**MOTHERS OF CHRIST**

St Francis, in his *Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*, around 1210, wrote concerning those who do penance:

“Oh how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, because “the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them” (cf. Is 11:2) and he will make “his home and dwelling among them” (cf. Jn 14:23), and they are the sons of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45), whose works they do, and they are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50).

“We are spouses when by the Holy Spirit the faithful soul is united with our Lord Jesus Christ, we are brothers to him when we fulfil “the will of the Father who is in heaven” (Mt 12:50).

“We are mothers, when we carry him in our heart and body (cf. 1 Cor 6:20) through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to him through a holy life which must give light to others by example (cf. Mt 5:16).”

This passage from St Francis’s Exhortation is an excellent commentary on a sermon (Sermon 51) preached by Blessed Isaac of Stella, a Cistercian of Citeaux, born in 1100. The Cistercians were the appointed Visitators to the fledgling Order of Friars Minor, so it is not surprising that they influenced the spirituality of St Francis and the friars.

Francis of Assisi was born in 1182. The theology and spirituality of the Cistercians is evident when we compare St Francis’s Exhortation with Blessed Isaac’s sermon, as follows:

“The Son of God is the firstborn among many brethren. Though by nature he is the Only‑begotten Son of God, by grace he united many to himself, to be one with him. For to those who received him he gave the power of becoming sons of God.

“When therefore he was made a son of man, he made many to be sons of God. By his love and power he united many to himself, as one. In themselves, by their birth in the flesh they are many, but by their divine rebirth they are one with him.

“For Christ, Head and Body, is one, whole and unique. But this one Christ is of one God in heaven and one mother on earth. This Christ is both one son and many sons. For as Head and Body are one son and many sons, so Mary and the Church are one mother and many mothers; one virgin and many.

“Each is mother, each is virgin. Both conceive in holiness from the same Spirit. Both bring forth a child without sin for God the Father. Mary gave birth to the absolutely sinless Head for the Body. The Church gave birth, in the forgiveness of every sin, to the Body for the Head. Each is the mother of Christ, but neither without the other gives birth to the whole Christ.

“And so in the divinely inspired scriptures, what is said in general of the Virgin Mother the Church, is said individually of the Virgin Mary. And what is said in the particular case of the Virgin Mother Mary, is rightly understood of the Virgin Mother Church universally. And when mention is made of either, it is to be understood of both.

“Every faithful soul, spouse of the Word of God, mother, daughter and sister of Christ, is understood to be a virgin with her own form of fertility. This is said of the whole Church, more particularly of Mary and individually of the faithful soul by the Wisdom itself of God, the Father's Word.

“Therefore, the text continues, ‘I shall abide in the inheritance of the Lord.’ The inheritance of the Lord universally is the Church, more particularly Mary, and, individually, every faithful soul. Christ abode for nine months in the tent of Mary's womb. He abides until the consummation of the ages in the tent of the Church's faith. He will abide forever in the knowledge and love of the faithful soul.”