

“Let the Whole World Tremble”

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16)



As Franciscans, we are fortunate to have for our inspiration and edification many writings authored by our Seraphic Father St. Francis. Thirty-eight of his texts have been transmitted to us, two in his own hand. Scholars believe there were others that have been lost to history—all the more reason to study those we have.¹ One of his writings is of special significance for Secular Franciscans—the *Earlier Exhortation*—which serves as the Prologue to the 1978 Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. All serve to teach us about the mind, heart, and preoccupations of the saint.

Among them we have different forms. There are letters, prayers, a great poem, personal testaments, and admonitions for the friars. As you might expect, there are recurring topics and themes that can be traced across his words. He speaks of poverty and minority, of the Lord’s Passion, of penance. However, no subject is more prominent than Francis’s love for and devotion to the Eucharist. Interestingly, Francis does not use the word Eucharist, preferring the expression, “the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”² It is perhaps his way of reminding us (as did St. Paul) of the transubstantiation—that the Holy Eucharist is “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ,” who is “truly, really and substantially contained.”³

Francis seized upon opportunities to proclaim the Real Presence and to exhort his followers and listeners to approach the Eucharist with utmost reverence and awe. A few examples: To the Brothers and Sisters of Penance (our predecessor Secular Franciscans) he was emphatic, “Whoever does not eat His flesh and drink His blood cannot enter the kingdom of God.”⁴ To the clergy he was blunt and direct, “Let all of us, clergymen, consider the great sin and the ignorance some have toward the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and His most holy names and written words that consecrate His Body.”⁵ Even to civil leaders he urged, “receive the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with fervor in holy remembrance of Him” and “foster such honor to the Lord among the people entrusted to you.”⁶ In a letter to the entire order he famously exclaimed, “*Let the whole world tremble*, and let the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest!”⁷

Secular Franciscans today would do well to claim for ourselves St. Francis’s ardor for the Body and Blood of our Lord. In the United States, a recent poll attracted attention with published findings which suggested that among those who identify themselves as Catholic, many—perhaps a majority—have ceased to believe in the Real Presence.⁸ Although polls and statistics are open to debate and interpretation, the poll’s underlying message about the contemporary church and the general state of catechesis is not encouraging.

In light of such news, we Franciscans should not lose heart. Rather, there are many actions we can take to promote belief in, love for, and devotion to the Eucharist. Consider a few:

- Refresh your understanding of the church’s teaching on the Eucharist in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The Sacrament of the Eucharist” (paragraphs 1322-1419). Also available online from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is “The Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Basic Questions and Answers” (see link below).⁹
- Cultivate a personal reverence and awe for the Eucharist. Participation at Mass and reception of Holy Communion should never become routine. Also, resolve to spend time, individually and in fraternity, before the Blessed Sacrament.
- Be bold and forthright about your belief in the Real Presence! Make it part of your faith conversations with Catholics and non-Catholics. When speaking to someone whose Catholic faith has waned, remind him or her of this treasure available to all the faithful.

The Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life. Indeed, let the whole world tremble!

From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

- Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church, and in liturgical activity. The faith of St. Francis, who often said, “I see nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God in this world except His most holy body and blood,” should be the inspiration and pattern of their Eucharistic life. [*Rule*, 5]
- As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do. Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ. [*Rule*, 8]
- The Eucharist is the center of the life of the Church. Christ unites us to himself and to one another as a single body in it. Therefore, the Eucharist should be the center of the life of the fraternity. The brothers and sisters should participate in the Eucharist as frequently as possible, being mindful of the respect and love shown by Francis, who, in the Eucharist, lived all the mysteries of the life of Christ. [*Constitutions*, 14.2]

For discussion or reflection

- How might you communicate Eucharistic awe in sharing your faith with others? How can centrality of the Eucharist inform our efforts to evangelize, going from “gospel to life and life to gospel?”

¹ Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap., *Francis of Assisi, Writings for a Gospel Life* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 46.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1374.

⁴ Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., et al., editors, *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, Volume I, The Saint* (New City Press, 1999), 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 52

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58

⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸ www.ncregister.com/daily-news/survey-on-catholic-belief-in-the-eucharist-prompts-calls-for-better-cateche

⁹ www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass/liturgy-of-the-eucharist/the-real-presence-of-jesus-christ-in-the-sacrament-of-the-eucharist-basic-questions-and-answers.cfm