***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**May 2024**

**HAIL, HOLY QUEEN**

The month of May, as we know, is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. One of my most treasured prayers of love to the Blessed Mother is the *Salve Regina* (Hail, Holy Queen). We know that St Francis had a deep and intimate love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. The *Salve Regina* we are so familiar with as we pray the Holy Rosary is one of the prayers that end the devotion. I did some research on this remarkable prayer and discovered it had been written almost a thousand years ago by a man who was born so deformed that he could never stand. The author, Blessed Herman, lived forty painful years in the German Benedictine Monastery of Reichenau. He was a genius who wrote a number of scientific studies, even though his speech was so impaired that he was difficult to understand. Herman eventually went blind and turned his talent to writing hymns and poems. The *Salve Regina* is his masterpiece and has been recited billions of times since his death, bringing hope and joy to those who have prayed it in dark times.

I came across this poem written by a Medical Doctor who was inspired by the life of Blessed Herman, and I share it for reflection in our fraternities this month of May. It is entitled “Herman the Cripple” by Dr William Barton Hurlbut MD.

I am least among the low,

I am weak and I am slow.

I can neither walk nor stand

Nor hold a spoon in my own hand.

Like a body bound in chain,

I am on a rack of pain;

But he is God who made me so,

That his mercy I should know.

Brothers, do not weep for me!

Christ, the Lord, has set me free.

All my sorrows he will bless.

Pain is not unhappiness.

From my window I look down

To the streets of yonder town,

Where people come and go,

Reap the harvest that they sow.

Like a field of wheat and tares,

So are lost in worldly cares

Their hearts as black as coal,

That are cripples of the soul.

Brothers, do not weep for me!

In his mercy I am free.

I can neither sow nor spin,

Yet I’m fed and clothed in him.

I have been the donkey’s tail,

Slower than a slug or snail.

You, my brothers, have been kind,

Never let me lag behind.

I have been most rich in friends,

You have been my feet and hands,

All the good that I can do

I have done because of you.

Oh, my brothers, can’t you see,

You have been as Christ for me

And in my need I know I, too,

Have become as Christ for you.

I have lived for forty years

In this wilderness of tears,

But these trials cannot compare

With the glory we will share.

I have had a voice to sing,

To rejoice in everything.

Now Love’s sweet eternal song

Breaks the darkness with the dawn.

Brothers, do not weep for me!

Christ, the Lord has set me free

Oh, my friends, remember this

Pain is not unhappiness.

There is a lot of connection with Franciscan Spirituality, even though a Benedictine composed this prayer. There is a close comparison with the *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary,* composed and written by St Francis of Assisi.

There are many Franciscan themes present in this masterpiece of prayer. Both these prayers by Herman and Francis begin with the word, “Hail”. This is a special salutation given to Mary. Any person with true faith would at once realize that Mary is called Holy. The Church for centuries had to protect and preserve the dignity of the Mother of God. Mary is the only queen who was chosen for all eternity to be the Mother of God.

Both Francis and Herman understood that Mary has this exalted dignity because she received a free gift of God in the same way that each of us received the free gift of grace as something we did not earn.

Mary uses all that she is to serve the Church. Her Queenship can be seen in two ways: understanding her closeness with the work of Christ, and her capacity of compassion towards God’s children.

Jesus, who is the Word Incarnate through Mary’s instruction, had the greatest compassion for sinners.

When we think of Mary, Herman, and Francis, each of their prayers shows how we are drawn into the heart of the Church and, in a sense, into the heart of Christ.

If we ask Mary, she will guide us to do the right thing in the presence of God. We are drawn into the heart of Christ through Mary because the heart of Mary is her devotion and love of Christ.

In the movie “Brother Son, Sister Moon” there is a beautiful scene where Francis and the Friars and Sisters are attending to cleansing the people with leprosy and there is a song sung, called “Shape in the Sky” by Donovan, who wrote all the music for the film. One of the lyrics of the song stands out for me, which I think sums up these two prayers. The words are:

“Father of all things, Mother of light, soothe and ease our human plight. Mary in mercy, Jesus in joy. Please won’t you help us win the fight?”

Mary is truly the Mother of Mercy since in giving birth to Jesus she becomes instrumental in our eternal salvation and all the remedies for all that separates us from the Truth and Goodness of God. Herman and Francis, in their prayers, show us that Mary wants us to embrace Jesus and his Gospel message, and she does this by empowering us to say ‘Yes’ to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Mary is the Mother of Mercy to our needs and sufferings, but first of all to Him who was mercy to her. God also chooses to exercise his compassion on us through the Sacraments of the Church. Since Mary is the Mother of the Church, she is also the Mother of the sacramental life of the Church.

We become more like Jesus and Mary through the Sacraments. Each of these prayers speaks the language of the heart. So, Francis and Herman show us how God listens to us, and this intensive love pours out from our hearts when we are crying.

Our spiritual journey must be marked with trust and hope that God gives us the things necessary for our salvation by his Divine Providence.

Pain, suffering, illness, rejection, failure, and death fall into a new perspective. Life begins to be seen as a difficult journey through a vale of tears.

However, we need a sense of humour, the need to laugh, because tears would be overwhelming if it were not for life’s absurdities and jokes. Those who endure pain will know how to laugh in spite of it all.

The *Salve Regina* fascinated and intrigued me as a young boy while learning how to pray the Rosary. The *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin* also fascinated and intrigued me in my formation as a young Franciscan Friar. In this sense, Francis and Herman were geniuses who have given so much to the Church and to the Franciscan Order.

During this month of May dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, let us try to appreciate what these two men have given us. In the general life of the Church as we pray the most Holy Rosary and the *Salve Regina,* and in particular, in our Franciscan vocation, to deepen our relationship with Mary through Francis’ *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. We are so fortunate as a Church to have such a rich and deep heritage in our devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. Both these prayers open our minds and hearts to wonder and are profound in what they have to offer us in our spiritual life.

The *Salve Regina* has been and will continue to be recited billions of times since Herman’s death, bringing hope and joy to those who have prayed it during times of great difficulty and challenge. The *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin,* given to us by our Founder, has been a source of inspiration to Franciscan men and women from his time to the present.

Both prayers, through the intercession of Mary, give us real hope in our struggles to overcome those things which weigh heavily upon us. Think of the many things we suffer in our lives and think of Mary’s life. She was never far from suffering in her life.

May Mary show each of us in our Franciscan calling how to be compassionate to those around us and to those who we meet in our day-to-day activities. In the *Salve Regina* and the *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary,* we speak the language of the heart, and God listens to the intense love that pours out from our hearts to those who come into our lives as Franciscans. ‘Hail holy Queen, Mother of mercy’, and ‘Hail, O Lady, Holy Queen, Mary, holy Mother of God’, pray for us! Our Holy Father St Francis, pray for us! Blessed Herman, pray for us!

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