

To all the Friars Minor of the Order
To all the Poor Clares of the Order of St Clare
To the brothers, sisters and friends of our Order

Dear Brothers and Sisters, May the Lord give you peace!

I would like to journey with you into St Francis' feelings when on that Christmas day in 1223, he indulged his restless impulse to go into the rocks and woods around the village of Greccio. Not alone but accompanied by his brothers and by an unassuming and poor humanity, made up of simple folk and humble people.

What drove Friar Francis to experience that Christmas was the irresistible desire to **see** the poverty in which the Lord Jesus wanted to be born with his own eyes. And this to **believe** that He - crucified and risen - is present, alive and glorified in the Holy Spirit, hidden under the tiny appearance of bread until the day of His return.

Clare will live by this same gaze, astonished and loving, that nourishes her faith and focuses it on the poverty of Jesus, from his birth, throughout his life, up to the Cross. Clare's life is transformed and made similar in every way to the poor Crucified, together with her sisters.

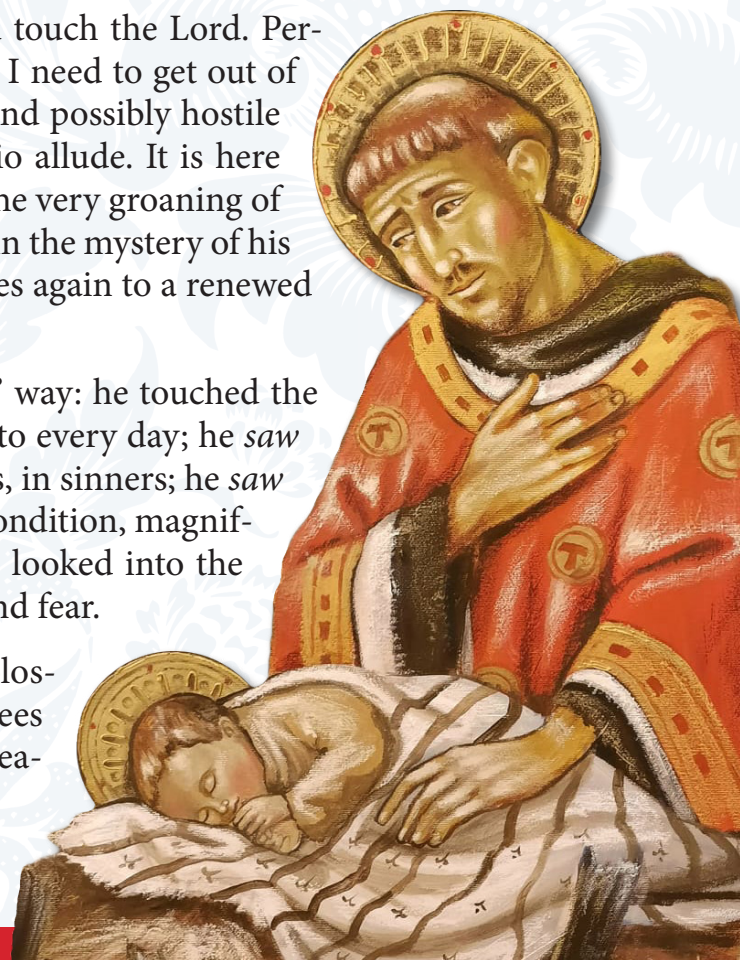
Seeing and *believing* are two verbs, as we well know, central to St Francis.

Seeing reminds us of the physicality of Francis' faith: it is not enough for him to think, but he wants to see with his eyes, touch with his hands, smell with his nostrils, hear with his ears, taste with his tongue. In short, his whole person, his senses, are set in motion by desire, by what moves him most deeply. So, faith is simply life for him.

I wonder if I still have a fervent desire to see and touch the Lord. Perhaps something else moves me. Then like Francis, I need to get out of my comfort zone and set out towards a different and possibly hostile place, to which the wood and the rocks of Greccio allude. It is here that I can listen again to that desire within me, in the very groaning of creation, our common home: to *see* the Lord Jesus in the mystery of his poverty and weakness, to open myself and ourselves again to a renewed encounter with him in the Spirit.

Francis experienced this encounter in a "physical" way: he touched the body of the Lord in the Gospel, read and listened to every day; he *saw* him in the leper, in his brothers, in the poor priests, in sinners; he *saw* the poverty of Jesus in the paradox of the human condition, magnificent and at the same time destined for death. He looked into the eyes of this fragility, finally freed from bitterness and fear.

