

***“He preached the Gospel with burning love.”***

***If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light. (Luke, 11:36)***



An attentive pilgrim visiting the major basilicas in Rome will notice a familiar figure in the magnificent apse mosaics of two of those churches, St. John Lateran and Santa Maria Maggiore. There with representations of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Sts. Peter and Paul, St. John the Baptist, and other biblical figures one will find the humble image of St. Francis, the Poverello of Assisi.

In the Lateran, a small image of St. Francis (and also one of St. Anthony) was “shoehorned” in among the tall earlier images. St. Francis stands between St. Peter and the Blessed Mother. His figure was added to the Lateran’s mosaic when repairs were made in 1291 during the pontificate of the

first Franciscan pope, Nicholas IV.<sup>1</sup> A different figure of St. Francis was added to the apse of Santa Maria Maggiore when that mosaic was restored in 1296, also at the direction of Pope Nicholas. The Lateran mosaic was the product of two mosaicists, Jacopo da Camerino and Jacopo Torriti, both Franciscan friars; the work in Santa Maria Maggiore is that of Torriti.<sup>2</sup>

To the modern visitor, the presence of these images of St. Francis may not seem all that remarkable. We are used to seeing paintings and statues of St. Francis in liturgical environments and in art generally. But the images of St. Francis in these two great churches were installed before the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. St. Francis died in 1226 and so powerful had been the witness of his life that he was canonized within two years. Even so, and allowing for the influence and involvement of Franciscan artisans and a Franciscan pope, it is noteworthy that before the century was out, Francis’s image came to be displayed prominently in two of the most important churches in Christendom. How did this little friar become so important so quickly?

An answer comes from no less a source than Pope Benedict XVI. In one of his Wednesday Audiences in January, 2010, he began by speaking about the founding of the best-known Mendicant Orders of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century—the Franciscans and Dominicans. He said they were “an important model of renewal in a new historical epoch.” They were Gospel witnesses as well as teachers. “They addressed topics close to people’s lives...They also taught ways to cultivate a life of prayer and devotion...For example, the Franciscans spread far and wide devotion to the humanity of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Two weeks later, in another audience, Pope Benedict spoke specifically of St. Francis, calling him “a ‘giant’ of holiness.” He said Francis was “the small, insignificant religious” who renewed the Church and the People of God by calling “them back to listening to the word and to literal obedience to Christ.”<sup>4</sup> We can imagine the impact he had on the people who heard him. St. Bonaventure wrote, “Traveling through various regions, he preached the gospel with burning love.” Little wonder that within two or three generations his image would be set before the faithful in churches great and small. Francis and the Franciscans astonished the world.

Although Pope Benedict does not issue a specific charge to Franciscans in our day, certainly one is implicit in his message. There was dynamic power in Francis’s Gospel witness—can we say the same of our witness? Francis’s example appealed to the people of his day and drove a spirit of orthodox renewal in the Church—what is the impact of our example? As Franciscan brothers and sisters, does the fervor of our love for Jesus and his Church inspire and thrill those about us?

The Secular Franciscan Rule we have professed calls us to these things and more. In Article 7 we read, “motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ.” Article 19 says as “messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others.” No less than Francis and his followers in their time do we live in a society where renewal in Christ is desperately needed. Let us pray to the Holy Spirit for the fortitude and perseverance to live and act as true Franciscan witnesses!

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#### **From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions**

- Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively. [*Rule*, 14]
- "Christ, poor and crucified", victor over death and risen, the greatest manifestation of the love of God for humanity, is the "book" in which the brothers and sisters, in imitation of Francis, learn the purpose and the way of living, loving, and suffering. [*Constitutions*, 10]
- Mindful that the Holy Spirit is the source of their vocation and the animator of fraternal life and mission, Secular Franciscans should seek to imitate the faithfulness of Francis to His inspiration. They should listen to the exhortation of the Saint to desire above all things "the Spirit of God at work within them." [*Constitutions*, 11]

#### **For reflection and meditation**

Are we as Secular Franciscans a force for Church renewal and re-evangelization of the culture in our time as Francis was in his? Would a visitor sense a thrill for the Gospel and a fire for Christ’s love among us?

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<sup>1</sup> “The Apse Mosaic at the Basilica of St. John Lateran.” christianiconography.info/lateran2007/apseLateran.html, accessed 9-20-2020.

<sup>2</sup> “Mosaics in Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome.” [https://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/t/torriti/mosaic/index.html](https://www.wga.hu/html_m/t/torriti/mosaic/index.html), accessed 9-20-2020

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI. *Holy Men and Women of the Middle Ages*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 14, 17.

**Image:** Detail from the Apse Mosaic of St. John Lateran, Alamy Stock Photo used with license.