



ORDO FRANCISCANUS SAECULARIS

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To
all my brothers and sisters in the
International Fraternity of the
Secular Franciscan Order

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

may the Lord give you his peace!

During the course of the years of the Franciscan Centenaries, this year we are celebrating the anniversary of the day, when "*... true love of Christ transformed the lover into his image ... bearing with him the likeness of the Crucified*" (Saint Bonaventure: The major legend XIII). Saint Francis has received the stigmata on the mountain of La Verna, meeting the crucified and glorified Christ in the image of the seraph. Saint Francis was being transformed by Christ, into the conformity of Christ, into being an image of Christ, not only in his spirit but also in his body.

It is an inspiration for us to seek answers to the great questions in our life: What is the experience of the true love of Christ in our life? What happened on the mount La Verna is not only a wonderful event which is absolutely worth to be remembered and celebrated, but such an event which also we, secular Franciscans can learn a lot from.

Introduction

What was the situation in his life when Saint Francis went up to La Verna and received the stigmata? What was the situation in the Order? We have to notice, that these were hard times for him. The Order has become big, which was a reason of joy, but also, it was very difficult to guide and animate more or less 5000 brothers. This was somehow a moment of crisis. Big questions were raised about the future of the Order, about the directions, about the proper way of life of the brothers. The chapter decided to launch new missions, e.g. in England. It became obvious, that the coin has two sides, and fraternal life is not only full of joys, but also full of challenges. Saint Francis, not only having the burdens of a leader of this big fraternity, feeling the responsibility and facing the challenges, but also having a lot of personal problems, health issues, personal temptations, getting weaker, has decided to head to La Verna.

We can read many meditations on the events happened to Saint Francis at La Verna, and we can learn a lot about it, it is a really important and enriching moment of the life of Saint Francis, which can give us a lot regarding our Secular Franciscan vocation. I only would like to draw your attention to three things: the gift of Christ, together with Christ and unity with Christ. This is somehow a kind of spiritual journey, which may be an invitation for us to, too, to set out and experience how Christ is working through these things in our life.

The gift of Christ

“O Lord Jesus Christ, before I die I ask you for two graces; first, that in my lifetime I may feel, as far as possible, both in my soul and body, that pain which you, sweet Lord, endured in the hour of your most bitter Passion; second, that I may feel in my heart as far as possible that excess of love which moved you, O Son of God, to suffer so cruel a Passion for us sinners.”
(*Little Flowers of Saint Francis*)

Saint Francis, shortly before this miraculous event at La Verna asked two things, two graces from Christ: to feel the love and to feel the pain. At La Verna he received the stigmas, and we think, it gave him only one of the gifts he requested: the suffering, the pain. But could we imagine, that Christ did only the half of the job, would give only the half of the gift? Though we never could read about it, it seems pretty sure, and I am convinced, that Saint Francis was granted that grace too, that he felt the immense love of Christ.

His such deep desire had a precious response from Christ, a precious gift. He understood and we should understand, too, that these two things go always together. Christ does not let us suffer without granting the ability to love and to feel being loved. But vice versa, too: Christ teaches us that there is no great love without suffering. But these two only can be in balance if we ask both of them from Christ, and if we are ready to accept both of them from the hands of Christ.

Suffering is not a good thing by itself. Suffering by itself is not a goal for us. But the more we can accept the suffering from the hands of Christ, the more we will be able to be like him also in the terms of our love. we may be sure that Christ, when grants us the grace of suffering, grants us the joy of love, too.

The stigmas are the external sign of these two gifts: the suffering and the love, showing that they are united in one, they come from Christ together, completing each other. These gifts were a turning point in the life of Saint Francis.

Instead of comforting him, instead of spoiling him in his physical and spiritual sufferings in a way he could expect, he gets the stigmas, the wounds, which hurt - hurt a lot. However, as a miracle, these stigmas mean a comforting, the stigmas calmed him down. This moment has changed the life of Francis, and should change our life, too. It should call us to do our best to be together with Christ, to get into unity with Christ, asking and accepting everything from Him.

Together with Christ

One can be alone without being lonely and can be lonely being surrounded by others.

We can read in the biographies of Saint Francis, that two years before his death, on the occasion of the feast of St. Michael, he went up to the mount La Verna. He wanted to be alone. Only Fr. Leo was permitted to accompany him. However, we should remember, that this is way far not the first moment in the life of Saint Francis, when he seemed to be alone, in spite of the ‘illusion’ of the contrary.

