***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**September 2024**

**ST FRANCIS’ STIGMATA**

***What does it mean for us?***

This year, as we celebrate the 800 years of the Stigmata of St Francis of Assisi on the mountain of La Verna, we need to be mindful of St Francis’ Admonition:

*It is a shame for us, the servants of God, that the saints have accomplished great things, and we want only to receive great glory and honour by recounting them.*

Admonition VI1

As a Franciscan family, as we celebrate this event in the life of our founder, we also need to look at the deeper spiritual implications for us. While we can point to several other Franciscan saints that have borne the stigmata, St Padre Pio and Marguerite Bays, we too need to recognise that, like St Paul, all Christians are called to carry the marks [stigmata] of Christ in their body and heart.

*May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. Forneither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything!**As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one make trouble for me, for I carry the marks [stigmata] of Jesus branded on my body. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen*.

Gal 6:14-18

The marks of Christ we carry can be physical, emotional or spiritual. As we grow in years, we get to reflect on the choices we have made and our own personal limitations. Even though we may be people of forgiveness, we can still carry the hurt and regret for our decisions or carry the pain inflicted upon us by others. The damage done can be very real. The perpetrator may be forgiven, but we often still carry the pain, defining who we are and our relationship with God and others.

The marks of Christ that we bear, our personal hurt, should lead us to have a greater compassion for others. Can we say, like St Paul, that in Christ, “the world has been crucified to me and I to the world”? Do our scars lead us to be more compassionate when we see others hurting or hitting out in pain?

Jesus does not just carry the wounds inflicted by the Roman soldiers; he carries the sins of the world. He does not strike out in anger but ends the cycle of violence through forgiveness and compassion on the cross. On the cross and celebrated in the Eucharist, Jesus graciously gives his life for others. He embraces us with his love.

St Francis of Assisi, in following the way of Christ, was led into the Passion. Francis was hurt by the failing of many of his brothers to understand and embrace his way of life, but on La Verna, he was able to forgive and accept them with compassion. He still bore the suffering of his life, for example in his blindness, but on La Verna, they were transformed and joined with Christ’s suffering.

In Baptism, we are invited to put on Christ, to join in Christ’s life. To be a Christian is to be a person who is willing to bear hurt and pain, and, like Christ, show forgiveness, not anger and retribution.

The *Guidelines2* for the *Centenario* call on the Franciscan Family not just to recount and celebrate the deeds of St Francis but to undertake a personal and communal renewal. Just as St Francis encountered Christ on La Verna, we too are called to seek, to encounter with Christ in our daily life.

The *Guidelines* ask us to look at how we bear our *stigmata*, in conforming our lives to the life of the poor and crucified Christ. They invite us to renew, like St Francis, our encounter with Christ in prayer, listening to the voice of God. We are called to recognise and embrace the presence of Christ in ourselves and in others.

They invite us, like St Francis, to show radical acceptance of others and give ourselves compassionate and selfless service. Like St Francis, they invite us to recognise that others also bear painful scars. In them we are called to recognise Christ and to the wounded in the world.

Let us not place an image of our founder as an image on the wall to be looked at and admired. Let it be a *mirror* for us, where *we learn to seek perfection* (1 Cel 90). Like Francis in his vision of the Seraph, may we realise that our faith calls us to embrace a life of *sadness and happiness, joy and sorrow* (1 Cel 94).

May we recognise Christ in the hurts we carry and in those carried by others.

May Christ’s love for us and our love for Christ transform us.

May our soul be set ablaze in Christ’s love.

Eventually, he [Francis] understood from this,

through the Lord revealing it,

that Divine Providence had shown him a vision of this sort so that

the friend of Christ might learn in advance,

that he was to be totally transformed

into the likeness of Christ Crucified,

not by the martyrdom of his flesh

but by the enkindling of his soul.

Major Legend of St Francis, XIII3

1. Armstrong, R., Helmann, RJ Wayne., Short, William J., *Francis of Assisi: The Early Documents – The Saint*. New York: New City Press, NY, 131.
2. Guidelines for Celebrating 5 Franciscan Centenaries 2023-2026. <https://ciofs.info/2022/09/17/guidelines-for-celebrating-5-franciscan-centenaries-2023-2026/>
3. Armstrong, R., Helmann, RJ Wayne., Short, William J., *Francis of Assisi: The Early Documents – The Founder*. New York: New City Press, NY, 632.

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