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Dear Sisters and Brothers in St. Francis,

The Lord give you his peace!

St. Francis observed the Lent of St. Michael every year. This “lent” begins with the Assumption of our Blessed Mother and end with the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel. This devotional period of a “milder form of penance” was and still is celebrated by those who seek St. Michael’s protection and intercession for them and the Church against the evil one. St. Francis’ love and devotion for the Church and the Holy Father are well-noted in his Rule, Testament, and other writings. St. Michael, defender of the Church and God’s People against the allurements and deception of Satan and his minions, was and still is an essential intercessor for whom Francis had a particular devotion.

*(The Great Lents the whole Church celebrates are Advent in preparation for the Nativity of the Savior and Lent in preparation for the Sacred Triduum of the Resurrection of the Lord. These the whole Church and also most other Christian denominations celebrate each in their specific ways. Other “lents” are devotional and not obliged by the Church)*

Just two years before the Poverello was accompanied home to the Father by Sister Death, in September 1224, Francis was at prayer on Mount La Verna, a solitary mountaintop site in Tuscany. He was celebrating the lent of St. Michael. Sometime around the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14), he received the answer to an ardent prayer regarding the love of Jesus and His Passion: *O Lord Jesus Christ, two graces do I ask You before I die: the first, that in my lifetime I may feel, as far as possible, both in my soul and body, that pain which You, sweet Lord, endured in the hour of Your most bitter Passion*; *the second, that I may feel in my heart as much as possible of that excess of love by which You, O Son of God, were inflamed to suffer so cruel a Passion for us sinners*.

The documents record that a winged Seraph appeared to St. Francis and signed him with the visible marks of the wounds of Christ. St. Francis of Assisi, the Little Poor Man, the Universal Brother, had now become a living image of the Crucified Jesus. The marks gave witness to the integrity of the person who bore them. They also gave credibility to the message he had now become. *When a spirit of indifference was taking over the world,* (The Lord) *renewed in the flesh of St. Francis the Sacred Stigmata of* (His) *Passion to rekindle in our hearts the fire of* (His) *love.* (adapted Opening Prayer for the Feast of the Impression of the Stigmata). The Seraphic one received an answer to his ardent prayer in a way he had never imagined.

Together with this privileged gift from God came an awesome responsibility. He was entrusted with a mission: to rekindle the fire of Divine Love in the hearts of God’s children. To rekindle hearts that had grown cold in their sincere love for God. They were Christians and Catholics or some other form of Christian expression, even then, that had established their own “spiritual and moral opinion for life”. The attitude, though not exactly the same, can be compared with the common expression heard so often, even by “faithful” people: “Oh, I’m not religious, but I am very spiritual”. When you say you believe but do not live what you say you believe, eventually you believe only yourself. It’s a like the adage that says: *The one who has him/herself as counselor has a fool for counselor*. Being blind to the truth how can you lead anyone, much less yourself?

Unity and “peace” (or better truce) in many areas was determined by the politics of the moment or the tolerance of fatigue awaiting another opportunity to overwhelm the “enemy”. How many wars! How many lives destroyed! How much sorrow and destruction! All in the name of “some” God Who differentiated among His own creation instigating division rather than unity and acceptance. All in the Name of the One (*Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God is One!* – Deuteronomy 6: 4). What blasphemy! Nothing ever seems to change!

Nature does not stand still. It is always developing. It is always going through the “growing pains” of change. So many holy souls and prophets of every time, on many sides of the spectrum of human history, were encouraging people to dialogue, accept one another. God was the common denominator, but whose God (!?). God creates and does not desire destruction and death. Nevertheless, in God’s Name (!?), the beauty of the Gospel was so marred and distorted by the very ones called to live it for the world to see in everyone the image of a loving God.. When hatred turns to love and death turns into life, then people can observe with astonishment and recognize the work of Grace, the work of God. The world of the thirteenth century was forgetting and at times losing the ardor of conviction and commitment. They needed “to see God in Christ” once again. St. Francis became the “come and see”, the “show and tell”, for God’s children to see clearly and understand unquestionably the Father’s message to all His children.

The Stigmata St. Francis bore spoke and continue to speak volumes for those willing to ‘read’ the Wounds of Jesus on the Seraphic one, in a spirit of faith. To see Francis was to see the living image of the Crucified. To see him was a challenge to change. To encounter him was to recognize God speaking through him. People were reminded of God’s limitless love. God was “pleading” with His children, calling everyone to cooperate with grace and to be the persons they - and we - were created to be. We are children of the Father, redeemed in the blood of the Son, bound together in the family of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Those willing to understand and accept the message of the wounds and the person signed with them, knew they were ‘called to action’. The Stigmata call to action not apathy, love not loathing, conviction not complacency, determination not doubt, commitment not compromise, life not lethargy.