From the encounter with Jesus, the joy of faith blossoms for him, the fresh look of the risen man who sees the presence of God in all creatures and, for this reason, praises him and returns all good to him.



Believing: faith is kindled by that encounter that touched me and left its mark in the flesh of my life. Our individual belief is born and safeguarded by the great “yes” of the faith of the Church. This is the act that accomplishes that *seeing*, that touching and letting oneself be reached. Let us look for the echo of this “yes” in the mysterious journey that, in countless ways, so many people make towards the Mystery.

Seeing without believing could leave my faith at the mercy of the emotion of the moment.

Believing without seeing could reduce faith to an idea that simply no longer has anything to do with my life and falls away, even when I continue to perform religious acts outwardly.

Joy is the sign that our faith is still alive; sadness and lament are like an anaesthetic of faith, which slowly becomes stupefied, loses contact with the “physicality” of our flesh, of life, and becomes merely intellectual or moralistic. Or it disappears.

Let us be vigilant, blessed brothers and sisters because this can also happen to us. Unfortunately, it does happen when: I take faith for granted and do not creatively cultivate a life of prayer in silence and contemplation, I lose contact with the word of God, I allow the Eucharist to become a routine, I do not joyfully avail of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I separate faith from life, I do not forgive and do not spend my life for others, I distance myself from the poor and adapt to a comfortable and guaranteed life.

Seeing and believing are Francis’ steps, disarming in their simplicity and depth.

At Christmas 2021, we are still waiting for the Lord, who nourishes our faith. He is present in the chiaroscuro of this time, which asks us to listen, discern and decide:

- the widespread fear of the pandemic, which seems to have no end and is changing us, including the role of science and technology, as is the case everywhere now;
- the solidarity that so many have shown in this emergency, which we did not expect;
- the massing of migrants and refugees at so many borders, with the sense of impotence that this gives us;
- the concrete signs of welcome and openness to others, paying in person;
- the suffering of our mother earth, scarred by the toil of so many women, men and children wounded in their physical and moral dignity;
- the signs of resistance and responsibility for the future of the common home, especially among the youngest;
- the hotbeds of war, terror and repression scattered around the world, so much so that they no longer even make the news;
- the silent work of those who, in many ways, become agents and mediators of peace and justice.

This list could go on. We are called to celebrate Christmas with eyes that can see this reality in and around us. Let each of us, starting with ourselves, take a step towards that Greccio wood among the rocks, to see a Child born in this poor reality.

This Christmas, I believe that I am, and we are called to *see* and *believe* in a new way.



The time in which we live, and which consumes all confidence, including religious confidence, asks us to do so.

The very dynamic of faith, which is a journey, a search, an ever-renewed adherence, asks us to do so.

Our religious life that today calls for a profound redefinition in the different contexts in which we live in the world asks us to do so.

The fear that we may still have of God also asks us to do so: let us remember that He gives us everything and takes nothing away from us; He offers Himself to us as a father does with his children; He reveals His face of mercy and grace so that our humanity may live.

The fact that, faith is losing its meaning in so many people's lives, and often also our own, who have chosen to follow the Lord, asks us to do so.

Francis surprises us as always and shows us the road that leads to Greccio, that is, to remote places, far from the great routes, to rediscover right here the possibility of a new belief, rich even today in life and in the future, to seek as pilgrims in the night.

My wish for this 2021 Christmas is that we may open our eyes in the Holy Spirit and believe in the mystery of the poverty of Jesus and his Blessed Mother. And from these "spiritual eyes", let the flame of faith be rekindled. Ignited by the fire of the Holy Spirit, we will become more and more inflamed against all icy inertia of the heart. In this way, in the various parts of the world in which we live, we will be that prophetic sign we are called to be by vocation, the presence of Christ crucified and risen for every brother and sister whom the Lord enables us to meet.

This is the prophetic sign that Francis and Clare were in the warmth of their faith. It was a humble search - and not its possession - for the Presence of the Living One in all creatures.

Here is the sign that we can be whenever we are not afraid to *see* and *believe* again.

*Happy Christmas, brothers and sisters,
and let us remember each other to the Lord who is coming.*



Your brother and servant

Br. Massimo Fusarelli, ofm

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Minister General

