

Homily for the Feast of the Stigmata - 17th September 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

May the Lord give you His peace!

Once again we are gathered together on this mountain to renew the joyful memory of the great gift that the Lord Jesus made to Saint Francis, the least of His servants and brothers: the signs of His own love, the wounds of charity, the holes from the nails that reveal all the hidden and powerful light that comes to us from the saving love of Christ.

This year the memory of the Stigmata falls whilst we celebrate the 800th anniversary of the *Regola bollata* and the Nativity scene of Greccio. Next year we will celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Stigmata.

It is the only Franciscan Centenary that runs from 2023 to 2026 wherein we retrace the last years of Francis' life, marked by a great trial or temptation that culminated right here at La Verna, and then concluded preparing Francis for his encounter with Sister Death. We can say that La Verna – examining what Francis lived here before and after – is a key to entering into the mystery of the existence of this Christian man. Here we see how the centre of his experience is his simple friendship with the Lord Jesus, which simply gave meaning and light to his person and his message.

If we were to seek this nucleus in other elements apart from Christ, we would lose the very compass of knowing and understanding Francis of Assisi. So to this end, let us follow in his footsteps.

In 1223 Francis was finally able to give his Order a definitive version of the Rule that we call the *Regula Bullata*, because it was officially approved by Pope Honorius. This required a long travail of research and amending of the text. In 1209-1210 Francis with his first companions asked Pope Innocent in a few simple words to live the Gospel, especially those radical phrases of Jesus wherewith he had welcomed Peter and Bernardo in the church of St. Nicolas in 1208: "*renounce everything, give your riches to the poor and announce the Gospel with freedom*".

This dream set in motion the faith of many at that time and their number grew so much that those few words, those verses of the Gospel with some practical norms for daily life would soon no longer be enough. In fact, here the friars from year to year began meeting with Francis at the *Porziuncola* for the Chapter of Pentecost where he updated those words, carried with them the experience of the life they were now living, not only in Assisi, nor just in central Italy but also in Northern Italy, the countries of Northern Europe and soon thereafter, also in Syria and Morocco. How can we live the Gospel in these different situations? Here is the question that has grown with time and has manifested itself in different ways of understanding that same Will of Francis, which for his part is moved by an evangelical tension that continually puts life and the Gospel in contact. For him the Rule by necessity will be jealously guarded to ensure the

possibility of living and following closely in the footsteps and words of Jesus. For others, they begin to become the border that must define and defend the boundaries of a fraternity that is increasingly inserted into the mission of the Church in a difficult time; this tension will become opposition.

Francis left the direct government of the Order in 1220 and in the following year he produced together with several of the brethren a text of the Rule that did not receive papal approval. It is in this second Chapter of Mats that he says clearly that the Lord has made known to him that the only vocation is to live the Gospel and not to enter into a life and mission already established by others. This Rule for Francis is definitive.

In the following two years Francis seems to take a step back from his position and revisits the text of the Rule. We do not know all the steps, but it is certain that tension was very strong and left its mark on the *Poverello* (poor man), who recognizes that his fraternity is not his property and that therefore it can follow its own evolution. He knows how to take a step back and open a new path, which he had not thought of. However, one thing remains indispensable for him: the call received from the Lord Himself to live according to the Gospel and nothing more. Indeed, it is here that the Rule desires to guarantee this gift and this commitment.

Let us now examine together three steps of Francis on this path.

Francis encounters the living Christ in His word, the Gospel, in which he listens to the "fragrant words" of His Lord. There is no encounter with Jesus without this continuous and loving "listening".

Having received the approval of the Rule on the 29th November, 1223, Francis allowed himself a pause to enjoy some peace and contemplation. **Now he desires to see Christ in all His poverty** and hardships that He experienced at His birth as a guest and refugee, He the One who chose to be born in that way.

So Francis makes his way to *Greccio*, where he does not reproduce the Nativity scene as a sacred representation, but rather wishes to see it simply through a pile of hay, with an ox and a donkey, the same condition of poverty in which Jesus chose to be born. At the Eucharist celebrated at the crib in the grotto of *Greccio* he says: "*Behold, every day He humbles Himself, as when from the royal throne He descended into the womb of the Virgin. Every day He Himself comes to us in humble appearance; every day He comes down from the bosom of the Father to the altar into the hands of the priest*" (Am I, 16-18: FF 144). The encounter with Jesus cannot bypass His humble condition as a poor guest; through His humanity we can know and encounter the thrice Holy God.

A third step now awaits Francis: after having encountered the Lord in the Gospel and seen Him in a state of poverty **is now attracted to enter in a deeper and more personal way into his relationship with Jesus, to the point of being transformed into Him**. The *Poverello* made his own the vision and experience of Saint Paul: "*I want to know Him, His sufferings (...) I was crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And I live this life, which I live in the body, in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me* (Gal 2:19b20).

The *Poverello* allows us to see the Lord Jesus in the Gospel just as He lived with His brothers and sisters, in poverty with the little ones, with love, in transforming pain: the Stigmata are the memory of the fulfillment of baptism in Francis, transformed into the One who gives Him strength, because he loves Him. As we retrace the last years of his life, let us not lose sight of the fact that Jesus Christ gave that experience to Francis which is the mark of being a Christian.

Today we still gaze with wonder and love at the wounds of Christ impressed upon his servant Francis and we know that our own baptism propels us towards this encounter and this profound transformation in Him. As we too make our way up to La Verna, let us ask us to accept that, as believers, we remain on a journey, taken as an adventure of faith, not leaving us calm and sedentary in what we already know how to repeat.

Faith is like an expedition that makes us venture into the land of the Other to dare to believe in God even today, and in others as brothers and sisters in the Church, not alone, and with the little ones and the poor. Encountering, seeing, and being transformed in Christ which takes place through faith. Let us ask that this gift be rekindled within and grow within and that it may also show in our lives the Good News of Christ's transforming love even in these difficult and yet blessed times.

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