***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**August 2024**

**COURTESY**

***“Courtesy the Medieval Grace”***

For Franciscans, the month of August recalls both “the noble lady” Saint Clare of Assisi,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the “saintly” King of France, Louis IX.**[[2]](#footnote-2)** Perhaps, in this *Monthly Spiritual Message*, we can pose some questions that might benefit our Secular Franciscan Fraternities scattered around this vast country isolated by distance. In terms of actual fraternity, many of us meet only once a month. However, in the spirit of fraternity, although isolated, we are always together every time we think of each other, especially when we pray for each other.

So, my questions are: Why were so many noble Kings and Queens canonised by the Church? What stood out among these royal and noble saints? The criterion for being canonised by the Catholic Church rests on the fact that a person has died for the faith – **martyrdom**(for which you don’t necessarily need to be perfect) or **holiness of life** (for which you must show that you were virtuous to a high degree). Today, we might also look for psychological and spiritual maturity and integrity - love and compassion and a few other things, like two miracles which have occurred by invoking the deceased. In the case of St Joan of Arc**[[3]](#footnote-3)**, a member of the Third Order of St Francis (now the OFS), it took over 489 years for her canonisation.**[[4]](#footnote-4)**

One of the influences towards the practice of virtue from Medieval times**[[5]](#footnote-5)** was the development of the ideals of Chivalry, which became popular with the legend of King Arthur, his mythical sword “Excalibur,” and the Knight of the Round Table*.* With the institution of knighthood**[[6]](#footnote-6)** “*Over time, the meaning of chivalry in Europe was refined to emphasise more general social and moral virtues. The code of chivalry, as it stood by the Late Middle Ages, was a moral system which combined a warrior ethos, knightly piety, and courtly manners, all combining to establish a notion of honour and nobility.”* **[[7]](#footnote-7)**

Along with the Code of Chivalry**[[8]](#footnote-8)** came a Code of Courtly Manners – Courtesy, which overflowed into Codes of Conduct for the Juridical Courts, Universities and Education and generally how people should act towards each other in public. All these codes were developed during the civic life and times in which St Francis, St Clare and King Louis lived – courtesy was a way of life, especially for the nobility. Because of this gracious and courteous attitude, up to fifty Poor Clare nuns lived together in the small convent of San Damiano. The basis of this tranquillity, of course, was not just a code of courtesy but genuine love and compassion for each other founded in their ardent love of God.

But today, has all this gone out the window? Do we still give up our seats for others on a bus or train? Or open the car door for passengers. I dare to suggest that courtesy has flown away – especially in Australia, where our “sense of honesty” has developed to where being brutally honest and speaking outright gossip**[[9]](#footnote-9)** has stabbed to death any sense of courtesy and respect. The Law of the country, for example, may declare that a verbal attack on someone is actually – **Assault**, and hitting someone with anything from a rolled-up newspaper to a baseball bat is – **Battery**. But how many younger Australians are aware of this? The level of bullying in schools and at work is frighteningly high. The amount of domestic abuse is alarming. The Police Force and the Law Courts are increasingly called upon to be the guardians of good behaviour. The longed-for dream and hope of a worldwide civilization of love and compassion are caught again in the winds of wars and the rumours of war; the malice of evil stalks the land.

In one of the Netflix shows, “Rookie,” where they are training new Police officers, a comment was made: "*Don’t be naïve, watch your back, everyone is good until they are pushed!”* In the show, Season 5 Episode 11, titled “The Naked and the Dead”, one of the policewomen asks a fellow police officer, *“What is your take on Pure Evil? Does it exist?”* The policeman asks for clarification, *“Evil as in the Devil or guys with broken brains who get off on torture?”* “*No,”* she replies*, “the first one.”* He responds, *“Look, I think looking for some mythical creature to blame for all the messed-up stuff human beings do is a cop-out!”* She replies, *“I disagree. I mean, yeah, there are some depraved people in the world, but you can’t say that you haven’t seen people act in a way that you can’t explain.”*

To tell you the truth, I was not expecting such a frank discussion in a TV Series. I was amazed that they would write in such a dialogue, but it makes sense when you think about it because the Police are on the front line against … the twisted reality of evil!**[[10]](#footnote-10)**  (NB: This Footnote )

Of course, the Secular Franciscans, like the friars, have a Rule of Life which is 800 years old. So, should we be looking there for a Code of Conduct? Or should we, schooled by the reality of the world and society around us, be just as rude and abrasive in our speech as everyone else?**[[11]](#footnote-11)**However, before we do that, it is perhaps important to realise that the word “courtesy” is not found anywhere in OFS legislation and only once in the Greek edition of the Bible.**[[12]](#footnote-12)** We find in Number 13 of the OFS Rule:

“As the Father sees in every person the features of his Son, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, so the Secular Franciscans **with a gentle and courteous spirit** accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ. A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ.”

