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Dear Sisters and Brothers in St. Francis,

The Lord give you his peace!

*Two years before his death, already very sick and suffering especially from his eyes,* (St. Francis) *was living in a cell made of mats near San Damiano. During his stay blessed Francis could not bear the light of the sun during the day or the light of the fire at night. He constantly remained in darkness in his cell. One night, as he was thinking of all the tribulations he was enduring, he felt sorry for himself and prayed interiorly: Lord help me in my infirmities so that I may have the strength to bear them patiently* (A voice spoke to him and said)*: be glad and joyful in the midst of your infirmities and tribulations; as of now, live in peace as if you were already sharing my kingdom. The next morning on rising, he said to his companions: I should be full of joy in my infirmities and tribulations, seek my consolations in the Lord, and give thanks to God the Father, to His Only Son Our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, for His glory, for my consolation, and the edification of my neighbor, I wish to compose a new ‘Praises of the Lord’, for His creatures. He called these ‘Praises of the Lord’ which opened with the words: Most high all-powerful, and good Lord, the ‘Canticle of the Sun’. He often intoned this canticle and had his companions take it up; in that way he forgot the intensity of his sufferings and pains by considering the glory of the Lord. He did this until the day of his death*. (Legend of Perugia, 42-43)

The Poverello of Assisi was one of the wealthiest persons to ever live. His wealth went far beyond the treasures that human beings consider desirable. The power he wielded over thousands of his day and millions over the centuries make him also one of the most influential and effective individuals to ever live. He was simple, surely not what the authoritative and commanding seek. He was poorly dressed, surely not what attracts the people of this world. He was not much to look at, surely not a figure that imposed himself by physical stature. He had a basic education for his times, surely not an intellectual ‘giant’ to dialogue with the ‘learned’ and prominent of his day. He had no bands of armed guards and militant forces, surely not what the dominant forces sought out. What he had was a ‘treasure’ that far surpasses all others: He was a man in love with God, and God’s presence in all creation. He was passionately in love with life. His spirit was contagious. Many originally considered him out of his mind. Most believed him to be eccentric. But all eventually recognized the uniqueness of a soul in love with God, life, and all people. St. Francis of Assisi is a constant reminder and image of a life in love with Life.

For centuries the Franciscan Family has praised the goodness of God for blessing the world with St. Francis of Assisi and for calling us to follow his example in living the Gospel life. The impact St. Francis continues to have on our world has continued for more than eight centuries. Since the time of St. Francis himself, the I, II, III, and Secular Franciscan Orders strive to foster a spirit of peace and goodness, and universal brotherhood. The spiritual children of our Father St. Francis and our holy Mother St. Clare have affected the universal Church, as well as societies and cultures in every corner of the world. They have influenced governments and help transform the thoughts of multitudes over the years. They have challenged people to open their hearts and minds to the world, to recognize it as the Theater of Redemption. Creation is a place to love and in which to live the Gospel Life of Jesus that *all things may be restored in Christ* (Ephesians 1: 10). There is an obvious question that arises, however, regarding St. Francis. One of his first followers, Brother Masseo, is recorded to have asked the question: *Why after you? Why does the whole world come after you?* It is an interesting and quite challenging question that certainly goes far beyond the expected response of a pious platitude.

*Once Saint Francis was staying in the place of the Portiuncula with Brother Masseo of Marignano, a man of great holiness, discernment and grace in speaking of God, for which Saint Francis loved him very much. One day Saint Francis was returning from the woods and from prayer, and when he was at the edge of the woods, that same Brother Masseo, wanting to test how humble he was, went up to him and, as if joking, said, Why after you, why after you, why after you? Saint Francis responded, What do you mean? Brother Masseo said, I am saying why does the whole world come after you, and everyone seems to desire to see you and hear you? You are not a handsome man in body, you are not someone of great learning, you are not noble; so why does the whole world come after you?* (Little Flowers 10)

How might we have responded to such a situation if the question were asked of us? It is an honest consideration posed by someone who gave up everything to follow St. Francis. And what about the multitudes that sought to follow Francis Bernardone either by living the Rule for friars, or by living a Rule for those in society who still wanted to be of Francis Family and Gospel life experience? Some undoubtedly would have been put off by the reason Bro. Masseo gave for asking the question had the reasons given concerned them. When ego gets in the way we suffer from nearsightedness. We see, hear, accept, and I dare say love, only ourselves, so that when others make us aware of our deficiencies or definite faults we either retreat or react. The attributes (or lack thereof) that Brother Masseo presented were rather peripheral. Nonetheless, how would any of us like to have been told rather bluntly: You are homely looking (aesthetically challenged), of an inadequate intellect (academically limited), and come from an insignificant level of society (socially modest)? How might we have responded? Masseo was thinking out loud. He had seen, believed, and followed Francis. Why?

