***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**October 2024**

**ON CELEBRATING THE TRANSITUS OF ST FRANCIS**

Members of the Franciscan family internationally gather on the evening of the 3rd of October to celebrate St Francis’ embraces of Sister Death and his entrance into eternal life. There is no set form of the liturgy, but it is a meditative reflection on the events of St Francis’ life, particularly those leading up to his death in 1226. It can be told in music, ritual and prayer. In Australia because of its ecumenical nature, we often celebrate it with members of the Anglican Franciscan family.

The name “*transitus*” is Latin for passing over. Like most saints, we celebrate St Francis’ feast on the anniversary of his death, but Franciscans celebrate the occasion with a unique sense of joy. Francis died as he aimed to live, following Jesus and attempting to bring the Gospel alive.

The *Transitus* is a unique celebration and opportunity for promotion for the Secular Franciscan Order. It doesn’t require a priest to preside nor a religious brother or sister. It doesn’t require a chapel or a church.  It just requires Franciscans to come together to tell stories, pray, perhaps sing and give thanks for the life of their founder, Saint Francis of Assisi.

The organisation and celebration of the *Transitus* is one of the prime ways the Secular Franciscan Order promote the spirituality of the Franciscan family.

In Assisi, the *Transitus* is celebrated in the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels with the people standing around the small chapel of the Porziuncola. In many ways this is the civil celebration of Italy’s patron saint, and it often attended by the President and Prime Minister of Italy.

Each year a different region of Italy brings gifts of flowers or fruits in honour of St Francis to be laid at the place of his death. A woman from that region, who through her life has expressed the virtues of faith, hope and charity, in service to others, is honoured in the name of “Brother” Jacoba with the Silver Rose. It is her honour to present a grey habit, candles, almond biscuits and incense at the *Chapel of the Transitus* and on the feast day itself she presents the oil donated from her region of Italy to be burned in the lamp for the coming year before the tomb of St Francis of Assisi in the Basilica of Assisi.

In the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels the *Transitus* evening prayer is not only celebrated in October but on the evening of the 3rd day of each month.

Common sources of the *Transitus*come from the stories of St Francis of last years. They highlight stories from his life and highlight how he tried to follow Christ’s footsteps to the end. Common sources include:

1. Francis’ love of his home town and particularly the Porziuncola chapel is expressed in many of the stories of the saint:

*The Saint was then living in the palace of the bishop of Assisi, and he asked the friars to transport him quickly to Santa Maria della Porziuncola, wishing to give up his soul to God there where, as we have said, he had first clearly known the way of truth.****[i]***

1. How St Francis changed the Canticle of Creation even on his death bed, Francis sought to be a peacemaker. When the new verse of the Canticle of Creation was sung before the warring Mayor and Bishop of Assisi it led them to be reconciled.

*Praised be you, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.
Woe to those who will die in mortal sin!
Blessed are those who will find themselves in your most holy will,
for the second death will not harm them*.[ii]

1. How Francis had the Gospel read to him from the Last Supper which describes how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples.

*Then he had the book of the Gospels brought to him, asking that the passage from the Gospel according to John be read to him, which begins with the words:  Six days before the Passover, Jesus knowing that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father (Jn 12:1; 13:1). And since he would soon become dust and ashes, he wanted a sackcloth to be put on him and to be sprinkled with ashes. And while many brothers, of whom he was the father and leader, were gathered there with reverence and awaiting the blessed “passing” and the blessed end, that most holy soul was freed from the flesh, to ascend into the eternal light, and the body fell asleep in the Lord*.[iii]

1. The arrival and admittance of “Brother” Lady Jacoba into the Porziuncola bringing all the things Francis desired in preparation for his death.[iv]

The celebration of the *Transitus* may also contain flashbacks to events in St Francis of Assisi’s life as a way of touching and celebrating aspects of the Franciscan charism. This might involve his encounter with the leper and the voice of God from San Damiano Cross, events which changed the direction of his life. It may involve reading the Gospel passages that lead Francis to embrace the evangelical counsels in a new way. A fraternity could read the story of Luchesius Modestini’s and Buonadonna de’ Segni’s encounter with St Francis that changed their lives. The readings used could involve his love of God reflected in nature or how he sought to “love his enemy” by crossing the battlelines to preach to the Sultan.

The *Transitus* liturgy having no set form allows each fraternity to prayerfully tell the story of St Francis in a way relevant for their community and their time. It provides a canvas to explain why we find St Francis of Assisi an inspirational guide to lead us to follow Christ more closely. It provides an opportunity to renew our commitment to our way of life and to give thanks to God.

As we approach the 800th year anniversary of the death of St Francis of Assisi in 2026 let us begin preparation to celebrate anew why we find inspiration in the life of St Francis here in Australia. Let us bring the story of living the Gospel alive, not only in prayer but in our life. And may we share it with others!

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[i] Thomas Celano, *The Life of St Francis* , Chapter VIII “What he said and did at his blessed death.”

[ii] *The Assisi Compilation*, 84 “He makes peace between the Bishop and the Mayor of Assisi.”

[iii] Thomas Celano, *The Life of St Francis*, Chapter VIII “What he said and did at his blessed death.”

[iv] *The Assisi Compilation*, 8 “Lady Jacoba, inspired in prayer, comes from Rome to provide for his burial”; *A Mirror of Perfection* (Lemmens edition), 11.;  *The Deeds of St Francis and his Companions*, XVIII, “The death of St Francis is revealed to Lady Jacoba of Settesoli and eternal salvation is revealed to Francis.”