

The Mass and the Eucharist in the spirituality of St Francis
(from the work A Basic Course in Franciscanism by Fidel Aizpurua OFM Cap)

Although devotion to the Mass and the Eucharist had fallen off grievously in Francis's day, he saw that the best way for him and his brothers to live the Gospel life was to assist at Mass and receive the Eucharist as often and as devoutly as possible. In the Mass, Francis saw more clearly the love which Christ had shown by sacrificing Himself on the cross for our salvation. This insight gave his life new meaning and led him to follow the same path as Christ, his crucified Lord.

We can well say that the Mass and the Eucharist were Francis's starting points in the sense that it was there that he really learned how to live the Gospel life, or, to put it another way, it was in the Mass and the Eucharist that he first learned how to live the faith.

From the human point of view, the Mass and the Eucharist were in a disastrous state at the time of Francis. To get more stipends, some priest used to say Mass several times a day, but they were careful to consume the consecrated bread and wine at only one of the Masses, thinking to evade in this way the Church law against celebrating more than one Mass a day. Other priests let their sacristies go to rack and ruin, and many of the churches looked more like taverns. The faithful almost never went to communion and some of them believed that adoring the consecrated host was better than receiving it, so they went to 'see' the consecration in the Mass instead of receiving communion. Worst of all there were some priests who celebrated Mass for the people while leading immoral lives and even the upper ranks of the clergy, the bishops, were not much better in this regard.

It is not surprising then that devout Catholics began to feel that if they could not find a good priest, one who was living up to his obligations, they had the right to 'ordain' a conscientious layman to minister to them. The Cathari went even further and said that adoring the Eucharist was sheer idolatry because it meant worshiping bread and wine which were material things whereas they held that God could not be present in any form of matter but only in spiritual things. The ones who suffered most from this state of affairs were the ordinary faithful who were attending Mass less and less frequently and who understood little about the meaning of the Mass which was said in Latin and which even the priests themselves did not value very highly.

Francis and the Eucharist

Francis revered the Mass and the Eucharist and received communion as often as he could. In fact, all the great moments of his life were connected with the Mass and the Eucharist—his conversion(1Cel 84), etc. He received communion frequently at a time when this was not encouraged (2 Cel 201) and when Mass in most churches was said on Sunday only. Moreover he preferred to receive under both species, a practice to which he often refers(e.g. EpOrd 6)

In addition he had the utmost reverence for priests and priesthood. With the Church he believed that only a priest could celebrate Mass and a priest's power to do so did not depend on his personal morality. Francis made this clear in his Testament (Test 8-11) and elsewhere in his writings (EpOrd 30-33).He himself was a deacon and probably did not go on to be a priest because then he would have ceased to be one of the *minores*, the lower classes, and would have become one of the *maiores*, the powerful upper classes....

He never tired of urging his brothers to say Mass and receive the Eucharist with all due reverence (EpOrd 14-16), and he constantly instructed them on the Eucharist and the Mass. We can see this demonstrated in a series of 'Eucharistic Letters' (Ep Rect, EpCler, Ep Ord, 1&2 Cust) which he wrote in the campaign for eucharistic renewal which Honorius III had called for in his Bull Sane con olim in 1219. In one of these letters he wrote: "I...humbly beg the clergy to revere above everything else the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ....The chalices..., appointments of the altar and everything which pertains to the sacrifice must be of precious metal. And if the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord is very poorly reserved in any place, it should be placed in a precious location under lock and key...and carried about with great reverence and administered to others with discretion.(1EpCust 2-4)

Francis believed that he was helping to 'repair' the Church by faithfully following the Pope's directions. In the Legend of Perugia (LP 18) we read how careful he was to do the 'Franciscan' work of sweeping and cleaning churches.

The Eucharist in Francis' spiritual life

Francis wished to base his Gospel life and that of his brothers and 'all the faithful'(2EpFid) on the Mass and the Eucharist. For him the Eucharist consisted not only of the species of bread and wine, but also of the holy words that consecrated them(EpCler 1f). Everything is important in the sacramental mystery – the bread, the wine, and the Lord's words said in union with the faith of Holy Church.

