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Dear Sisters and Brothers in St. Francis

The Lord give you His peace

Everything is a grace; everything is a gift. Everything that we are, have, experience; everything that we like, dislike, enjoy or not, everything, seen with the “yes” of faith, is a grace! God’s direct or indirect gifts help us grow through life and become the saints we were created to be. All we have to do is accept the gift and use it to the best of our abilities.

Luke, the evangelist, after the story of the finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple and His return with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth, writes that *Jesus grew in wisdom, age, and grace before God and men* (Luke 2, 52). Jesus is born, grows up, and fulfills his human and spiritual formation at a specific moment in time and in a determined place. He is the eternal God Who limits Himself to a historical and physical presence among His own creatures. Though He knows all things, our God, in the Incarnate Person of Jesus the Christ, “experiences” what He knows, as we are told *in all things but sin* (Hebrews 4: 15).

This is what takes place in the life of all people. It was an essential part even of the lives of the ‘officially canonized’ saints. No one is born a saint but he/she has a lifetime to become one. Saints are creatures whose human nature is not deformed by grace but elevated by it. It strengthens and perfects us day-by-day when we trust and cooperate with this divine gift. God’s Grace and graces are offered us that we might become what we were created to be; that we might recover what was lost when our First Parents decided to follow their own will rather than that of our God Father and Creator.

The saint is that person who has taken the *narrow road* (Matthew 7: 13-14) and allows the action of grace to transform his/her soul and thus re-creates the person *in the image and likeness of God* (Genesis 1: 26-27). We may have heard the saying, *What I am is God’s gift to me. What I become is my gift to God...and...God and I together can do the impossible*. Without God I can do nothing of true worth.

If it is true that supernatural grace perfects and does not destroy nature, then it is vital that our lives be rooted in the working of grace and the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Before any of us can ever hope to stand out as an example of virtue, it is necessary to become that *perfect person come to full stature in Christ* (Ephesians 4: 13) in the ordinary daily matters of living.

Health, culture, character, environment all contribute to the “saint becoming process”. God’s grace does not destroy a person’s right and ability to act on his/her own initiative. It does not take away free will. God would never reduce us to mere robots. Grace respects the character and the will of each and every individual. We are the ones who accept or reject the challenge to allow the love God has for us to take hold of our lives. We are the ones who decide to live in *holy fear* of offending God. And this ‘fear’ is not the uncontrolled anxiety of being condemned by an Eternal Just Judge. It is the

enlightened and prudent 'fear' of gratefully knowing ourselves as God's creation and of what we are capable in the light of our freedom as a child of God. It is a 'fear' of wounding the love of a compassionate and loving God Who brought us into being, died for us, and calls us to an ever more intimate relationship with Him in mystery. This 'fear' of ourselves and trust in Him helps us to recognize the daily miracles of grace around us, as we yearn for that time when we will see Him in the reality of the Eternal Life promised His faithful children.

An Italian psychologist, speaking of the humanity of the saints, wrote: *The soul of the saints is not like the Dead Sea whose waters are never agitated by so much as a breeze, and in which there is no sign of life. The soul of the saint resembles rather the Sea of Genesareth (Sea of Galilee) that has terrible storms and can be calmed only by the hand of the Master. Saints had their ups and downs, delusions and difficulties, weaknesses and temptations. They also had their faults, like those that Saint Alphonsus Liguori speaks of when he says that he would consider himself a happy man if he could be freed from these faults a quarter of an hour before dying.* These are the words of a saint known for his joyfulness even when he was being persecuted and for his understanding in patience of human weakness. Fear is a lack of faith and even more so a lack of love.

We must allow ourselves to be directed and molded by the action of God's grace. The obstacles that we may encounter on our way or those we ourselves create must be eliminated. Through our personal commitment, the task of overcoming our own weaknesses takes shape and progresses. We begin to see how our life is slowly lifted up to greater heights, spiritually first and foremost, and then, as a wonderful effect, our very soul is lifted up naturally, intellectually, psychologically, as our mind and heart are more in harmony with God and His holy Will.

