

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

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Be the Joyful Face of Christ to All!

NAFRA Theme for 2015

One Possible Answer to the Mystery of Perfect Joy

This past November found me on several different days for sometimes longer than an hour sitting in front of, praying before and meditating upon the original San Damiano Cross that once spoke to St. Francis and now hangs in the Church of St. Clare, Santa Chiara, in Assisi.

This Cross did not speak to me in so many words, but it did have much to say.

One important thing is that look on Christ's face. I came to see it as a look of joy in spite of, or even because of, suffering.

Yes, the suffering is undeniable. Christ is truly hanging on the Cross, and blood is copiously flowing from the nail prints in His hands all the way down His forearms to His elbows, dripping on those below Him. Particularly bathed in blood, both from the nail print in His right hand and from the spear-piercing in His right side, stand Mary, His Mother, and John, the beloved Disciple.

Yet look at the face of the Lord! Study that face! Look at Mary's and John's faces! Nobody is crying. Nobody looks particularly sad. Jesus clearly is not dead. His eyes are wide-open, and to me He appears more joyful and triumphant than sad and defeated.

As many commentators on the San Damiano Cross have observed, this is the Christ of John's Gospel. He looks in control, so to speak, laying down his life willingly in obedience to His Father and knowing that this action and His blood will take away all sin and open the gates of Heaven.

Thus, I think Christ on the San Damiano Cross offers one possible answer to the Mystery of Perfect Joy. It is not about Him! It is not about Death. It is not about Suffering. Perfect Joy is perfectly offering yourself for the glory of God and for the salvation of our brothers and sisters. If death and suffering are the only means to that end, then so be it. Take the suffering and death and give them to God! Let go and let God!

I believe both St. Francis and St. Clare understood this message, of course directly from Christ Himself,

but perhaps indirectly through meditating on the Christ hanging on this same San Damiano Cross.

Perhaps this is what St. Francis is stressing in that famous story of "Perfect Joy" found in Chapter Eight of the Little Flowers of St. Francis (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ugolino/flowers.iii.viii.html>). Take your time and read it once again, word for word in the original, remembering Christ on the San Damiano Cross:

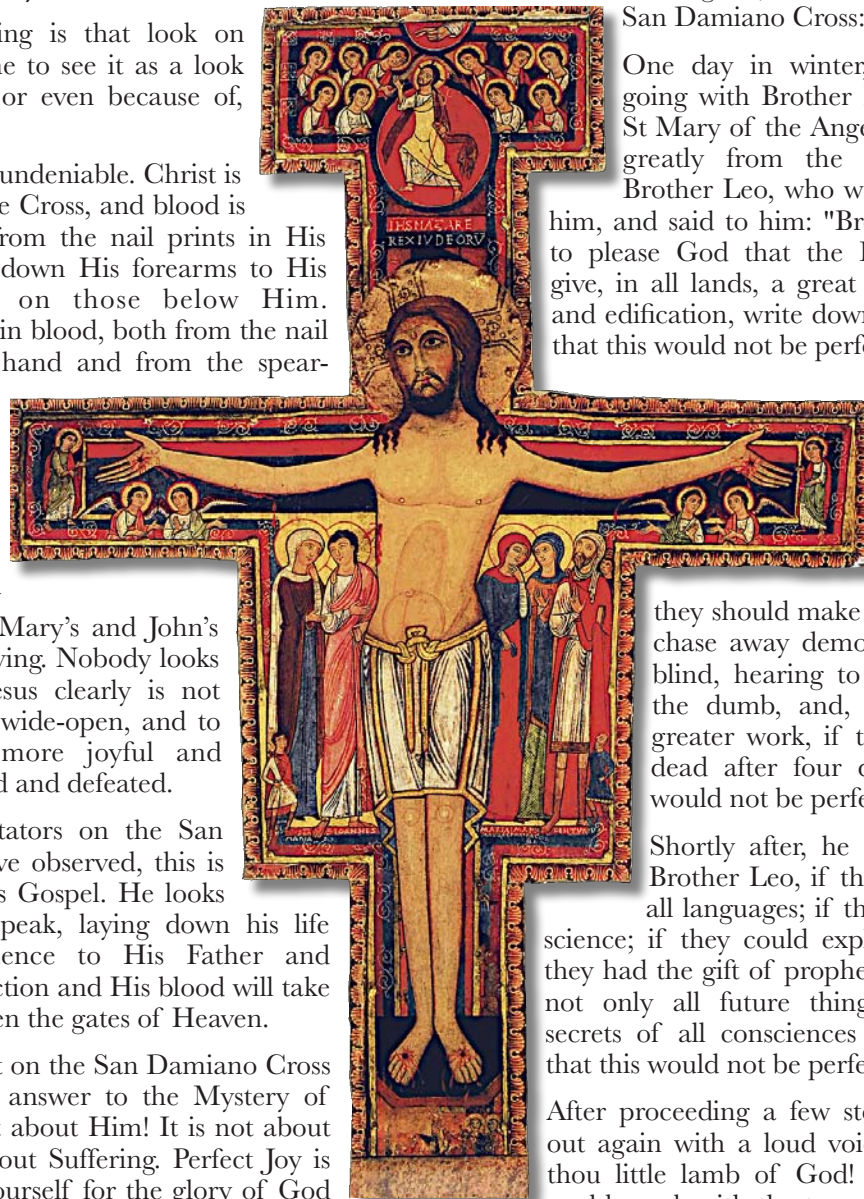
One day in winter, as St Francis was going with Brother Leo from Perugia to St Mary of the Angels, and was suffering greatly from the cold, he called to Brother Leo, who was walking on before him, and said to him: "Brother Leo, if it were to please God that the Friars Minor should give, in all lands, a great example of holiness and edification, write down, and note carefully, that this would not be perfect joy."

