

St. Francis Day Homily – October 4, 2019

A blessed and joyful feast of St. Francis! It is a special day for all of us who are part of the Franciscan movement, a movement that began in the Middle Ages, calling the church to conversion of heart, calling the church to RADICAL MUTUALITY. That call continues today. It is a call to us as church, the people of God, to RADICAL MUTUALITY, to be truly sisters and brothers to one another.

“To a far greater extent than at the time of St. Francis, people in today’s society are going through a very sharp conflict socially, economically, politically, and religiously. At the international level, we are assailed by the bloody reality of terrorism, war, human trafficking, violence, and violation of human rights.” (St. Francis Day letter). We are not sisters and brothers to one another. Individually and as people of God,

- we need conversion of heart.
- we need conversion to LOVE, to God who is Love, and to our sisters and brothers, that we may love them as we love ourselves.

CONVERSION is like a revolution—turning everything upside down, turning our lives upside down, changing direction.

St. Francis’ conversion of heart began at San Damiano, when he experienced Christ suffering on the cross—Jesus, God with us in human flesh and bone. At that moment he recognized the truth of who he was and who God is:

- he a creature dependent on God for everything, knowing that his very life and everything he received was a gift from God, knowing the extent of God’s love for him that he suffered and died on the cross.
- God, above all creation, who loved us so much as to become one with us, human beings.

Seeing Jesus, God in human flesh, giving himself in love to us, radically changed Francis. He wanted nothing more than to follow in the footprints of Our Lord Jesus Christ. How was he to do this? He searched the gospels, finding in Matthew (16:24): If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up your cross, and follow me. Similarly, we hear Jesus’ words in today’s gospel from Matthew: **Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart.**

- What was Francis to learn from Jesus?
- How could he become gentle and humble of heart?

Francis found an answer and his conversion in his encounter with the most vulnerable and rejected human beings of his time, the lepers. Remember how repulsive they were to him? How difficult it was for him to look at them? How horrible to think of touching them?

The conversion that Francis experienced at the foot of the San Damiano cross enabled him to really “see” Jesus, and because he truly saw Jesus, he began to see and act differently. What Francis saw, was that “... in his living and interacting, ... (Jesus) freely, indiscriminately, gave of himself to every single ‘other’ he encountered. Moreover, he didn’t just give; he entered into mutual relationship. He desired to receive the ‘other’ as well.” (Virginia Herbers, ASCJ)

The conversion that Francis experienced in the lepers was to see Jesus in them, his suffering sisters and brothers, to love them, and to show his love in giving himself to each one he encountered. Those who were to be avoided at all costs, ignored, pushed to the outskirts of the towns were creatures like himself, dependent on God for everything. Francis stayed with the lepers, bathed them, and kissed their wounds. Through these actions he said to them, the vulnerable and rejected of his time, what Jesus said to the vulnerable and rejected of His time: **Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome and I will refresh you.**

When I think of the self-emptying and self-giving love of Francis, I picture him as we have often seen him, with his arms outstretched, arms raised to God in joyful praise, arms open to receive his sisters and brothers in all of creation, to love them and receive their love.

If we love, we follow in the footprints of Jesus and through our actions say to the vulnerable and rejected of our time: **Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome and I will refresh you... my yoke is easy and my burden light.**

As we remember and celebrate the legacy of Francis of Assisi today, may we trust that in every season of our lives, Jesus invites us to live with open arms, to recognize “our interconnectedness, the spiritual force of love and compassion for one another, much in the same way of the unconditional love that Francis had for all of creation.” (St. Francis Day letter)

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October 4, 2019