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February 2024

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi,

May the Most high, glorious Lord, enlighten the darkness of your hearts and give you a correct faith, a certain hope, a perfect charity, sense, and knowledge, so that you may carry out His holy and true command and may the Lord grant you His peace, as we enter the Mystery of the Cross of Christ that our Father St. Francis bore in his heart and on his body.

The Universality of the Cross cannot be denied. Besides the Cross of Jesus, there is the cross each one of us has to bear. Seen in the light of Jesus' words, the Mystery of the Cross, accepted in faith, can help us have a perspective on life that encourages us to confidently accept the challenge to change. Unless we die to ourselves, we can never hope to really live. We want to live, and live fully, but there is something that holds us back from making strides that forge ahead.

An expression often used by Jesus in the Gospels, repeated by Pope St. John Paul II innumerable times, and taken up by his successor Pope Benedict XVI is: ***Do not be afraid***. We need to remember these words and take them to heart. Fear seems to be the universal common denominator that seeks to control the lives of so many.

The ultimate fear for most people is the fear of death. There are also the 'minor-yet-no-less crippling' fears: fear of uselessness, fear of failure, fear of being forgotten, fear of being a 'no one'. These, and many others, are all valid for those who have not yet been able to believe fully and take Jesus at His word. Among these are many Catholic Christians whose faith has been reduced to mere practices that no longer help them find a deeper meaning to life. Even the wonderful gift of the Eucharist becomes for many just 'another pious devotional tool' rather than the Real empowering Presence of the God-among-and-within-us. How tragic it would be had there not been a way out of this devastating situation that many camouflage so well.

The Church offers us a wonderful opportunity each year to review, reflect and renew our lives: Lent. We are called to deepen our relationship with God, Who in turn strengthens and enables us to live our lives more fully. Lent is a time for us to look at ourselves and the world in a powerful light - the Light of the Cross. This is not just any cross, but the Cross of Christ. The Drama of the Cross of Jesus is the Greatest Act of Love humanity could ever imagine. This Act of Love begun in the silence of the womb of Mary was made visible with the wooden Manger/Crib at Bethlehem. St Francis of Assisi immortalized for the eyes of the faithful the event of Bethlehem at Greccio in Italy. The Franciscan Family celebrated the 800th anniversary of the Greccio Nativity scene setup by St. Francis of Assisi.

From the simplicity of Bethlehem, the "Drama of the Cross" reached its climax on the wooden Cross of Calvary. The Crib embraced the Infant for all to see in wonder and joy, and the Cross on Golgotha lifted up the Man for all to approach with adoring reverence and gratitude. The Crib offered the Infant for all to embrace; the Cross extended the arms of the Man and opened His heart

for all to be embraced and enter into the Love of the Father. ***Do not be afraid***. This loving reminder, “Do Not Be Afraid”, is repeated over 300 times in Sacred Scripture. Why be afraid, what do we fear, if He shares life with each one of us at every moment?

Since it was first hoisted into place on the *Hill of the Skull*, the Cross has accentuated the *Sign of Contradiction* first seen at Bethlehem in the Infant and then throughout Judah/Israel two thousand years ago, during the ministry of the Man. Myriads of peoples have heard of and responded to the Cross of Christ. Some have accepted and proclaimed the message. Others have rejected and sought to eliminate its impact on the world in a variety of ways. There are the open acts of physical violence that have given the Church Her holy martyrs, outstanding witnesses of uncompromising faith and love. There are the subtle allurements and enticements that seek to mislead souls from the values and principles of our faith, thus jeopardizing the very core of the person and the strength of the believing community. This is the more devious and devastating of the two. ***Do not be afraid***. Jesus has conquered the world.

The Cross is the Truth to our questions. The Cross offers balance to our confusion. The Cross indicates the sure Way to follow. The Cross reminds us that the One Solitary Life that accepted and surrendered to the Cross in death, is the greatest image of the only Life that really matters, no matter the cost. The ***Universality of the Cross*** makes it the determining Instrument of Success and Fulfillment for all who lovingly and confidently accept the challenge to *take up your cross and follow in My footsteps* (cfr. Matthew 16: 24-26).

Following Greccio’s celebration, we prepare to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the reception of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi on Mount La Verna. At the mount of Greccio and the Crib of Jesus we celebrate the humility of God’s birth as a human. In this Year of the 800th anniversary of the Stigmata of St. Francis, we are transported in the spirit to the “sublimity” of God’s exaltation in His sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary, and the gift imprinted on the body of our Seraphic Father. The journey of the Christian is always *From the Crib to the Cross*...and beyond! Jesus is born to die that we may be re-born to live. Jesus becomes mortal and shares time with humanity so that we may become immortal and co-eternal with Christ in His eternity.

