**STIGMATIZED**

Early in August 1224, Francis retired with three companions to “that rugged rock ‘twixt Tiber and Arno”, as Dante called La Verna, and there he fasted for forty days in preparation for the feast of Michaelmas.

During this retreat, the sufferings of Christ became more than ever the burden of his meditations.

On or about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (14 September) while at La Verna, perhaps better known in English as Mount Alverna, Francis had the marvelous vision of the Seraph. As a result, the visible marks of the five wounds of the Crucified appeared on his body that had long since been impressed on his heart.

On 17 September, the Franciscan Family celebrates the Stigmata of St Francis. Brother Leo was with St Francis on Mount Alverna when he received the Stigmata. Another friar, Thomas of Celano, in his *First Life of St Francis*, Chapter XIII, has left us a clear and simple account of the miracle, which is well attested as a historical fact.

He described the Saint’s right side as bearing an open wound that looked as if it had been made by a lance, while through his hands and feet were black nails of flesh; the points were bent backward. After Francis received the Stigmata, he suffered increasing pains throughout his frail body that was already broken by continual mortification. Although Francis readily forgave the weaknesses of others, he was so unsparing towards himself that he finally felt constrained to ask pardon of “Brother Ass”, as he called his body, for having treated it so harshly.

Worn out as Francis now was by eighteen years of unremitting effort, his strength gave way completely, and he was almost blind.

Francis paid a last visit to St Clare at San Damiano, and it was in a little hut of reeds, made for him in the garden there, that he composed the “Canticle of Brother Sun”. This was in September 1225, not long before he died.

In the gospel for the feast day (Lk 9:23-26), Jesus has just predicted his passion and has scolded Peter who wanted to dissuade him from it. Enemies of the cross go looking for perdition, but the cross leads to “our homeland”, with God.

Now Jesus speaks of the conditions for following him.

The verbs used, “renounce”, “take up his cross”, “follow”, “lose his life”, are shades of the same reality. Whoever wants to follow Christ must decisively give up everything that obstructs him or her to share with Jesus his destiny that culminates on the cross. However, the mention of the coming of the glorious Son of Man (Lk 9:26) shows that the last word must be reserved for the resurrection.

The true Christian must be ready for any sacrifice if we are to live like Jesus Christ and find true life in him. To accept Jesus, the “Suffering Servant”, means to follow him and to behave as he did, in the concrete situations of every day. The prospect can appear “narrow”, but it is “the hard road that leads to life” (Mt 7:14).

Jesus does not deceive those who want to become his disciples. He promises sacrifice, not easy triumphs. However, he does not disappoint us because our sacrifice will result in “the glory of the Father”, which everyone will participate in “according to his or her present actions”.

The life of St Francis after his conversion, especially his stigmatization and manner of dying, demonstrates dramatically that the imitation and following of Christ is along the way of the Cross. As St Paul tells the Philippians, the way to life is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death”.

Let us live in the hope of taking our place “in the resurrection of the dead” (Phil 3:10-11).