

“Returning to Worship in the Spirit of St. Francis”

Homily for the Solemnity of St. Francis of Assisi

St. Mary’s Cathedral, 2020

Introduction

Seven hundred and ninety-four years ago this evening, also on a Saturday night, our heavenly patron, St. Francis of Assisi, welcomed Sister Death and made his *transitus*, passing over from this life to the next. That Francis passed at the moment of the dawning of the Lord’s Day, the Sabbath, is, I believe, no coincidence.

Zeal for Our Eucharistic Lord

Francis is famous for many things, but that for which he was most zealous is often overlooked: worthy and fitting worship of the one, true God, and reverence for the Body and Blood of Christ. Francis embraced Lady Poverty in order to honor him who became poor for us and offered his life for us on the Cross, making that sacrifice present to us in the Most Holy Eucharist. For St. Francis, honoring Jesus meant giving the Holy Sacrament of the Altar the greatest possible reverence. And even in his time, such reverence was often lacking.

The story is told that he intended to visit France, where his contemporary St. Dominic was preaching, and where the Holy Eucharist was properly venerated. When that could not materialize, he was motivated to write a letter to the clergy on this topic, the first letter of his that we have. His pointed and forceful words there

expressed outrage at the “great sin and ignorance some have toward the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.” For him, everything having to do with the treatment of the Blessed Sacrament and the celebration of Mass had to be the best we could offer: worthy, clean, beautiful, precise. He writes: “Let all those who administer such most holy mysteries, especially those who administer them illicitly, consider how very dirty are the chalices, corporals, and altar linens, on which his Body and Blood are sacrificed. It is placed in many dirty places, carried about unbecomingly, and ministered to others without care.”¹

Nor was this some sort of a momentary step out of character; rather, this zeal for the Blessed Sacrament and the proper respect due to it marked his entire life, right up to the very end. In fact, in what was essentially his public farewell address, his “Letter to the Entire Order” toward the end of his life on this earth, the first priority with which he concerned himself was, again, the proper reverence due the Blessed Sacrament and the utmost care with which priests must celebrate the Mass. He urged this upon priests in no uncertain terms; in fact, he was quite harsh in his language, going so far as to say that priests who celebrate Mass unworthily are “damned and cursed.” So it is that, at the end of his life, the final message he left to his followers, the issue he found most pressing, was not obedience nor even poverty, but rather proper reverence for the Blessed Sacrament.²

¹ Augustine Thompson, “Francis of Assisi, A New Biography,” Cornell University Press (2012), Ithaca and London, p. 61.

² Thompson, pp. 119-120.

Living the Spirit of St. Francis Here and Now

This gift of St. Francis to us is very timely. We do well to ponder it as we are now returning to indoor worship. How grateful we are, but I cannot emphasize enough that we must continue to exercise responsible citizenship and follow the safety protocols of the Archdiocese when worshipping. These protocols have been proven to be effective, but, of course, only when they are followed! Thank you for the responsibility you exercise to insure everyone remains safe and healthy as we rejoice in giving honor and glory to God together.

The question we must ask ourselves now, though, is, how have we been changed during this period of Eucharistic deprivation? We must admit that in our own time, too, attitudes and behaviors toward the Blessed Sacrament have become very lax, and even disrespectful. This is not uncommon. Have we accepted this fast from the Eucharist as an opportunity God has given us to renew our devotion and love for the sacrament? Will we be willing to express that in concrete ways both large and small: our manner of dress, maintaining prayerful silence in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament including when it is reserved within the tabernacle, spending time in prayer before and after Mass and refraining from chatting with those around us? And what about our preparation to receive the Most Blessed Sacrament worthily, to be as well-disposed as we can? Frequenting the sacrament of Penance, praying throughout the week, adoring our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Perhaps our time is

not so different than that of St. Francis, as we have become inattentive to proper Sunday dress, prayerful silence, and attentiveness to receiving worthily.

Some people may think that such considerations are no longer realistic, they are not practical. Here again, we are not far away from our beloved patron saint's own time and experience. In the first general chapter of the new Order in 1217, there was already a movement to lessen the austere poverty to which Francis had committed himself. There was agitation for change on the claim that the rule of their order needed to be – yes, there it is – more practical. Francis, of course, was indignant and would have none of it. He would not compromise his response to the Lord's call to him to live the way of simplicity and humility.³

After Mass, as we continue with the Rosary Rally, I will offer a prayer of renewal of our Archdiocese's consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Renewing our consecration means to refocus our attention on *living the consecration*. For us here and now, to live the spirit of St. Francis we must begin and always persevere: in prayer, especially the daily rosary and the family rosary once a week; in adoration of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, spending at least one hour a week in his Eucharistic presence; and in acts of penance, especially Friday fasting and frequent confession.

³ Herbert J. Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater, edd, "Butler's Lives of the Saints," vol. IV, Christian Classics, Inc. (1981), Westminster, MD, p. 27.

Reform and Communion

There is one more aspect of St. Francis' life that serves as another very valuable lesson for us today. It is no secret that in Francis' time there was much corruption in the Church, especially among the clergy. Such corruption has, sadly, been no stranger to the Church all throughout her history. "Francis, rebuild my house" was the message he received from our Lord at San Damiano. Francis is perhaps most renowned as a reformer. And he was a successful reformer because he preserved communion with the Church. Some reformers attempt to do this on their own, creating movements apart from the Church or trying to recreate the Church with a new idea. That never works. The real work of reform begins within: within each soul, and within the heart of the Church.

As harsh as Francis could be in his criticism of the clergy, he always retained great reverence for priests. For him it was the highest possible calling, and he was fond of kissing the priest's hand as a gesture of respect for the hand that consecrates the Body and Blood of our Lord. He never wavered in his obedience, no matter how hard. In fact, the reason he was not able to make that trip to France was because he was ordered to stay in Assisi by the Pope's representative in Tuscany, Cardinal Hugolino of Ostia. Francis had wanted to go off to the foreign missions, but the Cardinal recognized the promise of Francis' new movement and that his leadership was indispensable to its growth. Francis was upset at this order and pleaded for a change of mind; he was adamant that he must go, but the Cardinal insisted and in the

end Francis obeyed.⁴ And the reform of the Church through the holiness of St. Francis spread through Assisi and beyond, even to our time, and this place, where St. Francis remains beloved. Beloved, but do we answer the Saint's great call?

Perhaps our times are not so different. Nor, then, should our response be different from that of St. Francis. At a time of intense and bitter infighting, of scandals, of opposition between warring factions within the Church and of divisions between bishops, priests and lay faithful, the temptation is to criticize and do things our own way. This is precisely what the devil wants. He is the great divider: divide and conquer. Instead, let us take our lead from the poor man of Assisi, and tend to the inner work: prayer, fasting, love and respect for the Blessed Sacrament, embracing and serving the poor.

Conclusion

This is what brought St. Francis to be so identified with Christ that he literally bore the brand marks of Christ's wounds in his body, the stigmata, the "marks of Jesus on my body" to which St. Paul refers in his letter to the Galatians. These are "brand" marks: Christ's "brand," the sign that one belongs to him. While few are given the rare gift of the stigmata that brings with it so much pain, we can all receive with willing heart the pain that God gives us for the sake of our fidelity to Him.

This is the real work of reform; this is what rebuilds God's house.

⁴ Thompson, p. 60.