*Men and women are on a journey of discovery which is humanly unstoppable - a search for the truth and a search for a person to whom they might entrust themselves. Christian faith comes to meet them, offering the concrete possibility of reaching the goal which they seek*. (Pope John Paul II - *Relationship Between Faith and Reason*, Encyclical of September 14, 1998). Life is that period of time we have been allotted to fulfill the “Quest for the Other”. Those who persist in the active hope their quest will be successful, will ultimately come to know, love, and serve God in Himself and in each other. The Incarnate God, Jesus the Christ, invites us to follow Him and walk the journey of faith as pilgrims (in time) and strangers (in a world that is a bridge and not a fixed abode).

When people place their trust in another, there comes a moment when they want to know with certitude and concretely what their heart tells them is true, good, and necessary for personal fulfillment concerning the other. Reassurance does not so much express a doubt as much as a desire to corroborate and reconfirm a decision made with firm conviction and total commitment. Brother Masseo loved and trusted St. Francis, but he wanted to hear the answer from St. Francis himself. In the depths of his heart Brother Masseo knew God was with Francis. He believed in the man he had chosen to follow in response to Gods call.

Life-changing decisions, such as marriage, religious life, priesthood, becoming a Secular Franciscan, committing one’s self to any life that ultimately aims to transform a person from within as well as without, require prudence, trust, prayerful discernment, and courage to decide wholeheartedly. Courage urges us to take the step, and fidelity assists us to experience the value and fruitfulness of the yes with which we surrender to the call. A simple rule is Live it and you will love it. It is only in living our decision that we grow into loving it day-by-day. The questions and explanations are valuable and valid, but ultimately when I believe God is in the midst of the call and my response, I must make the decision trustingly, regardless how others encourage or discourage me by their words or actions. Remember, your vocation is yours, none others. A community, fraternity, Order is made up of many individuals who have personally responded with the same affirmative reply and share a life of mutual support, encouragement, familial love. It is a personal individual choice rooted in the conviction that expects and urges one to keep on moving forward, even if all others opt to change course.

The immediate response of St. Francis to Brother Masseo continues from the little Flowers: *Hearing this, Saint Francis was overjoyed in spirit and, turning his face to heaven, stood for a long time with his mind lifted up to God. Then returning to himself, he knelt down and gave praise and thanks to God*. (Little Flowers 10)

 The key word is immediate response. Francis, with all of his idiosyncrasies, was centered on God. God was the focus, center, and source of all Francis desired to live and do in this life. Even a response to his brother was not made until his attitude of prayer lifted him in spirit so that it was not *I who live but Christ who lives in me,* as St. Paul writes to the churches. To paraphrase, It was not Francis who responded, but Christ who responded in Francis*.* We read in Scripture how Jesus, before He did anything of importance, would often spend the night in prayer. Before performing a miracle, Jesus would groan from the depths of his soul and gratefully acknowledge the Fathers willingness to hear His request. When we take time to enter that vertical relationship of prayer with/in God, every response we make, whether in words, actions, or both, lead us to enter the horizontal relationship with our sisters and brothers. Thus, we communicate all we know and are, with simple loving kindness and truth, in profound humility.

*Then with great fervor of spirit (St. Francis) returned to Brother Masseo and said, Do you want to know why after me? You want to know why after me? You want to know why the whole world comes after me? I have this from those eyes of the Most High God, which gaze in every place on the good and the guilty. Since those most holy eyes have not seen among sinners anyone more vile, nor more incompetent, nor a greater sinner than me; to perform that marvelous work, which he intends to do, He has not found a more vile creature on the earth, and therefore He has chosen me to confound the nobility and the greatness and the strength and beauty and wisdom of the world, so that it may be known that every virtue and every good is from Him, and not from the creature, and no person may boast in His sight. But whoever boasts must boast in the Lord, to whom is every honor and glory forever. Brother Masseo was shocked at such a humble response, said with such fervor, and knew certainly that Saint Francis was truly grounded in humility.* (Little Flowers 10)

G. K. Chesterton offers a brief and interesting picture St. Francis: *Saint Francis was a lean and lively little man; thin as a thread and vibrant as a bowstring; and in his motions like an arrow from the bow. All his life was a series of plunges and scampers; darting after the beggar, dashing naked into the woods, tossing himself into the strange ship, hurling himself into the Sultans tent and offering to hurl himself into the fire. In appearance he must have been like a thin brown skeleton autumn leaf dancing eternally before the wind; but in truth it was he that was the wind*.

