

LENTEN REFLECTION: PASSION, SUFFERING AND JOY

We began our Lenten journey with this psalm: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” (Psalm 95:8)

Since we are on our Lenten journey, it occurred to me that reflecting on the words of passion, suffering and joy would help us to soften our hearts and deepen our relationship with Jesus, as we witness in the life of St. Francis.

In our Secular Franciscan commitment, we are shown by St. Francis himself to live the gospel “going from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel.” (*The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, article #4)

Francis could be said to have truly embraced these words as he was blessed with the stigmata of our Divine Savior Jesus Christ.

We, too, are also led to embrace Jesus in our human condition by the direction “If any one wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

Let’s follow the footsteps of St. Francis and reflect on the ways we can become the disciples that we are called to be.

PASSION: “to endure, suffer; also describes extreme compelling emotion, that we describe as a fervor, ardor and enthusiasm.” (Webster’s New World Dictionary)

We read that Francis received visions and direction that he sometimes did not fully understand. He responded with the same passion that he approached his early days of seeking his way, first as a soldier. Later, he denied himself the wealth of his family, and his future in that family. His passion was so ardent that his father requested he come before the Council in the town square perhaps thinking that he may be convinced to stop his “odd” behavior. He responded by disrobing, in order to prove totally to his father that he did not want to inherit his father’s cloth and fabric business.

Through the course of the following years he continued to follow the direction of the Gospel, but in particular, he heard in the Gospel: “Thus he heard that the Disciples of Christ must not possess neither gold nor silver nor money, nor carry wallets or purse, nor staff on the road. Nor must they have footwear, nor two tunics, but preach only the Kingdom of God and repentance.” (Matthew: 10:9) Francis’ response “This is what I want, he said, this is what I desire with all my heart!” (*The Major Legend of St. Francis by St. Bonaventure*, Chapter 3, verse 1) He would later ask his followers to live as he did following this Gospel directive.

Reflection: Dear Father Francis, there are days that my enthusiasm wanes and I do not have the passion to do the right thing and be the true disciple I really desire to be. It is then that I need to remember how you applied God’s words directly to your life, and prayed constantly always to do the will of the Father in Heaven. In this season of Lent, the 40 days of preparing for the Savior’s Crucifixion and Resurrection, instill in me the passion to do the work of Christ, for it is “in Him that we move and breathe and have our being.” (Acts 17:28)

SUFFERING: “to undergo something painful; to be afflicted with, to allow; permit; tolerate.”

Francis did not avoid anything the Lord asked of him. In *The Life and Times of Francis* (1967, ed. Enzo Orlandi), we understand that the first group of 12 who followed Francis abided with him in a “hovel” cave-like dwelling. “Francis followed the precepts of the Gospel in soul and body. Penance was his daily bread.” As time would build up the disciples, in the same time, the threats of change to the dream of Francis surfaced. This caused him immediate suffering and led him to plead his case to those who would listen to live in the simplicity, poverty and humility in

which the Order was founded, saying “. . . they are to pass through this world as pilgrims and foreigners serving the Lord in poverty and humility and begging for alms with confidence and without shame. Let poverty be your party.” (ibid., p. 54)

As Francis withdrew to his solitude which he loved, he was to have another vision and receive the stigmata. “He was marked with the crucified Christ, in his hands and feet and a scar of the wound of the lance on his side.” This was not the only physical suffering that Francis carried. It is also noted that he was afflicted with an eye disorder which he contracted on his mission to the East. Treatments for the ailment would not ease the suffering, but were in themselves tortuous. “. . . his eyes were cauterized . . . they cut all his veins from ear to the eyebrow, and perforated both his ears with no result. The saint did not utter a single complaint during this gruesome operation.” (ibid., p. 65)

Reflection: Dear Father Francis, like Jesus Christ in his Suffering and Death, you reveal to us once again, taking the Gospel to Life and Life to the Gospel. Though you showed great discipline, more over, you showed us the depth of your Love for Jesus, Jesus’ love for you revealed itself in the stigmata. Father Francis, let me hold on to the cross as you did, embracing it with all the love that this human heart can hold. Though I may falter, let me not give up or give in to the temptation to avoid suffering. Let me live out the request of Jesus “to take up my cross daily.”



JOY: “a very glad feeling; happiness; great pleasure, delight and also to be full of joy; rejoice.”

Expressing Joy in all its manifestations was so important to Francis that we read of the story to Friar Leo of the parable for **perfect joy** and it is the acceptance of even the rejection we receive, that is, acceptance without grumbling, complaint and enduring patiently that which has befallen us. Though that description of joy is not in

Webster’s Dictionary, it was the way of Francis.

Within the same definition is “also to be full of joy.” Francis expressed his joy in song and was known to sing in French as he walked along the roadways, and whatever service, or work, he expressed his loving joy with others.

Reflection: Dear Father Francis, how often I forget to smile and sing! Let me hold the image of you preaching to the creatures and birds of the air, and reminding them of the Father’s love for them. Let me see you embracing the leper and greeting him with a kiss. These moments bring to mind the great love for all that you overflowed with and so I wish to live with this in my life, in whatever the day may bring.

The life and spirit of Francis is complex, full of passion, suffering and joy. He, however, chose to leave complexity behind from the earliest moments of stripping himself naked. He was demonstrating what he knew to be his truth, not in rebellion, but out of his love for living closer to Jesus. He continually pursued his way of life as he understood the Gospel. Truly to live without material goods, and with complete dependence on God’s mercy, was as much a sacrifice for him as it is for anyone today. It was his passion for Jesus and his love that even the pain and suffering were transformed into Perfect Joy.

Closing with the Gospel verse from the Transfiguration: “**But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and do not be afraid.” And when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else but Jesus alone.”** (Matthew: 17:7-8)