kissed each of their diseased hands.

One of the lessons we can learn from this story is that it was not the leper who had the greatest illness, but rather Francis. Although the leper had a bodily sickness, Francis, up until that moment, was diseased with an incomparable worse sickness, his inability to love. The only cure to Francis' sickness was the 'spiritual medicine' which could only be obtained from the leper. By kissing the wounds of the leper Francis was cured of his spiritual illness. Through this act of charity Francis was able to love. It was only then that he was able to fully follow Christ.

Many of us today, just like the young Francis, are filled with much compassion for works of charity. However, it is often those small acts of love that we don't make that end up becoming our biggest defect.

Sometimes that lack of love might come in the simplest form of being irritated with someone else's bad habits, or our own inpatients or rudeness towards someone simply because they annoy us. Other times it might come in the form of calling someone a fool (if not worse), showing bitterness towards others, being selfish, arrogant, angry, or perhaps one of the worst of all,

gossiping! This is not charity.

These are the most difficult challenges towards charity that we face each day. In fact, it is probably easier to join a charitable organisation and go out on the streets once a week to feed the poor, than it is to be nice on a daily basis to someone who simply annoys us, whether it be our friends, family members or a beggar on the street.

Why did God place that leper in the path of St Francis? Because it was precisely what he needed at that time to develop the virtue of charity. In the same way God allows all those 'annoying' people into our own lives precisely to allow us to develop the virtue of charity through them.

We might sometimes think to ourselves, "If only they could change". But in all truth, it is probably not 'they' that need to change, but rather 'me'. It is not 'they' that are sick, but 'me', with spiritual leprosy.

Our inability to be charitable and feel love towards them is a greater defect than those 'problems' of theirs that don't agree with us. And the only person that can heal us of our lack of love is precisely that person, our 'leper', if only we can 'get off our horse' and embrace them for who they are—a child of God. It may be the sweetest act of charity we ever make.

“...the greatest of these is Charity”

Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians gives us one of the greatest accounts of charity. In many translations of the bible this chapter often replaces the word ‘charity’ with ‘love’. This shows us that the two go hand in hand, there cannot be one without the other.

If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have not charity, I am as a gong booming, or a tinkering cymbal.

And if I should have prophecy and know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith, so that I could move mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profits me nothing.

Charity is patient, charity is kind; charity is never jealous; charity is not boastful or conceited.

It is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances.

Charity does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth.

It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes...

And now there remain faith, hope and charity. These three: but the greatest of these is charity.

Charity in the Gospels

...as we forgive those...

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he taught them one of the most important, although most difficult acts of charity that we can ever make—to forgive.

“Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us*”.

“Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either.”

Jesus himself set the greatest example of this when on the cross he prayed for his persecutors:

“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

“But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you”
(Mt 5:44)

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”
(John 20)

“You Did it For Me”

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us that our final judgement will be based on one criteria only—how we treated others.

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’”

‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’

The Good Samaritan

Of all the parables Jesus taught, perhaps there is no better example of charity than that of the Good Samaritan.

When a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jerico is attacked by robbers, beaten, stripped and left for dead, it was not his own country men who came to his aid, but rather a man from an enemy region, a Samaritan.

Jesus teaches us that we must be charitable to everyone regardless if they are our friends or not.

Secular Franciscan Saints



St Frances of Rome

1384-1440

Born into a noble Roman family, Frances showed an early interest in becoming a nun, but instead was married at the remarkably early age of twelve to another Roman noble, Lorenzo Ponziani. Together they had three children. Although the marriage was arranged, it was a happy one lasting forty years. Frances was received into the Third Order of St Francis, and together with her sister-in-law, set out through the city of Rome visiting the poor and caring for the sick. During the time of flood and famine Frances turned part of the family's country estate into a hospital and gave food and clothing to the poor. However, tragedy struck the family when a certain plague took the lives of two of her children. In 1410 Rome was in the midst of a civil war in which Lorenzo was severely wounded; he never fully recovered. Frances not only cared for him, but reopened her home as a hospital where many people were miraculously healed. She had the gift of miracles and ecstasy; she even saw her guardian angel and enjoyed visits from numerous saints, including St Francis of Assisi.

Bl Gerard of Villamagna 1174-1245

Gerard was the son of peasants who worked on the land of a wealthy family in Florence. After the death of his parents at an early age, the wealthy family took the boy into their own home and taught him to live a pious Christian life. As a young man he joined his master to fight the Saracens in the Third Crusade. Both were arrested, imprisoned and suffered many torments before being released. Twelve years later Gerard once again joined the Crusades, yet this time facing the powerful force of Muslim pirates. It is said that through the power of Gerard's prayers their boat was saved by a miracle. On his return to Italy he entered into the Third Order of St Francis, having been received by St Francis himself. He withdrew to a hermitage and lived a strict penitential life. He often went begging door to door for food for others less fortunate than himself. Gerard was also gifted with the ability to enter into profound prayer and contemplation, always praying on his knees. Gerard died in the month of May, 1242, on the same day which he earlier announced he would die.

Bl Humiliana Cerchi

1219-1246

From her earliest childhood Humiliana was known for her works of piety. To all who knew her it was clear that she was called to the service of God, not the world. But her father thought differently. In order to increase the power and reputation of his family, he promised his daughter in marriage to a nobleman who was not deserving of such a holy bride. He was greedy and dealt harshly with his young wife. But she responded to him with meekness, patients and charity. After five years of marriage, when her husband fell dangerously ill, Humiliana not only nursed him until his death, but also handed over her entire family fortune to her husband's relatives. After the death of her husband, Humiliana joined the Third Order of St Francis and returned home to her father. However, refusing his urging to enter into a second marriage, she was stripped of all property rights. To this she rejoiced with our Lord's words, "He who does not renounce all that he possesses, cannot be My disciple." Humiliana lived an austere life, begging for her food and praying to God, often in ecstasy for days on end.

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'Secular Franciscan Saints' are adapted from the Franciscan Book of Saints, by Marion A. Habig OFM