*Why you? Why does the whole world go after you, Francis?* Because like the wind: lively, vibrant, plunging into the depths, darting after the marginalized and alienated, dashing into the seclusion of prayer with nothing but his soul enamored of God, tossing himself into the strange events that God allowed to come his way, hurling himself into the midst of danger for the sake of the Name with a courage surpassing even that of the Crusaders of his time, Francis was the image of the freedom all people desire in life. Shackled, held down by no one and nothing. Francis was and still is free. He believed firmly God was with him, thus he had nothing to fear. A frail body was the vessel of a magnificent heart and soul. So great was his desire to be one with the Father-Son-Holy Spirit, that towards the end of his life he not only carried the dying of Christ in his soul but was privileged to carry the wounds of the Savior on his body for all the world to see. *Why you, Francis?* He might reply, Because through me the Lord has seen fit to make Himself known and seen, that others may be encouraged to trust in God, disarm their hearts to one another, and rebuild a falling world, for as we *can see is falling into ruin* (words of the Crucifix of San Damiano to Francis).

The expression Jesus used, so often repeated in the Gospel according to Matthew, *But I say to you,* is an emphatic reminder that some things are not negotiable. *God who created us without us cannot save us without us*. (St. Augustine)

We cannot just believe and not do. We can “grandstand” our Faith to be seen. We can create great slogans and wonderful programs without personally believing in anything we are doing. Faith not backed up with a life that verifies the ‘principles’ and ‘values’ preached by that Faith, is nothing more than an intellectual exercise of themes and slogans that fluctuates with the political, social, and so forth tides of the times. *Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works*. (James 2: 17-18) The greatest “demonstration” we can offer is to live what we profess *without gloss* (St. Francis words to those who wanted to mitigate the words of his Rule for the friars)*.*

Seeing himself before the awesome love and majesty of God, St. Francis recognizes his lowliness and the greatness of God, and thus can give Brother Masseo the answer he seeks. Francis acknowledges how insignificant he is before the immensity of God, and it is for this reason that God can work through him. Filled with ourselves there is no room for God; the humble soul is empty of itself and offers God all the space God wills. There can be no pride in one who recognizes at every moment the sovereignty of God and himself as nothing more than the Herald of the Great King. The herald proclaims the message of the other, not their own message. The herald must be a subject of integrity who can be trusted to communicate the message of the one who sent him, and not his own personal issues and agendas. It is here that Francis explained in his response the prayer he so often would say, *Who are You (Lord). Who am I*, repeating the words of St. Augustine centuries before: *That I may know You (Lord), that I may know myself*. There is a powerful nuance here I think should be mentioned. Many translate the words of Augustine to mean: Let me know you Lord and let me know myself. It seems like more. Augustine and even Francis would translate the phrase to mean; **Let me know You, Lord, so that I may know myself**. Once Francis heart lifted up, saw himself in the mystery of the One Whom he sought to know, he understood more deeply the purpose and call of his own life and could rejoice in the transforming power of grace that had worked such wonders in him and, through him, in so many others. Humility is truth. The test is not for us to show God how much we believe. The test is for us to realize how far we are willing to go to believe with our entire being. *Totus Tuus (All Yours -* papal motto of Pope St. John Paul II)*.* Faith believes and gives one’s self to God unconditionally.

Francis’ challenge to the world was to follow the Gospel and not let one’s possessions possess them. His own example of this was when he stripped himself of his worldly belongings, gave them back to his father in public before the bishop and people of Assisi, and said *From now on I will no longer say, My Father Peter Bernardone, but Our Father who art in heaven*. He had nothing left but he possessed everything. Even when God seems to be ‘absent’ from us, in faith we sense an unexplainable presence and strength. Conviction of faith leads us through and beyond the obstacles, difficulties, and doubts. Faith is the power working and welling up within us. It is the very root of our daily life. Our life becomes an act of faith that sees the invisible and can achieve what seems the impossible. Remember the mustard seed (cfr Luke 17: 5).

Faith is not an intellectual game played with abstract facts. Faith is unconditional acceptance of a person, God, as we have come to know Him in the Person of Jesus the Christ. Faith is an affirmative response and selfless acceptance of God’s Will. Through an extended and painful journey of discovery, the faith of St. Francis of Assisi opened his eyes to see life from the perspective of eternity and God’s love. And we?!

