***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**March 2023**

**FRANCISCAN CENTENARY**

This year begins “A Multifaceted Centenary 2023 – 2026”. One belief in the biblical notion of celebrating Jubilee is to return home. Therefore, the Chosen People were expected to return to their ancestral home and observe the various directives about the Jubilee Year in the midst of their own families.

During this celebration of our multifaceted Centenaries, we are asked to go home to the sources of our Franciscan Spirituality to drink from our own wells.

We are celebrating the Rule of 1223 in this year of 2023; Christmas at Greccio of 1223 also in this year; celebrating the gift of the Stigmata of 1224 in 2024; celebrating the Canticle of the Creatures of 1225 in 2025; and celebrating the Easter of Francis of Assisi of 1226 in 2026.

In the writings and sources of Francis and Clare, we find the heart of our Franciscan Spirituality, and the motivation for the way we live our lives.

First, I want to reflect on several descriptions of Franciscan Spirituality connected with the multifaceted Centenaries that I hope you will find enriching and helpful in formulating your understanding of Franciscan Spirituality. Christ has been imitated in many ways. We, as Franciscans, are called to follow Christ in Francis’s way. The purpose of the Centenaries over these four years is to clarify what that really means and how it involves us in our daily lives.

What is a common element in these Centenaries? The Spirit of Jesus Christ gives us life through Baptism and nurtures it in our lives. The Spirit is received by faith, realized in love, and lived in hope within the Church. Through our Franciscan Profession, it is a call for the development and growth of each person. The Holy Spirit influences each person who comes to the Order to make his/her own the evangelical ideal presented by Francis and Clare. We offer to a new person coming to the Order our ideals, our Spirituality, and a better opportunity to fulfil himself/herself as a Christian, but it receives from him/her a new injection of life.

In God’s Providence, we have been called to the Franciscan way of life. Most have come to this way of life because the Holy Spirit used brothers and sisters of our Three Orders to inspire us through their manner of life and their approach to living our charism. God, who is a great respecter of persons, enables us to develop our gifts in the context of our Franciscan Communities who share a common commitment to living the Gospel in a certain way through our Rule. God does this for the good of the Church and the world in a way that does not violate our individuality or uniqueness.

St Francis wanted to live the Gospel in a radical way as a response to his experience of God’s love. Deep within his being, he experienced what it meant to be loved by God in an unconditional way. His way of life that shaped the Rule was a direct response of love to the love of God. Francis’s experience, along with how Franciscan men and women have interpreted and lived his charism through the centuries, includes you and me in 2023.

Most of us Franciscans have come to know Francis through stories, but stories are never enough. We must live the experience. Francis’s writings are the primary source of getting to know Francis and his spirit. Francis looked upon his own words as a commentary on the words of Sacred Scripture. The way of life that Francis set before us, his followers, was to follow the teaching and the footprints of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Fidelity to Christ and the Gospel was the fundamental principle of Francis’ vision of the world. In Christ, Francis found the source of virtues. Francis saw in Christ God’s infinite love in the Incarnation of the Word in becoming human and laying down his life on Calvary. Francis appropriated this coming down, this humbling, this stooping to become small, this humility and poverty, this minority, when he gradually stripped himself of all signs of power and status in order to identify with the poor.

Francis was in awe and grateful, even ecstatic, over God’s love, so poor and humble, which was made visible in the manger, the flight into Egypt, the hidden life, his gentle behaviour in the face of opposition, and his submission to a cruel and humiliating death on the Cross, even though he was the Lord of Glory.

This humble love of Christ continues to reveal itself in the Church of sinners, in the human words of Scripture, in the small Eucharistic Host, in vulnerable priests, in the poorest human beings. Francis discerned and admired Christ’s presence in all these humblest forms and consequently chose to respond to such humble love by a life of poverty and humility, stripped of every sign of status and power.

As we contemplate the Centenaries of the Rule and of Greccio, we remind ourselves that the inspiration and motivation for Francis and Clare’s poverty and humility was the poverty and humility of Jesus. Both were inspired by the Holy Spirit to assume a life of radical poverty and humility in the service of the Gospel. The words, “poverty” and “humility”, are like a resounding chorus in the writings of Francis and Clare.

The greatest pain for Francis and, I think, for us Franciscans today, is that Divine Love is not loved. Francis exhorted in his time, and he now exhorts us, to respond to this love. In the Letter to the Order, he wrote*: “Look, brothers, at the humility of God and pour out your hearts before Him! Humble yourselves, as well, that you may be exalted by Him. Therefore, hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves so that He who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally.”* (Letter Ord 28-29)

As we celebrate the Rule and Greccio this year, we are challenged to contemplate deeply the experiences of Francis and Clare and their encounter with God. They used these insights to shape our Franciscan vocation which is shaped by the Gospel. Poverty and humility were expressions of love that made Francis and Clare and the whole Franciscan Community free and more loving. May the Centenaries of the Rule and Greccio help us take an affirmative step in our Franciscan Journey.

Francis saw himself as a disciple of Jesus and wanted all his brothers and sisters to attend the School of Jesus Christ. In this school, Francis’s textbook was Sacred Scripture; he learned Christ and the humble love of Christ by pondering the Scriptures. What is required of a disciple, is total attention to the Word of God. Only if a disciple comes to know the mind of Christ, the mind of the Teacher, will he gradually *“by the truth, … grow completely into Christ*” (Eph 4,16).

What time we have left during Lent is a challenge to all of us to be more immersed in the School of Jesus Christ. May we daily learn of Christ as good students by meditating on the Word of God. God bless you all, and may the remaining time of Lent inspire us to be good students in the School of Jesus, like Francis and Clare. Peace and all good things!

Fr Tony Fox OFM Conv

National Spiritual Assistant OFS - Australia