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Dear Sisters and Brothers in St. Francis,

The Lord give you peace!

We have been elevated to the supernatural state, redeemed and saved, and we are destined for Eternity with God, “co-eternity”. We need to consider death not as the end of everything. It is not the end. It is not ruin. It is not the fatal conclusion. It is the transition to co-eternity. If we consider ourselves to be passing through this world, if we act as though we are temporary, if we aspire to what is Up Above, if we set our lives up based on the Beyond, if we base our existence on the afterlife, then everything comes into order, everything becomes balanced, everything is oriented, everything is fed in hope. If we think of tomorrow as the next future to prepare for, then one of the most important virtues of spirituality comes into play: that of Hope. Hope, not as poetic rhetoric, not as a change of mood and also not as an evasion that allows for non-commitment, but as what it is: the second theological virtue which is infused like a seed during Baptism. These are words of Bl. Carlo Acutis, a 15 yr. old adolescent, a “millennial”, who died of leukemia in the prime of life. A theologian could not have spoken more eloquently considering life’s journey and the ultimate instant in life to Life: Death!

Pain and suffering have always been ‘problems’ for human beings. They are facts of life *from whom no one can escape* (cfr *Canticle of the Creatures* of St. Francis of Assisi). Experience helps us to think we know about suffering and pain. However, what many are convinced “beyond a doubt” regarding death and dying eclipses when the moment approaches. Death is the mystery we will understand only when we experience it. When we do experience it, we will not be able to tell anyone else about it. How we view “tomorrow” determines who or what we prepare our hearts for at that moment. Even a fifteen year old adolescent, filled with faith, hope, and love for life, can look forward to “Up Above” and “Co-Eternity” with God. What happens is that as time passes we begin to forget, or try to. Have we really tried to remember that we are created by and for God, to live with Him forever, to be a part of “co-eternity”?

Today me, tomorrow you. This is a loose translation of the Latin inscription: *Hodie mihi, cras tibi.* This famous saying can often be seen sculpted or painted at the entrances of many cemeteries in Europe. It is a rather stark and macabre reminder that earthly life, as chronologically long or deeply intense as it may be, will eventually have its transforming moment from time to eternity. The point of convergence of all life’s experiences - good, bad, and indifferent - will come together awaiting our call to timelessness. Death calls and eternity awaits. It is not the end of everything, as too many people feel and believe. It is the moment of the ultimate transformation of who we are into who we were created to be.

The journey of life is so wonderful because of the many challenges God offers us along the way. All is aimed at encouraging us to grow in His love and to achieve *the full stature of Christ.* (Ephesians 4:13) Why? Because *the glory of God is man come to full stature* (St. Irenaeus).

It can also be very dangerous because of the many allurements and seductions that can entice us to deviate from the path marked out for us. Jesus is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*.(John 14: 6) If we follow His Way, listen to His Word of Truth, we can expect ultimately to share in the fullness of His Life. He Himself says: *I came that they may have Life and have it in abundance*.(John 10: 10)

Jesus gained that Life for us, once for all, on the Cross of Calvary. Life and the Cross! There it is again, the Paradox of the Cross! the Paradox of Christianity! We are always facing these choices, these opposites: positive-negative, good-bad, light-darkness, grace-sin, heaven-hell. We always have that responsible and awesome option placed before us. In the Old Testament, before the People of Israel entered the Promised Land, Joshua read the Law of the Covenant God made with His People and told them to choose *between life and death...I for my part will serve the Lord*.(Joshua 24: 15) The people responded in unison that they would serve the Lord. History tells us how fickle their and our promises and commitments can be. Perhaps this is why we have difficulty in reflecting on that most solemn moment in life when we are called to encounter the Source of all Life and see ourselves in His Light.

Our Christian Faith, and spiritual life that conditions our actions, is nourished by the Sacramental Life of the Church. Redeemed in the Blood of Christ, we are constantly challenged to *come follow me*. In this life of faith we speak of positive values while focusing in on what at first glance seems ‘negative’. We speak about Life, but refer to it through the Death of Jesus. We speak about Love, but recognize it through the symbol of hatred, torture, and death, The Cross. We hope in Heaven, but experience its beginnings through the challenges and pitfalls of life’s earthly journey. Our humanity, so prone to the changing attitudes of nature, has learned how to ‘see’ beyond the barriers that daily seek to impede our forward steps. It is with a faith-filled heart and a hope-filled life that we can securely live life to the fullest, seeing every moment and experience as another opportunity to Live Life and Love It.

