

SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF APRIL 2024



In his Testament, Francis writes, “The Lord gave me faith in Churches,” Here, he was probably thinking back to his days at San Damiano. For Francis, churches were sacred places in which he encountered the divine.

What does “faith in churches” mean in this instance? I doubt Francis means a list of dogmas, of creeds, of things to believe. When I was student in the Seminary, one of my professors said that faith is really just an experience of God. When he was before the San Damiano crucifix, he truly experienced God. Lots of people walked by that church of San Damiano. Many walked in. But did they have the same experience? Francis had that experience: it was in that church of San Damiano that Francis was called to repair a church that was falling into ruin. There was a sense of divine experience. Francis himself did not know how to describe it. He simply says, “The Lord gave me faith in churches.” He was given faith in those sacred places where he could connect with God.

Let us go back to Francis’ call by the Crucifix of San Damiano. Here is a young kid, probably 26 years old, having a ride in the countryside. He decides to visit the little church. He was probably taking a rest. And he decides to say this prayer. When he asks for insight: “enlighten the darkness of my heart.” He is looking for discernment here. He is saying, I don’t know what I am looking for here, but show me. Teach me. Guide me.

Very deliberately he says, “give me.” Isn’t that typical of how we pray when we are young? It’s a merchant’s mentality: give me this, so that I can do that. It’s an exchange.

In saying “give me” what does Francis ask for? “True Faith.” What did God give him? The very thing he asked for! In his Testament, Francis says, I asked for it and you gave it to me.

Francis did not ask for perfect faith; he asked for “true” faith. There is a big difference between “perfect” and “true”. It is like tuning a guitar, you listen for the tone to be true, to match. That’s what Francis asks for: ‘true’ faith, a faith that matches the one God has in mind for him. My faith may be different from Bro. Leo’s or Bro. Giles, but it is true for me in the particularity of my own experience. That’s a wonderful piece of our Franciscan tradition: that we ask for ‘true’ faith not

perfect faith. We ask for 'true' joy not perfect joy. (the original translation of "Perfect Joy" is not '*perfecta*' but '*vera*': true joy!)

Francis now looks back as an old man and realizes that God gave him what he asked for: true faith in churches, true faith in penance, true faith in priests.

Yes, even as Francis encountered the humanness of some of the priests of his day, he still had faith in them. He explained that it is only through the hands of the priest that he has the opportunity to see the corporal presence of Christ. He writes, "I see nothing of the Most High Son of God except for His Most Holy Body and Blood which (priests) alone receive and which they alone administer." So, Francis, says, we just can't do without these instruments – no matter what they do.

Francis received this faith as grace, as gift. Now looking back on his life, Francis realized these things – churches, penance, priests – were significant for him.

A nun friend of mine taught a First Communion class. On the first day of the class, she had gone to Morning Mass in the Parish and then went to teach the class. As she entered the classroom, she noticed that one little boy genuflected as she entered the room. The next Catechism class he did the same thing. The third week, when he did it again. The nun asked him, "Timmy is something wrong?" He replied, "No Sister. I be genuf'ectin because I saw that man put Jesus in you this morning!" This is the faith that Francis was talking about: enlighten the darkness of my heart, that I may see the presence of Christ in you!

Imagine what the Church would be like if we really understood what the Eucharist is about! We'd be genuf'ectin all over the place. This is the faith that Francis talked about, and I imagine that Francis did a lot of genuf'ectin – before Brother Sun and Sister Moon, before his brothers and sisters. In everyone and everything he saw a reflection of God. These things were significant, for through them God gave Francis and experience of God's self.

If Francis pointed to churches, penances and priests as privileged places of encountering the divine. Where – in what spaces or people or actions – have we encountered the divine?

Most High, Glorious God
Enlighten the darkness of my heart
and give me true faith
Certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge
Lord that I may carry out Your holy and true command. Amen.



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