It is in the Mass that we can best learn the meaning of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ and realize how great our debt is to Him for redeeming us on the cross. It is in the Mass that we see most clearly what the Gospels mean when they teach us that Christ died for us.

What we learn from the Mass and the Eucharist is not something alien to us or apart from us. Instead we begin to see that we too must bear the cross with Christ. The Mass is the most profound way to get to know Christ (2EpFid 2-14) . Francis chose the life of poverty in response to the love that Christ showed for us by the poverty of the cross. So it was that Francis came to realize that his life had a meaning from Christ's redeeming death. The fact that Christ sacrificed Himself to save us from eternal death gives meaning to our lives.

Francis then felt that it was his responsibility to pass on to others the knowledge he had received from God and to tell them that God has made Himself accessible to them by sending His Son to die on the cross for them, as Francis himself learned from the Mass and the Eucharist (2EpFid 1). And those who have learned the lesson of the cross in the Mass and the Eucharist have no other option but to 'do penance'(2EpFid 15-18). In this way Christ's Redemption becomes tangible and personal to every believer.

We know all this only because we believe in the Church which teaches it to us. The Friar Minor celebrates the Mass in the manner and with the intention prescribed by the Church, and the Church in turn guarantees the truth of his discovery of what the cross of Christ means in his life.

Francis learned the Gospel life in the Mass and the Eucharist because it was there that he learned the secret of Christ's cross. In the same way, we can be Franciscans only by learning from and living the Mass and the Eucharist for this was the sure path that Francis followed and it must be ours too

SOME NEWS FROM THE MONASTERIES

MEXICO

On May 19 four sisters from the community of San Luis Potosi left to reinforce the community of the Monastery of Nava del Rey Spain

On May 27 seven sisters from the monastery of Zamora, Michoacan left to found a new monastery in Brownsville, Texas (USA) at the invitation of the bishop of that diocese, Raymond Peña.

In August six sisters from the monastery of Silao, Guanajuato traveled to France to help the community of Aix in Provence which is an aging community

The sisters of Leon are working on finalizing the project to go to Umzumbe, South Africa to strengthen the community there. The exact date for leaving has not been established but the sisters will travel to the United States for one month to practice their English before leaving for South Africa. The other monastery of Swelendam in South Africa is flourishing after the arrival of the Mexican sisters there a few years ago.

As part of the celebration of the 750th anniversary of the death of St Clare the relics of St Clare will be visiting several monasteries in Mexico from December 18, 2003 until February 7, 2004.

On September 2 the Capuchin nuns Sacramentarias held their election for a new Mother President of the Federation. She is Mother Dulce Maria Sanchez Cruz and will be in office for the next three years according to the statutes of the federation.

MOZAMBIQUE

After some months of preparation four sisters from Mexico and two native sisters from Mozambique will embark to establish a new foundation in that country at the end of this year. The sisters from Mexico are from Lago Guadalupe

PHILIPPINES

The fourth monastery in the Philippines has been established in Davao. A group of ten sisters from the Laoag, Philippines monastery are the first group to establish the new community there .

ITALY

At the meeting of the Federation of Italy in September of 2003 the new Mother President was elected in the person of Chiara Francesca Barbera of the community of Palermo, Sicily replacing Mother Antonella Pirugini who had occupied the office for the past twelve years.