Like the great priest-prophet of the Old Testament, Ezekiel, St. Francis received a mission to be a living prophecy to a lethargic world suffering from spiritual dryness. Ezekiel’s prophetic words speak of numberless dry, lifeless, disjointed bones, lying on a vast field, (see Ezekiel 37: 1-14). The words Ezekiel prophesies over them at God’s command can be compared to many periods in human history, to St. Francis’ time, and even to our own, when war and its after-effects on society - violence, economic difficulties, contagious illnesses, social restlessness, immorality and amorality - take their toll on the spiritual life of God’s people. Even those of deep faith can experience a dryness and spiritual fatigue. Many just get caught up in the “mechanism” of a modern, technologically advanced, seemingly self-sufficient world that seems to be forgetting or already has forgotten its Creator. They look for understanding and direction. They seek someone who will journey with them and nourish them with God’s Word and healing grace. The compromises they have made with the world for peace and happiness, no longer hold. Once we encounter the Crucified and *gaze upon His face* (cfr. St. Clare’s letter to St. Agnes of Prague) how can anyone not respond with surrender?

To see St. Francis, signed with the sign of the Crucified, made Jesus come alive in the hearts of those he met and with whom he spoke. The Stigmata was a sign to all of a presence that was reassuring, encouraging, life-giving. Isaiah also spoke of the wounds of Christ centuries before His Passion and Death - *Through His wounds we are healed* (Isaiah 53: 4-5). St. Francis of Assisi accepted to let those wounds come alive once again in his own body. Francis was a reminder and a sign of hope. He became a tangible image of the self-sacrificing love of Jesus the Redeemer. The wounds of Jesus imprinted on the body the Poverello kept the reality of that one great sacrifice vividly alive before the eyes of all.

The field of dry disjointed bones about which the priest-prophet Ezekiel writes is also a reminder of what we are without God. When we allow God to fulfill His work in/with/through and for us, His Living Word overshadows our lives. The brilliance of that “shadow of the Father” possesses and fills us with God’s breath of love, the “overshadowing of the Spirit of God”. We come alive more fully than before. No longer dryness and death, but freshness, fulfillment, freedom and life-giving love! God Himself intervenes by doing in-with-for us what is otherwise humanly impossible. When we feel like ‘dry bones’ - tired, discouraged, disillusioned, even despairing - that is the moment for us to *hope against all hope* (Romans 4: 18). God Himself brings about our spiritual ‘resurrection’ in this life. The Resurrection of Jesus and the Eucharist offer us the opportunity to participate in His Passion-Death-Resurrection, our pledge of future life and glory. Love for the cross is the distinctive sign of chosen souls. Jesus’ wounds remind us how He loved us to His death that we might live with Him in Life’s fullness.

The Seraphic Father shares in the Paschal Mystery of Christ in the Stigmata he received. Our accepting “yes” to the truth of *this unheard-of event* (cfr. Brother Elias letter on the death of St. Francis) opens our heart to a gradual and effective restoration, renewal, rebirth, and re-creation in each one of us. Francis becomes the ambassador leading us to a deeper awareness of Jesus in our life. As we accept and “Live Jesus” transforming grace takes over. The feeling is inexplicable but the results are obvious.

As Spiritual Children of St. Francis of Assisi, we continue to let Jesus come alive in a world grown cold to the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The ‘Good News’ that we preach with our lives is that *God so loved the world He sent His only Son so that all who believe in Him might have life. He did not come to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him* (John 3: 16-17). We ‘climb Calvary’ with Christ and accept ‘our own stigmata’. We bear joyfully the responsibilities and burdens that come with life. We rekindle the flame of faith in the hearts of others, and we see it grow stronger by God’s grace in ourselves.

The signing of our Seraphic Father with the Sacred Stigmata of Jesus calls us to action. It must however begin with each one of us first, before we attempt to reach out to others. Ultimately, we reach a point where everything is in perspective and even the world is put under our feet. The world once again is recognized as it always is, but not always accepted as being. The world once again is seen as the Theater of Redemption. It is no longer seen solely as a stumbling-block of distractions and seductions that destroy fervor and lead to tepidity, indifference. It no longer leads to separation from all that is good and all that is God. All that is human finds it journey to be holy. St. Francis’ Prayer asking to experience the love that Jesus had in dying for us and St. Francis’ reception of the Stigmata of Christ on La Verna both offer us help to reflect upon a simple and powerful way to strengthen and deepen our spiritual lives.