Our Seraphic Father Saint Francis of Assisi was a unique and inspired prophet for all times. His approach to life and all creation has earned for him the title of *Universal Brother* and *Man with a Disarmed Heart*. He instilled in the hearts of his spiritual children an attitude of joy and gratitude for every facet of life. He was a man imbued with a spirit of wonder that made him rejoice even during the most challenging times of his own life. Several years before his brief life ended - he died at 44 years of age - his body began to succumb to all the effects of the penances he had imposed upon himself. He even apologized to ‘Brother Ass’, as he called his body, for treating one who was so faithful to him in such an unappreciative manner.

St. Francis of Assisi was aware his physical condition was terminal. The pains of the Stigmata of Jesus he had received two years before at La Verna caused him constant pain. He accepted this “gift” with love and gratitude. When he was informed that he was soon to pass from this life to the next, Francis asked that a new stanza be added to the Canticum of the Creatures, and that it be sung for him: *Praise be You, my Lord, for Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm. Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility*. Not much time was left. When he was informed that Death was imminent, he called out *Welcome, Sister Death!*

St. Francis saw life as the “cherished gift” it is. Determined to live it as the sign of the Father’s Love, then we must love it. Live and you’ll love it! Then even death cannot disturb our inner joy and serenity. When we wait to love it before we live it fully, life becomes an uphill climb that gets ever more burdensome. An active Faith, a trusting Hope, makes each moment an anticipated enjoyment of what awaits. We live each moment as a precious grace and know how to ‘let go’ and “let God” receive us into our “co-eternity” with Him.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit through grace in those who live in God’s Will opens the heart to see God in all things and to recognize the reality of heaven as the Father’s gift to His children. Yet, the process to achieve ‘perfection’ travels through many and varied experiences. The experiences of life teach us many things about God, ourselves, others, the world in which we live, the universe around us ... and the Life that awaits us all. The decisions we make during our journey are indicators of the direction taken and road followed to achieve the ultimate goal of the “time traveler”. Yes, each of us is a “time traveler” always moving on the road from time to timelessness. Our quest for happiness finds its revelation when the moment of “co-eternal” transition happens.

Everyone wants to be happy. Fulfillment takes on various forms for people. Believers seek to be with God. They seek to be saints. The requisites for a saint “in process” are to be a human made to the image and likeness of God, and to live in God’s will. Simple, huh?! Not so! If it were, why are so many people neurotics, psychotics, discouraged, depressed, even terrified when they know “time is flying” them to their goal?

The more time you have behind you and the less you believe you have before you makes life seem to pick up speed. The truth is we are still moving at the same rate since we were born. What games people play(!) causing themselves anxiety, worry, and worse.

Death is a terrible word for most people. They avoid even saying it for fear it might ‘catch up with them’ sooner than expected. It always seems unexpected when Sister Death finally arrives to call us home. Notice how, when we hear of the death of someone, often people will ask *How old were they?* As though age had anything to do with it! Death is the natural conclusion of time so that someone can enter eternity. Fear of it is the result of humanity’s disobedience in Eden. The passage from time to eternity - in whatever way God would have accomplished it had not Original Sin happened - would still have occurred, but, I believe, in loving anticipation and yearning, rather than fear and sadness.

Sin causes the fear and the uncertainty of our moral strengths. To this, all I say is: Trust God’s Word! God loves you! Believe in God’s love, and love Him back by living in God’s Most Holy Will! Sincerely ask forgiveness and assistance when you trip or fall along the way.

Our millennial blessed adolescent, Carlo Acutis knew how to live and so was always serenely and joyfully ready to let go to enter “co-eternity” with God. Again he offers words for our reflection: *We often talk about here, there, up, down. This way of thinking and speaking relativizes everything. Since we are immersed in the here, we relate everything in time and space which enslaves us, which conditions us. If we free ourselves from these chains, if we become accustomed to that which is Up Above, if we gain confidence with the Beyond, if we consider life to be a trampoline towards Eternity, then death becomes a transition. It becomes a door. It becomes an in-between. It loses its drama. It loses its fatality. It loses its definitiveness. Exorcise death. Spiritualize death. Sanctify death. This is the secret. Then we will not think about, and we will not speak about, and we will not measure it in absolute terms, in terms of no return, of total destruction, but we will see death in the light, in the warmth and in the victory of the Risen Christ.* (Bl. Carlo Acutis)

We question, “negotiate” with, blame God for the ‘bad’ things that happen to others as well as to us. Nevertheless, the Christian is enlightened by the assurance of the Faith that proclaims Jesus lived, was sacrificed to death for all humanity, and arose to Life. St. Paul himself reminds the community of Rome: *And hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly ... While we were still sinners, Christ died for us ... We have been justified by His blood ... We even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received reconciliation.* (Romans 5: 5-11) This is the great God to Whom we entrust ourselves and all those who have gone before us. With unselfish love we offer ourselves to God Who is for us, for me, for every child of His Creation. It is this God Who has given us the most excellent means to enter His loving embrace with joyful anticipation - Jesus. And Jesus establishes a perpetual means to keep that promise and pledge alive - the Eucharist.

