September 17: Stigmata of St Francis

**EMBODY THE GOSPEL**

The future of our Franciscan Family in the Church depends on our facing two challenges, which St Francis faced and conquered.

Our first challenge is that we must discover who we are called to be. We need to find the original Franciscan Family in the sources, through reading, reflecting, study and prayer, and we need to recognize our responsibility as the same Franciscan Family today. This involves us in formation, renewal and conversion.

Our second challenge is that we must show our renewed identity to the Church and to the world today. There is more to this than fostering good press relations and creating an attractive public image. If our inner reality is renewed, the outward image will look after itself, and the press will be chasing after us, not we after the press.

We are called, like St Francis and the first Franciscans, to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. All Franciscan Rules begin in this way. “The Rule and life of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of their own, and in chastity.” “The form of life of the Order of the Poor Sisters that Blessed Francis established is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity”. "The rule and life of the secular Franciscans is this: to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the centre of his life with God and people."

The Gospel is not primarily a printed text of scripture or even a set of moral rules. The Gospel is the Word of God embodied in flesh and blood. The message is the messenger. The messenger is Jesus Christ, the man who is God.

Observing the Gospel is discovering Jesus, God in flesh, in our lives and in the lives of others. Following the Gospel is conforming ourselves to the example of living that he gave us. He calls us to follow his way to life‑with‑God through death to our self‑centredness.

The Gospel happened all over again in the lives of the first Franciscans. St Francis saw the Crucified in himself since his conversion, and through his receiving the wounds of Jesus in his hands, feet and side, and in his death. He saw the same Crucified in others, especially in the most in need, the poor lepers.

Consequently, others saw Jesus in him, even the wounds of the Crucified in his flesh. They also saw the risen Lord in him as he rose above human frailty and gave a consistent response of love to them and to God. Celano pictures his resurrection in the commotion of the larks over his deathbed and in the vision of the friar who saw his soul rising to heaven.

We Franciscans today, religious and secular, have committed ourselves to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, after the example of St Francis. He left us with the challenges that he faced and conquered: to discover who we are called to be, and to show our true selves to the Church and the world. He has done his part. May the Lord teach us what we must do.