1)***Imitate Love***- Ask God for the ability to surrender totally in trust to God’s will. Love is total surrender to the One Who surrenders Himself for us on the Cross and to us in the Eucharist.

2) ***Meditate on the Sufferings and Love of Jesus*** - Keep the image of the Passion-Death of Jesus alive in your heart. We Franciscans are noted for our affective prayer. It touches the heart and makes the reality of what we consider more vivid and impressive*.*

3)***Love the Cross*** *-* Do not fear the image of suffering and death. The Cross without Christ is a lie. With Christ, the Cross becomes not a sign of death but Life, not a sign of hatred but Love. Keep the image always alive in your heart and your life, especially in the midst of the heavy burdens that might come.

4)***Grow in Christian Perfection*** *-* The spiritual life is not static. Once Christ and the Cross become ‘real’ and present to the heart, we must proceed forward by ‘living Jesus’ and His Gospel more intensely.

5)***Climb Calvary*** *-* When we grow in our Christian life, we cannot help but desire to ‘climb Calvary’ to be one with the mystery of our redemption*.*

6) ***Embrace with Cheerful Soul Everything*** *-* Having embraced the Cross and stood with Jesus, all else becomes a gift we can easily embrace with gratitude, trust, and cheerfulness. Yes, ‘cheerfulness’. To embrace one thing is not to embrace something else. God loves a cheerful giver. When we embrace cheerfully what God’s permits, we let go of our false securities and comfort zones, and just trust because we love.

7)***Be Faithful*** *-* Nothing can be taken for granted. We must be ever on the watch to remain faithful. Never become complacent thinking that everything will now happen automatically. The Spirit’s work is kept alive by faith-filled lives that never slacken, that renew the ‘process’ everyday with greater commitment and intensity.

8)***Place the World Under Your Feet*** – Seek to live the spirit of the famous image of St. Francis embracing the Crucified with the world at his feet. Use the world as the theater of redemption it is. Make good use of all creation as the gifts that can lead us to the fullness of life. Thus, the world will not control, condition, and ultimately condemn us, but it will be as it was created to be our “source of resources” to help us on our journey to God.

The impression of the Stigmata of Jesus on Saint Francis of Assisi, celebrated this month, challenges us to remember and live the words *Per Crucem ad Lucem* - *Through the Cross to the Light* (Pope St. Paul VI). The wounds of the Passion speak of a world that challenge and often refuse and reject the Incarnate God. Jesus took on human nature that humanity might rise above what was leading it astray. Treachery, betrayal, capture, torture, and death were the ‘thanks’ He was offered by those whom he benefitted in many ways. The wounds we celebrate in Our Seraphic Father call us to be spiritually impressed with the same ‘signs’ and respond to the gift as did St. Francis.

- **The nails in the hands** remind us to use our hands to bless and not offend, to give not seek to receive, to embrace rather than push away, to raise up rather than put down, help rather than hinder.

- **The nails in the feet** remind us of the Scriptural phrase: *blessed are the feet of the bearer of peace* (Isaiah 52: 7). They encourage us to approach all as sisters and brothers, move towards those in need rather than remain stationary in our own comfort and security, take the first step and seek out those estranged rather than wait for the other to make a move first.

- **The heart pierced** reminds us that we must disarm our hearts to one another. Allow all to enter our hearts as well that we may discover the limitless and unconditional love of God through us. We enter the open heart of Jesus to encounter the open arms of God waiting to give us His warm loving embrace. It’s a “heart-to-heart experience” that cannot be duplicated nor substituted.

Let the Impression of the Sacred Wounds of Jesus on the body of our Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi speak profoundly to all of us. Franciscans see themselves in our Seraphic Father. He is the image we seek to follow so that through him we may be faithful in “living Jesus”. Thus, we become a Living Gospel to the world. We cannot be Gospel without being Christ. We cannot be Christ without the imprint of the Wounds on our heart and soul. We cannot bear the imprint of the wounds unless we can say: *It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me* (Galatians 2: 20). *When I am weak then it is that I am strong* (2Corinthians 12: 10). Such a “gift” requires we offer an unconditional “yes” to God and surrender in all things to God’s Will. We become victors with the Victim, Whose Wounds our Seraphic Father bore, reminding us *I have done what was mine to do, now may Christ teach you what you must do* (St. Francis’ words to those surrounding his deathbed)

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 our Holy Mother St. Clare of Assisi look upon each one of us, their Spiritual Children and your loved ones, with loving care.

**Happy Feast Day of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi to our entire Franciscan Family!**

Peace and Blessings

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

Regional Spiritual Assistant