What do we see and hear from the Cross? From the Cross of Jesus we see the anguish of the sick, the tears of the frustrated. We hear the laments of those struggling as they climb the winding road of their Golgotha. From the Cross of Jesus we see the nations of the ‘fourth’ world condemned to die of hunger, as a large crowd carries its insignia of concern for the fundamental rights of all human beings, but keeps silent when faced with the ultimate challenge to act. From the Cross of Jesus can be seen nations considered marginal and destined for extinction by the great powers of the world whose only concern is their own economic growth at the expense of others nations, most of whom are either patronized or considered ‘expendable’. From the heights of the Cross of Jesus, can be seen the newly-forming nations still struggling to be ‘free’, those massacred in the various hot-beds of war throughout the world. From the Cross of Christ we recognize the stranger in search of a homeland, those longing to make a difference in a troubled world, the segregated and oppressed of society. ***Do not be afraid, for I am with you*** (Isaiah 41: 10), ***in this sign*** (of the Cross) ***you will conquer*** (These are words of the vision to the Emperor Constantine at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, a battle that led to the end of the persecution of Christians and freedom for the Christian Church.)

Please don't think that I am talking politics. Some may even comment that I should 'stick to spiritual things'. Our Faith must be concretized. Unless we make our faith visible in our lives, we are nothing more than plastic images, not to say 'hypocrites'. Our faith is not a *Policy*, it is a *Person*. Faith must be concretized if it is to go beyond mere 'lip service'. Until our faith can be translated into an awareness of those 'crucified' around us and in the world, we are walking with our eyes closed and are in danger of falling ourselves into the very ditches we refuse to acknowledge.

It is true that every Christian must accept his/her own cross, but it is also true that each one of us must seek to unfasten those who have been hung on the cross. One cross is our challenge in life; another is the cross that is placed upon us by others. In both cases, however, the cross becomes the challenge that says: ***Do not be afraid***. Now is the time for us to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: *This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own* (Isaiah 58: 6).

We have a tendency to speak about "spirituality" and we are enthused when we hear of extraordinary mystical experiences. Nevertheless, we hesitate or even refuse to come to the aide of our brother or sister who groans under the weight of their personal cross. Even Jesus was given a Simon of Cyrene. It is Christ Who suffers in them! Not only must we seek to alleviate their burdens, but we must also begin to identify those who construct the crosses for others to bear, and attempt to eradicate their hurtful influence in the life of others. We don't have to go far. The opportunities to be Christ to others are all around us. Open your eyes and your heart! ***Do not be afraid*** at what you see and whom you invite into your love. It might just be the Lord knocking who waits for us to *Open the Door to Christ*. What a tragedy if just that one time we were busy, tired, annoyed, and we failed to let Him into our "disarmed heart". The Cross disarmed Jesus totally And we?

Faithfulness to the Cross of Jesus demands much from us. It expects us to see in the Cross the instrument of our salvation. It presumes we recognize the Cross as a sign that redemption is near. It urges us to lift our hands and not just our hearts to help make a burden bearable if we cannot eliminate it. It is the only way - the Way of the Cross - that leads us with and through Jesus, to a more complete life. Why? Because the Way of the Cross does not lead to death, but to a total commitment and surrender to the One Who Alone is the Source of New Life for ourselves and all with whom we share the journey to the Hill of Redemption. In so many areas of the world new hope begins to dawn because of those who have met Christ on the way and have heeded His words: ***Do not be afraid***. For the Franciscan it could sound "do not be afraid to embrace the leper", "do not be afraid to accept the Cross", "do not be afraid to die...to yourself"

The certitude of a soul filled with a faith that lets go of itself to trust in the Lord, can be seen in the following words. The words are taken from correspondence between a spiritual director and the directee. *I only know one thing for certain, that the Lord will never fall short of his promises. ***Do not fear***, I will make you suffer, but I will also give you the strength to suffer', Jesus tells me continually. 'I want your soul to be purified and tried by a daily hidden martyrdom; do not be frightened if I allow the devil to torment you, the world to disgust you and your nearest and dearest to afflict you, for nothing will prevail against those who groan beneath the Cross for love of me and whom I have taken care to protect. Beneath the Cross one learns to love and I do not grant this to everyone, but only to those souls who are dearest to me'. May the same Cross always be our bed of rest, our school of perfection, our beloved heritage. The surest sign of love is the*

capacity to suffer for the beloved. We must keep our eyes fixed on the noble, majestic and holy company of those who follow Jesus to Golgotha. Each one of them without exception bears the profession of the true faith on his countenance, self-denial in his heart, and the cross on his shoulders.