Francis resigned his office as leader of the group of friars that had grown quite numerous in a few years. The presence of “the Brother” was always a challenging presence to the brothers. They loved him, but many desired that his Rule be softened somewhat. Francis was confronted by these friars. They compared themselves to other religious of the times and requested/demanded “concessions” or outright changes to the Rule Francis had written. The verbal battle ensued and at a point Francis with others who were present heard words from an unseen source (*Francis to whom does the Order belong, you or Me?*) reminding Francis that the Order was God’s. And, since it was an Order inspired by God to be instituted by Francis for those who sought to live an authentic Gospel Life, they were to follow the plan God set down through Francis, *without gloss, without gloss, without gloss*. Needless to say, it was a decisive moment – for the moment! Authenticity of expression in living the Rule of our Seraphic Father has been a conversation among the brothers for centuries, with the brothers presenting their idea of greater “authenticity” and “credibility” for changing times. This “conversation piece” will probably never end. It’s a “healthy tension” that still seeks to know, understand, and live authentically the mind and heart of the Universal Brother. Healthy tensions open minds and hearts to accept rather than reject. One Rule for three branches is still very much alive and challenging not only the friars but the world.

Like St. Francis, we are “Heralds of the Great King” who go into the highways and hedgerows to invite all to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One of the greatest Gospel witnesses we can give others as sisters and brothers in St. Francis of Assisi flows from living in the Presence of God. *Jesus take over*! should be our daily prayer and aspiration. *Gaze upon the Lord, gaze upon His face.* (words of St. Clare of Assisi to St. Agnes of Prague). The face of God recognized in our hearts and in the events of our daily lives makes everyone a gift inviting us to let God, let go, and thus let loose the graces that flow from the open heart of the Savior embraced in the other. Even the leper embraced by St. Francis destroying all Francis’ fears invites us to embrace our lepers to “let loose the power of grace”.

The Poverello truly was the wealthiest person of his times. Stripped of all worldly wealth, he could be filled with what no one could give him but One, God. Father St. Francis prayed that He might experience the depth of Jesus’ love for us so that he too could be one who sought *to restore all things in Christ* (Ephesians 1: 10). The joy of the journey can truly become a living “Canticle of Praise” to the Lord for every moment and encounter of life. Each step we take is a step forward surrendering ourselves unconditionally to the ever-loving providence of God, Who never leaves His children unaided.

Pope John Paul II tells us that men and women are on a journey of discovery in search for the truth and a person. Saint Francis encountered that ‘Person’, Jesus, on the Cross at San Damiano who impressed His words on Francis’ heart, until Francis met that ‘Person’ again at La Verna, Who impressed His ‘Word Incarnate’ on his body. The living image of the Crucified spoke to the world of an emptying love that accepted *to be human even to death* (Philippians 2: 8) that we might share in the Divine Life to truly live and for an eternity (cfr John 17: 23). The Word Incarnate spoke most powerfully and clearly the day Love was crucified. St. Francis sought and prayed to feel and live that love. St. Francis was “sealed” for all to see with the marks of the Sacred Stigmata of Christ’s loving Passion and Death. He was a sign to rekindle hearts that had grown lukewarm and cold to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All Franciscans seek to follow Francis that they too might live that Love and continue a presence and living message that so much of today’s world seems to have forgotten.

Every life has its disconcerting events and fears. Our Father Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope John Paul II, and many others went through periods of spiritual darkness and dryness. Nevertheless, they continued to believe and hope in God. They were an encouragement and empowering presence for others. Faith and life walk hand-in-hand. It is our Faith that strengthens our spirit and nourishes our life. Jesus reminds us: *It is the spirit that gives life. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.* (John 6:63) Allow the Spirit of Faith to fill your minds and hearts. We accept the words of Jesus in truth. Franciscan peace, joy, and serenity are a reality that becomes ‘contagious’ when we share them with others.

Spiritual Children of St. Francis of Assisi live every moment of life fully! The spirit of prayer that enveloped our Seraphic Father who ‘became prayer’ encourages us to trust at every moment and whatever challenging crossroad we encounter. It was how we were to go among all people: *All the brothers, however, should preach by their deeds*. (The Earlier Rule: Chap XVII, 3) Thus, his words to the brothers gathered around him as he prepared to enter eternity, *I have done what was mine to do, may Christ now teach you what you are to do*, be ever present in our hearts as well. We too are called to be messenger and message as we herald the Great King in and with our lives.

May God bless you; my Our Lady and good St. Joseph guide, guard, and protect you; and may our Seraphic Father, St. Francis of Assisi and holy Mother St. Clare of Assisi, look upon each one of us, their Spiritual Children, with loving care.

**BLESSED TRANSITUS and HAPPY FEAST DAY**

**OF OUR SERAPHIC FATHER SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI**

Peace and Blessings

Fr. Francis A. Sariego, O.F.M. Cap.

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