***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**June 2024**

**BACK TO ASSISI**

***“Journeying back to Assisi with Francis of Assisi and Carlo Acutis”***

In May of 2024, it was announced by the Vatican that a second miracle had been approved in the cause of Blessed Carlo Acutis and that he will be canonized by the Catholic Church. As he is buried in Assisi, a place he fell in love with, and in the person of St Francis of Assisi, I reflected on these two men and what they have in common. A young man of the Middle Ages, and a young man who was a Millennial for our age.

This town of Assisi changed the spiritual lives of these two men and the lives of countless men and women who have striven to live the Gospel according to the Franciscan way. In the Basilica of St Francis is the Tomb of our Holy Father Francis. We know for ourselves and the many before and after us, that Francis was such an effective preacher and touched the hearts of many who came to conversion to a life in Christ.

On October 3rd, 2020, Pope Francis celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at the Tomb of St Francis. It was there that he signed his Encyclical Letter, “Fratelli Tutti”. Pope Francis wrote:

*“With these words, St Francis of Assisi addressed his brothers and sisters and proposed to them a way of life marked by the flavor of the Gospel. Of the counsels Francis offered, I would like to select the one in which he calls for a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance and declares blessed all those who love their brother ‘as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him’. In his simple and direct way, St Francis expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born.”*

Exactly a week later at the same Basilica, two floors above the Tomb of St Francis, there was another great day of celebration as Cardinal Agostino Vallani read the Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis declaring the Venerable Servant of God, Carlo Acutis “Blessed”. It was a beautiful celebration. He was just an ordinary teenager living the faith. The Beatification portrait that was unveiled was just a picture of him in casual clothes. He loved PlayStation, loved computers and yes, his love for Jesus in the Eucharist was much greater. He catalogued Eucharistic Miracles on his website, helping others to learn and love Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He attended daily Mass, received Confession frequently and grounded himself in prayer, particularly Eucharistic Adoration and recitation of the Rosary.

He put his love for Jesus into action as well. The allowance he earned, he used to buy sleeping bags and essentials for the poor. He was liked by his peers, but he wanted to include the ‘marginalized’ in his circle of friends. When he learned of his diagnosis with Leukemia, his love for Jesus grew even stronger as he offered his sufferings for the Church and the Holy Father.

The thing with both Francis and Carlo is that they made their faith so relatable to their brothers and sisters. They made use of their present means of communication to proclaim the Gospel, all in a spirit of humility. For Francis, it was his preaching and travelling, for Carlo it was the internet and his local community. They both had short lives in today’s terms: Francis at 44, and Carlo at 15. How did he accomplish so much in a short amount of time? As Secular Franciscans, no matter how young or old we are or where we live in the world, we have 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. These two men challenge us as to how do we make use of our time on earth? Do we use it with family and friends, with our Fraternity and with the wider community to live the Gospel? Or do we use our time to use the internet or just our daily lives to lose ourselves in the unnecessary and useless.

Pope Francis said of Carlo: “Carlo was well aware that the whole apparatus of communications, advertising and social networking can be used to lull us, to make us addicted to consumerism and buying the latest thing on the market, obsessed with our free time, caught up in negativity. Yet he knew how to use the new communications technology to transmit the Gospel, to communicate values and beauty.”

It seems to me that Carlo exemplifies the way of St Francis in these modern times and although not formally a Secular Franciscan he certainly went from Gospel to life and life to Gospel. That is the key – enjoying the pleasures of life in moderation and to leave room for the spiritual, for knowledge and family life while maintaining the essence of who we are, the “you” inside of you, the unique part of you which we learn from Francis and Carlo.

Assisi should stand as a reminder for all of us that holiness is not reserved for the elite, but for ordinary people of all ages. It is a call to remind us in our Franciscan Vocation, from the day of our Baptism to the day of our Profession, to keep on striving for holiness and the primary call of our vocation.

Carlo was inspired by St Francis of Assisi in his love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He, like Francis, had an ardent wish: “ to attract as many people as possible to Jesus by proclaiming the Gospel first and foremost with the example of his life.” The Franciscan historical chronicles tell the story that “during a trip to Rome, Francis kept with him a little lamb, inspired by his devotion to Christ, his most beloved Lamb. Upon his departure, it was entrusted to a noble matron, Lady Jacopa dei Sette Soli (of the Seven Suns), so that she would have custody of it in her home. And the lamb, as if spiritually educated by Francis in matters of the soul, would not leave the woman’s side when she went to church, when she stayed or returned. Some mornings when the lady was late in awakening, the lamb would gently pounce and nudge her with his little horns, and wake her with his bleats, encouraging her with gestures and expressions to hurry to church. For this, the lady had much admiration and love for that lamb, disciple of Francis and teacher of devotion.

St Francis nurtured a particular affection for lambs, to whom Jesus Christ is often paralleled in Sacred Scripture, most especially for His gentle nature. Carlo often said that “the Eucharist is my highway to heaven.”  And “the more we receive the Eucharist, the more we will become like Jesus, so that on this earth we will have a foretaste of heaven.” He was attracted by the devotion of his favourite saint, Francis of Assisi, to the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, “If we go out into the sun, we get a suntan. If we get in front of Jesus in the Eucharist, we become saints.” Both Francis and Carlo had a deep devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, as we saw in last month’s reflection of Mary in Francis’ Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Carlo said “I never fail to keep the most gracious appointment of the day – the recitation of the Holy Rosary. He called the Rosary, “The shortest ladder to heaven.” Carlo learned from Francis that to be a saint we need to love. Carlo showed himself to be generous in self-giving. Francis’s affinity for the Eucharist, his care for the poor in society, his love of creation and his deep sense of brotherhood towards all God’s children, are universal and enduring qualities, which all the faithful and particularly we as Franciscans should seek to embody.  In this month of the Sacred Heart, we are urged by the example of these two inspiring men to live out our faith with passion and sacrifice.

Let us, in this month dedicated to the Sacred Heart, be inspired by these two passionate men of God and may we continue doing good work, adoring the Eucharist, caring for the poor and loving all creation.

Let us be impassioned by Jesus and live our Franciscan Profession in the service of the Gospel, spreading love for prayer and witnessing faith and charity towards others. For Francis and Carlo, Jesus was a Friend, Teacher, and Saviour. He was their life force and the reason for everything they did. Receiving inner strength from the Lord’s presence, Francis and Carlo wanted to attract as many people as possible to Jesus by proclaiming the Gospel first and foremost with the example of their lives. It was precisely their witness to the faith that impelled them to undertake the tireless work of evangelization in the environments they frequented, touching the hearts of the people they met and fostering in them the desire to change their lives and draw near to God.  May we as Franciscans do the same in our daily lives to bring the Gospel to others by our personal witness to Jesu Christ.

Here are some of the saying of Blessed Carlo that I think not only challenge us in our daily lives but also reflect the spirit of our Holy Father St Francis:

“All people are born as originals, but many die as photocopies.”

“The more we receive the Eucharist, the more we become similar to Jesus and already on this earth we foretaste heaven.”

“Money is only ragged paper: what counts in life is the nobility of the soul, that is, the way that one loves God and loves one’s neighbour.”

“Life is a gift, because as long as we are on earth, we can increase our level of love.”

God bless you all!

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