***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**December 2019**

**“Francis, teach us to pray.”**

(Part Two)

The prayer of adoration that Saint Francis taught the friars at Rivo Torto flows out of a profound mystical experience of Christ Crucified that only Saint Bonaventure,[[1]](#footnote-1) of all the sources, tells us happened to Saint Francis. It was just after he encountered the disappearing leper.

Saint Francis does not tell us about this mystical experience; only about the leper. He says that he dismounted from his horse and embraced the poor sick man. Yet Saint Bonaventure gives us three occasions almost together in which Saint Francis meets Christ and we must try to understand just how important the sequence of these events was in the formation of St Francis and his own understanding of his calling. Years later when Saint Francis sets about writing his Testament, he recalls only the moment with the leper. It is a crucial moment in his conversion:

1The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus, to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. 2And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. 3And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterward, I delayed a little and left the world. 4And the Lord gave me such faith in churches that I would pray with simplicity in this way and say:

5 *We adore You, Lord Jesus Christ,*

*in all Your churches*

*throughout the whole world*

*and we bless You*

*because by Your holy cross*

*You have redeemed the world.*

In meeting the leper and in being “*led among them*”, Saint Francis discovered the profound truth that deep down beyond the horrible outward appearance and stench of rotting flesh caused by the disease of leprosy as it progressed, there was a suffering human being, just like himself, his brother – Jesus Christ.

At that moment, the Holy Spirit taught Saint Francis what fraternity was all about and this is why he declares in the Testament: *“When God gave me brothers,[a fraternity] there was no one to tell me what I should do, but the Most-High himself made it clear to me that I must live the life of the Gospel.”*

The elusive leper initiated a conversion experience by a confrontation, in which Saint Francis suddenly saw the humanity of the person behind and beneath the disfiguring reality of the disease. It was this insight that prepared him for the more profound mystical experience of the Crucified Christ that changed him forever.

There can be no doubt that the Christ crucified who appeared to Saint Francis was horrific to behold. But in the transforming moment of penetrating to the humanity of the leper Saint Francis now was able to see the humanity of Christ beneath the disfigurement of the crucifixion.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here was not the beautiful wood or alabaster body of Christ upon the cross that we are used to seeing in our churches, this was the horrific reality of the passion of Christ. Saint Francis experienced both the awful fragility of the humanity of Jesus, tormented and disfigured and the incredible infinite love of the Son of God.

Let us look at Saint Bonaventure’s text: Francis, having been given the true spirit of fraternity through his meeting with the leper, began to seek out solitary places to pray and to discern the Will of God for his life:

There, with unutterable groans,

he concentrated incessantly on meriting to be heard by the Lord

after the long perseverance of his prayers.

Then one of those days, withdrawn in this way,

while he was praying

and all of his fervour was totally absorbed in God,

Christ Jesus appeared to him as fastened to a cross.

His soul melted at the sight,

and the memory of Christ’s passion

was so impressed on the innermost recesses of his heart that,

from that hour, whenever Christ’s crucifixion came to his mind,

he could scarcely contain his tears and sighs,

as he later revealed to his companions

when he was approaching the end of his life.

Saint Bonaventure leaves us in no doubt that from this moment for Saint Francis, Jesus Christ is his brother suffering because of his great love for each one of us.[[3]](#footnote-3) Saint Francis must find a way from this time on to balance between his desire for contemplation and his need for fraternity. Fraternity becomes the criteria of truth that our personal relationship and contemplation of our Lord Jesus are authentic.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Saint Bonaventure, in wishing to teach the friars how to contemplate the passion of Christ, gives us this extraordinary prayer:

O my God, good Jesus,

although I am in every way without merit and unworthy,

grant me,

who did not merit to be present at these events in the body,

that I may ponder them faithfully in my mind

and experience towards you,

my God crucified and put to death for me,

 that feeling of compassion

which your innocent mother and the penitent Magdalene

experienced at the very hour of your passion.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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1. The Major Legend, Chapter 1 No. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *“I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.”* Psalm 22:6. Christ had become so disfigured on the cross that he was like “Nehushtan” the brazen serpent that Moses lifted up on a pole. Jesus himself makes this reference John 3: 14-16. *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Christ Crucified is mirrored in any form of suffering, not just leprosy. It is the Holy Spirit that teaches us this and changes our attitude to one of compassion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We can protest all we like that we love our Lord Jesus Christ, but if we do not have compassion for the members of our fraternity then our boast of love is morning mist blown away by the rising sun. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 St Bonaventure, “The Tree of Life” as found in: Ewert Cousins. Bonaventure. Classics of Western Spirituality. Paulist Press, 1978. p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)