A little further on, St Francis called to him a second time: "O Brother Leo, if the Friars Minor were to make the lame to walk, if

they should make straight the crooked, chase away demons, give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and, what is even a far greater work, if they should raise the dead after four days, write that this would not be perfect joy."

Shortly after, he cried out again: "O Brother Leo, if the Friars Minor knew all languages; if they were versed in all science; if they could explain all Scripture; if they had the gift of prophecy, and could reveal, not only all future things, but likewise the secrets of all consciences and all souls, write that this would not be perfect joy."

After proceeding a few steps farther, he cried out again with a loud voice: "O Brother Leo, thou little lamb of God! if the Friars Minor could speak with the tongues of angels; if they could explain the course of the stars; if they knew the virtues of all plants; if all the treasures of the earth were revealed to them; if they were acquainted with the various qualities of all birds, of all fish, of all animals, of men, of trees, of stones, of roots, and of waters — write that this would not be perfect joy."



Shortly after, he cried out again: "O Brother Leo, if the Friars Minor had the gift of preaching so as to convert all infidels to the faith of Christ, write that this would not be perfect joy."

Now when this manner of discourse had lasted for the space of two miles, Brother Leo wondered much within himself; and, questioning the saint, he said: "Father, I pray thee teach me wherein is perfect joy."

St Francis answered: *"If, when we shall arrive at St Mary of the Angels, all drenched with rain and trembling with cold, all covered with mud and exhausted from hunger; if, when we knock at the convent-gate, the porter should come angrily and ask us who we are; if, after we have told him, 'We are two of the brethren', he should answer angrily, 'What ye say is not the truth; ye are but two impostors going about to deceive the world, and take away the alms of the poor; begone I say'; if then he refuse to open to us, and leave us outside, exposed to the snow and rain, suffering from cold and hunger till nightfall - then, if we accept such injustice, such cruelty and such contempt with patience, without being ruffled and without murmuring, believing with humility and charity that the porter really knows us, and that it is God who maketh him to speak thus against us, write down, O Brother Leo, that this is perfect joy.*

And if we knock again, and the porter come out in anger to drive us away with oaths and blows, as if we were vile impostors, saying, 'Begone, miserable robbers! to the hospital, for here you shall neither eat nor sleep!' — and if we accept all this with patience, with joy, and with charity, O Brother Leo, write that this indeed is perfect joy.

And if, urged by cold and hunger, we knock again, calling to the porter and entreating him with many tears to open to us and give us shelter, for the love of God, and if he come out more angry than before, exclaiming, 'These are but importunate rascals, I will deal with them as they deserve'; and taking a knotted stick, he seize us by the hood, throwing us on the ground, rolling us in the snow, and shall beat and wound us with the knots in the stick — if we bear all these injuries with patience and joy, thinking of the sufferings of our Blessed Lord, which we would share out of love for him, write, O Brother Leo, that here, finally, is perfect joy.

And now, brother, listen to the conclusion. Above all the graces and all the gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ grants to his friends, is the grace of overcoming oneself, and accepting willingly, out of love for Christ, all suffering, injury, discomfort and contempt; for in all other gifts of God we cannot glory, seeing they proceed not from ourselves but from God, according to the words of the Apostle, 'What hast thou that thou hast not received from God? and if thou hast received it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it.' But in the cross of tribulation and affliction we may glory, because, as the Apostle says again,

'I will not glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Amen."

Again, when St. Francis is able, with and only with the grace of God, to get beyond himself, to get beyond even his own humiliation and suffering, when he realizes that it's not really about him at all, nor about suffering, but rather about doing the Lord's will and imitating Christ first and foremost, before every other consideration, then and only then does he realize perfect joy.

Do you see the Mystery of Perfect Joy? First, how can anything be perfect is this vale of tears? We all suffer. Second and worse, we see people we love suffer. Third and worst of all, it seems there is so little we can do to relieve the suffering in the world, in those we love, in our own lives. How can we find joy in so much suffering? Again, how can one speak of anything perfect in this life?

Well, that look on Christ's face on the San Damiano Cross, that moral to St. Francis's story on perfect joy, suggest to me that only when we can look beyond our own lives, our own self-importance, even our own suffering and death, and see God's will, God's plan, God's complete Love and Mercy, only then can we realize that perfect joy.

Yes, there will be suffering, even death, but if we live in the Lord, suffering and even death are but steps. Suffering with the Lord is a cause for joy, not sorrow. With the Lord's Cross, there is always the Lord's Resurrection, and above Christ's head on the San Damiano Cross, you can see Him rising, ascending, joyfully, confidently, into Glory.

This also seems to be the moral of St. Francis's story. Most importantly, it's not about St. Francis! It's about St. Francis surrendering his will to the Lord's will, putting even his own humiliation and suffering into the Lord's humiliation and suffering. When he can do that, again, with and only with God's great grace, then he can achieve Perfect Joy.

Let us pray. God, why do we get so caught up in the sin of Adam and Eve, trying to be You, trying to make our own rules and make ourselves the center of creation? Help us, Lord, to be ourselves, not You. Help us to realize that we don't need to be and cannot be You. Help us to accept our small parts in Your plan of salvation. Help us to do what we can do, to say what we can say, to pray what we can pray for your Glory and for the salvation of our sisters and brothers AND LET YOU BE GOD. We don't need to be Pope; we don't need to be God. Let Pope Francis be Pope. Let You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be God, and help us do what we can. In doing what we can, what we should, in accord with Your Will, even if it involves humiliation, suffering and death, let us realize that Mystery of Perfect Joy. We pray in Jesus' name.