We strive to regain innocence of spirit and life. Encouragingly we remember that not all the saints were as innocent as we are told was Saint Aloysius Gonzaga. Just consider some: St. Mary Magdalen (*from whom seven demons were expelled*), St. Mary of Egypt (*whose notoriety as a woman of loose morals was proverbial in her area of the world*), St. Margaret of Cortona (*who was a kept woman*), St. Paul (*who was rather violent*), St. Augustine (*whose Confessions speak of numerous sins and his own prayer: "Lord, make me chaste, just not yet", tells us a great deal.*), St. Francis Borgia (*about whom the philosopher Leibnitz remarked regarding the ingenious method Francis used to overcome his exaggerated love for wine*). Even St. Vincent de Paul, the loving Father of Charity, seemed to have a crotchety character at times and was subject to anger. So many others could be named who during their lives, as we, were all masterpieces of the Artist in progress.

And what about all those holy men and women who did not live in the shadow of the cloister, convents, or friaries! From the very beginning of their life they too had to combat the vehemence of their passions and temperaments! We have all heard the phrase, *Still waters run deep* (Latin proverb). Even those placid souls who seem to be impervious to any annoyance still have the inner part of their nature that must deal and decide on the course to take at any given moment. The temptations we experience are the challenges for change that God through nature offers us. How we respond will determine who we become, and where we are headed. The examples of the lives of our sisters and brothers raised to the honor of the altar continually remind us that we all have more than just a chance at heaven. It is ours for the taking! All we have to do is Let go!, Let God! And Let Loose of all that keeps me from Him! In other words: say yes to the prompting of grace and trust.

God is a jealous God (Leviticus 24: 14-16)! God does not want other things to disrupt the loving relationship He has established between Himself and His creation. He knows we can become that *new wine in new wineskins* (Matthew 9: 16-17) that Jesus, our Incarnate Lord, challenges us to become.

The saints we revere and honor all tell us that it is not only possible but necessary. How we accomplish this task is easier than we might imagine. Among the many ‘things’ we could do, I can think of a few that are essential:

- *Abandon yourself to the working of the Holy Spirit.* When God ‘calls the shots’, you can be sure success is in sight. We are called to Heaven. Our journey through life often encounters difficulties that challenge our choices. The Spirit of God speaks to our minds and hearts. Trust the Spirit of God. Seek it out through prayer, meditation and, at times, through the counsels of people of proven faith and life who can encourage you and clarify your difficulties and doubts. God works through others to bring us to Himself. *No man is an island* (John Donne). We need each other.

- *Be committed to your own conversion.* Health enthusiasts will do anything for that better looking body. They go through painful exercises, extreme fasts or diets, and often will spend good hard-earned money, sacrificing other legitimate pleasures, to achieve their goal for a better physical look or material situation. How committed are we to a better soul?!

- *Be an enemy to duplicity.* God knows you better than you know yourself. *You are what you are before God and nothing more* (St. Francis of Assisi), and I like to add ‘nothing less’, that is, ‘nothing less than a child of God called to eternal life’. We are entrusted with an awesome responsibility to make sure that our authenticity, integrity and credibility never be placed in doubt. Struggling to become saints - we are a work in progress (And what a piece of work many of us are!!!)

- *Don’t hide the rough edges and cracks and flaws.* They will be obvious. As the Master works on us, we show others the good that is happening and how powerfully transforming God’s grace is. ‘Duplicity’ is just another word for ‘hypocrisy’. Avoid it! Let God shine through. Once the light of God’s presence shines through us, we live in the glow of His Eternal Love.

Years before Vatican Council II and its reminder of our Universal Call to Holiness, one of our Capuchin saints, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, wrote to a spiritual daughter, Erminia Gargani (January 27, 1918): *I have never ceased, nor will I cease to pray to the most sweet God that He may be pleased to accomplish His holy work in you; that is, that you may have a strong desire and intention to reach perfection in the Christian life; a desire which you must love and nurture tenderly in your heart, as the work of the Holy Spirit, and a spark of His divine fire.*

We too accept the gift of our humanity with gratefulness; our difficulties, burdens, challenges, and even our sins as traveling companions on the road of life. They help us keep our feet well grounded in reality. In this reality we yearn and strive for where our heart is directed, that is Life with God in Heaven. And let us all become saints - It takes only a lifetime, and God will be with us all the way!

As our nation celebrates Independence Day on July 4th, let us always remember that our “independence” is fruitful when our “dependence” on God and His Holy Will, opens our hearts to be “interdependent” on one another as the Franciscan fraternity and family we professed to be.

May God bless you; Our Lady and good St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and our Father St. Francis of Assisi and our holy Mother St. Clare of Assisi intercede for you and all our loved ones with loving care.

Peace and Blessings

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