PROFESSIONS

- Perpetual - H Ma. Paulina Chicoma Ibañez Lima Peru
H. Belen Cardona de Loera Guadalupe, Zacatecas
Sr. Maria di Gesu Eucaristica Roma
Sr Maria Rosa del Volto Santo Flores da Cunha Brasil
Sr M Paola del Preziosissimo Sangue Flores da Cunha Brasil
Sr Chiara Elena del Cuore di Gesu Naples Italy
Sor Maria Rosa Pinto Spain
Sor Ma Francesca Pinto Spain
Sor Ms Clara Pinto Spain
H. Mercy de Nava del Rey Valladolid Spain
H. Gloria de la Natividad Leon México
H Clara Ines Vazquez Vargas Leon México
H. Ma. Del Rosario Alameda Morales Tepojaco México
H. Graciela Estrada Santillano Durango México
H. Ma Goretti Segoviano Estrada Durango Mexico
- Temporary –Sr Maria Maddelena del Amore Incarnato Mercatello sul Metauro Italy
H Maria de Jesus de la Divina Misericordia Pucon Chile
Sr Maria Pia di Gesu Misericordioso Palermo Sicily
Sr Maria Cristina dell’Immacolata Palermo Sicily
Sr Maria Maddelena del SS.mo Crocifisso Palermo Sicily
H. Angelica de Maria Niña Carvajal Nuevo Casas Grandes México
H. Maria Irma de la Santa Faz Rivera Ramirez Nuevo Casas Grandes México
H. Patricia Lopez Heredia Vera Cruz México
H. Laura Caldera Escareño Guadalupe Mexico
H. Maria Lucia Tapia Mohonera Oaxaca Mexico
H. Maria Leticia Solis Zamora Mexico

MAY THEY REST IN PEACE

- Suor Maria Vittoria Salvaja 74 years Genoa Italy
Sor Rosario Berasain 92 years Tudela Spain
Sor Maria Jesus Blanco 81 years Pinto Spain
Hermana Maria Teresa Zabala 77 years Nava del Rey Spain
Hermana Cristina Cuadros Rosales 78 years Granada Spain
Sor Magdalena Colom Mateu 86 years Palma de Mallorca Spain
Sor Maria Clara Muset 93 years Barcelona Spain
Sor Maria del Carmen Perez Muñoz 75 years Veracruz México
Hermana Maria Beatriz 73 years Cadereyta México
Hermana Maria Josefa Farias Valencia 85 years Uruapan México
Hermana Maria Ines Gutierrez Raimirez 78 years Chihuahua México
Suor Maria Agata del Divin Pargoletto 93 years Moncalieri Italy
Suor Maria Concetta del Santissimi Crocifisso 90 years Florence Italy
Suor Maria Francesca del Divino Amore 96 years Garbatella (Rome) Italy
Suor Emanuela del Volto Santo 89 years Alessano Italy

December 2003-11-24

Dear Sisters,

It is hard to believe that we have come to the end of another year. It is a time to reflect on what we have done and what we have left undone these past months. The end of the year is sometimes a moment for nostalgia and certainly a moment for making new resolutions.

Some years ago I was taking a course on the Sacraments of Healing and when we were studying the Sacrament of reconciliation the professor took the class to a synagogue where the rabbi gave us a lecture on the Jewish concept of sin. He said that for the Jewish people the 'greatest' sin was not to remember their past and God's intervention in their history. Almost all of the Jewish holidays are days of commemoration of some past event. The Passover supper begins, for example, with the youngest male family member asking his father why this night is different from all other nights. Then the father begins to recount the Passover of the Jews from the land of Egypt.

We also celebrate many holidays of remembrance: birthdays and anniversaries; civil holidays that recall great battles and the birth of a nation; Christmas and Easter which recall the greatest events in our history etc etc.

But there is one celebration that is more than just remembering. It is an act that makes ever present the moment of our salvation. The Mass is not just a memorial service or a type of theater recalling what Christ did two thousand years ago. It is the unique and continual participation in the sacrifice of Calvary that will continue to the end of time. When Christ told us "Do this in memory of me," He meant more than just a celebration or anniversary of an event. He meant it as the means of His continuing with us really and truly until the end of the world.

In his newest encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul says:

“The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church. In a variety of ways she joyfully experiences the constant fulfillment of the promise: 'Lo I am with you always to the close of the age,' (Mt 28:20), but in the Holy Eucharist, through the changing of the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity.” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 1)

The Constitutions of the Capuchin Poor Clares also say: “We should fully take part each day consciously, devoutly, and actively in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, in which the mystery of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is celebrated until He comes again.”(Const. 66)

And so as we begin another year of grace we are confident that the Lord Jesus who has called us to live this life of consecration will ever be with us because of the Mass and the Eucharist.

Fraternally,

General Assistant