The Cross is our insignia, our sign of victory, our pledge of unity with the Master, our remedy for the ills of humanity, our hope for eternity, our certitude of God's inimitable and eternal Love for us in Jesus.

When St. Francis had disrobed of his earthly clothes and was given the poor tunic to wear, the first thing he did, we are told, was trace a cross on it. He was to bear the cross as his daily garment. The cross he wore was the dignity he shared with Jesus Himself. The cross he wore on his tunic, the cross who spoke to him at San Damiano, was the cross imprinted spiritually on his heart until it was emblazoned on his body for all to see on Mount La Verna.

Mindful of the vision of the Prophet Ezeckiel telling the angel to sign the elect with the sign of the "tau", Francis made the "tau" his signature. It became the "Franciscan Cross". Just as the "tau" is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, so the Franciscans signed with the "tau" of the elect, herald the end of an age that introduces the Cross, the "new tau", as the sign of the beginning of a new age. The sign of the cross and the body of the one who would be physically imprinted with its marks heralded a new age when *hearts grown cold were once again enkindled with the fire of God's love* (loose translation of the old prayer for the Mass of the Stigmata) to proclaim a world of peace and blessings for all.

The holy season of Lent is upon us. We search for more ways to make the Cross of Jesus a more present and reflective reminder of the meaning of the Mystery of the Cross of Christ in our life, not just in our liturgical and devotional practices, but also more deeply in our own personal lives. The Cross must be a sign of encouragement as we seek ways of assisting others who are burdened with their crosses.

We envision and even invent devotional practices each Lent to "deepen our prayer life". The desire is to celebrate more intensely the penitential spirit of Lent. There is however a practice many pray about sincerely with their lips, but not so much with the full affirmation of their hearts. Why? because *The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak*. It may seem simplistic. Do we ever realize that what God wants is us, our hearts, our wills? God asks and waits for one thing, and we beat around the bush without getting to the heart of it all. How many have prayed and maybe still pray the famous prayer of St. Alphonsus Liguori after each station of the Cross: *Grant that I may love you always, then do with me as you will*. We mean the words "devotionally and sincerely". Nevertheless, in the concrete, we hesitate to desire to be convinced and determined to accept whatever Cross God may permit. Yet, that would be the perfect prayer and devotion since it is not the one I want but the one the Father Himself is offering to me. Even Jesus prayed: *Father if it is possible let this cross pass from me*. (So we can feel hesitant) *Yet not my will but Yours be done* (Yet realizing it's God Who wills, isn't acceptance a "sure thing"?). Jesus understood the Father's answer. His anguish of what awaited Him made Him sweat blood. Nonetheless, trusting in the Father's Will, He faced the Cross with loving surrender. And we are redeemed.

The Father never asks His children to do anything beyond their strength. The greatest penitential practice for Lent is living each moment with loving surrender to the Father's Will. Thus, we open our hearts to others, assisting them in their needs. Prayers and devotional practices are necessary to keep our hearts and minds focused. We remember our dignity as Christians and the spiritual

treasury of our Catholic Faith. In a simpler and more serene manner we are enabled to advance swiftly and effectively on our Lenten journey. We need not try to figure out what to do. All we have to do is be willingly, trustingly, and cheerfully available at all times in every way to God's Will. The Cross is always a sure thing for a Christian. When more than during Lent?

Have a blessed and spiritually fruitful beginning to Lent. Let go of your hesitancy. Go beyond yourself to others. Take up the daily challenge of your cross. Look beyond the difficulties of the moment. Trust in the One Who gave Himself for us all. ***Do not be afraid*** to deepen your relationship with God (Prayer), to distance yourself from all you allow to possess you (Penance), and to open your heart and surrender to the Christ Who suffers in others and awaits your love (Almsgiving). These three elements help make for a fruitful Lent. Have confidence and courage. ***Do not be afraid!***

In this Year of the Stigmata of St. Francis, let us keep alive in our hearts the message God offers us through the writings of St. Paul as we celebrate the Stigmata of Christ imprinted on the body of our Seraphic Father: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me. Therefore let no one trouble me for I bear the brandmarks of Jesus in my body.*

May God bless you; Our Lady and good St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and our Seraphic Father St. Francis and our Mother St. Clare of Assisi watch over each one of you and your loved ones with loving care.

Peace and Blessings
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