Commentary 13 on the Rule takes this a little further:

*Hand in hand with simple living comes the recognition that in Christ all are equally brothers and sisters. The Franciscan way of life has no room for prejudice or exclusiveness. In fact, the sense of community and the will toward community compel Secular Franciscans to discover Christ in everyone, especially the lowly and poor and disadvantaged.*

The Rule of the Secular Franciscans reminds us that Christ is the norm of our behaviour, and for this reason, we should always be going *“from gospel to life and life to the gospel.”* The source of Christian courtesy and respect for others is found in fraternal love and compassion.

If we look towards the early Christian Community, St Paul reminds them in Ephesians 4:1-6:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord,

beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,

with all lowliness and gentleness,

with longsuffering,

bearing with one another in love,

endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit

in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit,

just as you were called in one hope of your calling;

one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

one God and Father of all,

who is above all, and through all, and in all.”

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1. St Clare (1194 – 1253) Feast Day 11th of August. Sister of St Agnes of Assisi (1197 – 1253) Feast Day 16th of November. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. King Louis IX (the Ninth) (1214 – 1270). He is the brother of St Isabelle of France (1225 – 1270). Of sixteen French Kings named “Louis,” he alone is considered a saint. His line ended with the death, at the age of 38, of King Louis XVI (1754 – 1793) during the French Revolution. King Louis the Sixteenth asked a question at the foot of the scaffold: *“Is there any news of La Perouse?”* This was a reference to Captain La Perouse, who sailed two French ships into Botany Bay on the 26th of January 1788 but perished that same year after leaving Botany Bay on the 10th of March 1788. As the guillotine fell, removing King Louis XVI’s head, the Chaplain present said, *“Fly to heaven, son of Sant Louis IX, King of France.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. St Joan of Arc (1412 – 1431). In Melbourne, outside the National Gallery of Victoria, there is a magnificent statue with St Joan seated on a horse to match on the other side St George. Titled simply “Joan of Arc,” it was erected in 1907, thirteen years before she was canonised. See the controversy it caused: <https://blogs.slv.vic.gov.au/our-stories/joan-of-arc/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The longest time from death to canonization goes to the Doctor of the Church, St Isidore of Seville, (560AD – 636AD), now Patron of the Internet. He produced over twenty books covering all the knowledge he could gather in one place. He called his work “etymology” (The Study of Origins). It took 900 years for him to be canonized. See: <https://catholicism.org/patron-saint-for-the-internet-isidore-of-seville.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We need to go back to about the 1200s to find the first manifestations of the ideals of Chivalry, “The Code of Warfare” and Courtesy”, “The Code of the Court.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the Knights Templar is that their stringent rule of life was, in part, written by St Bernard of Clairvaux. Their Rule outlined every aspect of their lives. The supreme virtue was “Obedience.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chivalry [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Specifically, “Horse Soldiers”, hence, the idea of earning your spurs. The Highest Order in the Catholic Church is The Knights of the Order of Jesus Christ *(Originally established by the King of Portugal, when he rebranded the Knights Templar in Portugal to save them from extinction and then the title was transferred to the Holy See; It is no longer bestowed by Popes.)* Other Orders still existing in the Catholic Church are: The Knights of the Golden Spur; The Knights of the Order of St Gregory the Great; The Knights of the Order of Pope St Sylvester; The Hospitaller Knights of St John of Jerusalem; The Knights of Malta, etc. This is not counting the enormous number of civil honors in the world that are bestowed by royalty. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The word “Gossip,” like “Gospel,” comes from the Old English good whisper and good speak, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. St Thomas Aquinas, “The Problem of Evil?” See: <https://aquinasonline.com/problem-of-evil/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Actual swear words of course certainly not acceptable. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Greek word *philophron*, which translates directly to the English “courtesy,” is used only once in the Bible. It comes from two other Greek words, *philos*, meaning “friend,” and *phren*, meaning “understanding,” “perceiving,” and “judging.” These two words, indicating “understanding a friend”, are put together to suggest the idea of courtesy. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)