Jesus said: *I am the living bread come down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.* (John 6: 51) When we gather around the Eucharist, sacrifice and sacrament of the Lord Jesus Christ, we reaffirm our faith in Life. We encounter death and dying with serenity and even joy. We let go of a lifetime of false securities. We remember that *We have here no lasting city, but we seek one that is to come.* (Hebrews 13: 14). We speak of ourselves *to be strangers and pilgrims on earth ... seeking a homeland* (Hebrews 11: 13). We accept everything as a gift that we may offer each moment of life as a ‘gift’ for others to share with us. We see, as did Saint Francis of Assisi, everything in creation as intimately related to us because of God and so can even call on *Sister Bodily Death from whom no human can escape* with the trust and acceptance of Francis’ *Canticle of the Creatures*, where St. Francis added these words praising God in ‘Sister Bodily Death’ shortly before his own death.

In the Eucharist we discover the source and pledge of Life. The Eucharist is our defiance of death. In the Eucharist our concerns and confusions are clarified, our discouragements and despair are dispelled, our faults are forgiven, self-centeredness becomes love that welcomes all into a disarmed heart. How much more can we say about the Eucharist, ‘heaven on earth’, that we are privileged to possess, celebrate, and ‘become’ when our hearts and souls prepare for the encounter!

The Eucharist is ‘communion’. Isn’t that what we call It - Holy Communion? Death is separation and detachment, but the Death-Resurrection of Jesus in the Eucharist re-presented at every Liturgy, binds us to Christ and one another, and fills us with the graces of God’s Love and Life. The Eucharist is Communion and Life! The Eucharist introduces us to acknowledge death as the mystery of Life it really is. The Eucharistic Lord embraces all who celebrate the Lamb Sacrificed and shared in the Paschal Mystery of the Passion-Death-Resurrection of Jesus. Thus, Eternal Life becomes the destination of all who ‘Live Jesus’ in time, and pass through the doorway of death into a “co-eternity” of “timelessness”.

The Eucharist is ‘sacrifice’. The word ‘sacrifice’ means to ‘make sacred’. When we unite ourselves and our lives to that of Jesus, we become one with the One we offer. The more we enter the ‘sacrifice’ with Jesus, the more we are assured of a share in His everlasting Life. Thus *life is not ended but transformed* (Preface I for the Dead).

The Eucharist is a ‘pledge of future glory’. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist and receive the Body and Blood of Christ we share, according to our cooperation with God’s grace, in the mystery of ‘heaven on earth’. We live in mystery the Life we are called to share in the fullness of its reality.

In faith, we live in hope - the pledge - of sharing in God's eternal Love. *For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance* (Romans 8:24).

How do we live our lives? What is our attitude to the challenges God permits that remind us of our vulnerability and mortality? Do we live in the spirit of the letter to the Hebrews that states: *'We do not have here a permanent dwelling, but we await another'* (Hebrews 13: 14) Do we take time to reflect on death as one more step, the ultimate, in getting us to God? Do we avoid even thinking of the Paschal Mystery that each one will be called to celebrate in his or her personal life? Are we joy-filled in life and encourage others to be so, even in the midst of difficulties? Remember St. Francis who wanted the Canticle sung for him at his death. Are we one of those who fall into that amusing, but true saying: *'Everyone talks about heaven, but no one seems to be in a hurry to get there'*?

St. Francis of Assisi had a tremendous love for the Eucharist and Mary. These two columns of our Faith sustained him and encouraged him in the fulfillment of God's mission for him *Go rebuild my Church for as you can see it is falling into ruin.* (words of Cross of San Damiano at beginning of Francis' conversion pilgrimage) God is "Presence" among us in the Eucharist. God is Love for us in the Cross and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. God is Providence for us in the love and concern of our sisters and brothers. If we live the spirit of our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi, the Poverello, life will be the wonderful experience God intended it to be for us all. Death will truly be that 'Welcome Sister' that leads us to the fullness of Life.

The soul will not enter into its eternal rest until it is lost forever in that vast ocean of goodness where it will know what God knows, love what He loves and will only enjoy what is a joy to him. O my Jesus, I will live and hope and silence will be my strength as long as this life lasts. (St. Pio of Pietrelcina letter September 18, 1915)

Let's pray for the Holy Souls this month, as they await the loving call to heaven. "They were where we are, and we will be - hopefully - where they are". The Church Militant and the Church Suffering assist each other that together one day, we may celebrate God's Eternal Life in the Love of the Church Triumphant.

May God bless you; Our Lady and good St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi watch over each one of us, their Spiritual Children, and our loved ones, with loving care.

Peace and Blessings,

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