He was alone in the prison of Perugia. He went alone to pray in front of the San Damiano cross. He went out to keel the fast of St Michael on an island, and he was alone. But also, he went out and left the dwelling place of the brothers to be alone when praying. He even was ready to stay sleepless all the night spending in prayers when this was the only opportunity to listen to and talk to God.

He was not alone, but was lonely though being in the center of the company on the streets when being young. And he was not alone, but could feel lonely at the chapter when the brothers wanted to change his genuine ideas about the Order.

We could continue, searching his biographies. There were so many moments of being alone, sometimes being lonely, that this feeling was deeply set in his heart. Sometimes he was seeking to be alone and sometimes he found himself alone, he was lonely. However, he was always sure that in this loneliness among the people, Christ was always with him.

On the La Verna Christ did not let him being alone at all. This was the very moment, when Christ has definitely terminated his being alone. He got the best company ever, Christ himself, visibly, in the closest contact in the world. This being accompanied, comforted by Christ has led him to an absolute unity with Christ.

Christ is ready to accompany each of us, forever. Also we, secular franciscans feel sometimes alone, like anyone else. Sometimes we feel lonely. We have bad moments, periods in our life, when we don’t feel anyone to be close to us. May this miracle of the La Verna be an inspiration for us, too. Christ is always ready to accompany us, he is always so close to us, that we can feel the inspiration to be united with Christ in an absolute unity. It is possible, let’s believe it!

Unity with Christ

If I want to understand someone else, the other people, I should imagine to be in his place. What did lead him to do what he did? How can I understand his motivations? I should think the same way he/she thinks, I should try to feel the same thing that he/she feels.

Francis wanted exactly the same. He wanted to learn the motivations of Christ. What has made Christ, as absolutely being a man, to give his life to others? What did make it possible for him to go to the cross? Francis wanted to understand Christ, wanted to know, what kind of love it must be to do the same. He asked the grace to experience what Christ has experienced, he wanted to totally be united with him. He did not only want to get closer to Christ, but wanted to be like Christ, and later through this unity he could be so close to others, to his brothers, to the poor, to the lepers, as Christ was. He really wanted to imitate Christ. The ‘sequela Christi’ has meant him even more, not only to be ‘like’ Christ but to ‘be’ Christ. This desire has driven him through his whole life, thus becoming truly ‘Alter Christus’.

With the stigmas he arrived to the full unity, to the complete likeness of Christ, both in spirit and in his body. The stigmas are not the reason of this full unity but the highest point of his life which arrived to the absolute unity and likeness of Christ, both internally and in its external signs. He became 'Alter Christus', not because he received the stigmas, but the stigmas are its external signs.

Conclusion

Saint Francis recognized that to all his problems of that time - in his private life, among his health issues, in his spiritual life, in the life of the Order - this gift of Christ is the solution, living the cross at its fullness, living in an absolute unity with Him. He recognized that the full unity means the physical unity, with the stigmas as its external signs, and also the spiritual unity with Christ whom he has met though on the cross but in his full glory.

Francis was mightily astonished, and joy, mingled with sorrow, filled his heart. He rejoiced at the gracious aspect wherewith he saw Christ, under the guise of the Seraph, regard him, but His crucifixion pierced his soul with a sword of pitying grief. (LMJ XIII) His heart was filled with joy and sorrow, simultaneously.

This life-changing encounter with Christ has made it possible to become gifted, to unite with Christ, and thus to be comforted.

The Spirit is urging us towards the true love of Christ. The Spirit is encouraging us to go forth. The Spirit is comforting us in the difficult moments of our life. The Spirit is giving us guidance when we are searching the directions. The Spirit is transforming us. Let us be opened to the Spirit, so that like Saint Francis, we may bear the likeness of the Crucified!

I invite you all, also in the fraternities, to set some questions to ourselves again.

How has Christ transformed us when we became members of this seraphic fraternity, the OFS?

Do we wear the likeness of Christ? Whom do we allow to transform us: Christ or the world?

What do we do with the gifts? Do we recognize, what are the real gifts? Do we know what are the gifts of God?

What do we do with the suffering? Can we join it with the expression of love? Does the "true love of Christ transform" us? Do we wish to be transformed into the image of Christ? What would mean for us to bear the likeness of Christ?

May these questions lead us all to a better understanding of our vocation, and may the answers help us to keep on going on our vocational journey day by day more faithfully, more joyfully, more united with Christ. May our seraphic father, Saint Francis help us on this way!

I wish all of you a blessed feast and a joyful celebration of this life-changing encounter!

Your brother and your minister



Tibor Kauser
CIOFS General Minister

