

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI
(J.F.M.H. - 4.10.18)

Cardinal Claudio Hummes is a great friend of Pope Francis. In the Conclave, when it looked increasingly likely that Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio would be elected pope, Cardinal Hummes hugged and kissed his old friend and said, ***“Don’t forget the poor.”*** *These words had a powerful impact on the future pope, who chose as his papal name ‘Francis’.* The great saint, St. Francis of Assisi who was noted as ***(the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation.*** How Saint Francis and the new pope would love to have a Church that was poor and for the poor. It is recorded that Saint Francis had said very similar words when he explained his own vocation to his followers. ***“This is what I want. This is what I seek. This is what I desire with all my heart.”*** They recognised both Christ’s own way of living and how He taught the vast majority of mankind who learn mainly by example, to love in a Godlike limitless way, first God and then His neighbour, while, at the same time, depending on God, to provide all that was needed.

Today, 4th October is the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. He was born in 1182 in Assisi in Umbria while his father, Peter Bernardon was working in France. He was baptised John, but acquired the nickname of Francesco (the Frenchman), because his mother, Pica was French. We all know what the birth of Saint Francis has meant to mankind. Dante summed it up by writing, *“With him a sun was born to the world.”* The life of St. Francis shone out like a bright sun on a world dedicated to self-gratification and the acquiring of riches. It pointed unerringly to the value of poverty as the way Our Lord had chosen for himself, from the time of His birth, throughout His whole life, until His death on a cross. With absolute poverty came the need to rely utterly on the Almighty Father. In his quest to follow the way of life of his Crucified Christ, Francis path of poverty as being a necessary step for him. 'Lady Poverty' became the love of his life.

Pope John Paul II commenting on his active pursuit of poverty says, *“Supporting it became an integrally practiced theological virtue. He rarely calls it by name, because it became his state of mind and made him concentrate everything on God, made him expect everything from Him, made him happy not to possess anything but from Him.”* He incorporated this idea of poverty in the Rule for his Order when he and his companions ('The Penitents of Assisi' as Francis then called them) submitted a primitive Rule to Pope Innocent III for approval. At the time, a number of the Cardinals advising the Pope claimed that the Rule ought to be reformed, because such poverty, as was intended, was unsafe and impracticable. But Cardinal Colonna, Bishop of Salina, pleaded in its favour that it was no more than the evangelical counsels of perfection. The Pope recommended the affair to God. Afterwards he is reported to have told his nephew that in a dream he saw a palm tree growing up at his feet; in another vision some time after this, he saw Francis propping up the Lateran church, which seemed to be ready to fall. (About five years later the pope has a somewhat similar vision about St. Dominic.) He sent for Francis and approved his primitive rule, but only by word of mouth. He also granted Francis, and his companions, leave to preach repentance everywhere. Before they left Rome they received the ecclesiastical tonsure and, in 1210, Francis himself was made a deacon. (The saint never became a priest.)

From the beginning, poverty permeated the life of St. Francis and his order. He travelled as a pilgrim, preaching and identifying himself with the penniless and labourers, tending lepers and other sick. He begged for stones and dragged them to the forsaken wayside chapel of San Damian and started to repair it himself. It was the first of a number of rundown chapels he rebuilt. As his way of life and preaching began to attract popular support, his apostolate increased in size and extent. He and his followers lived in little wattle and daubed huts, their churches modest and small, they slept on the ground, had no tables nor chairs and a few books. The few books he allowed were enough to inform the Friars of the knowledge they required, to keep the Order's work a mission of simplicity and poverty, rather than one of great learning.

The Benedictines of Monte Subasio generously gave him the church of the Portiuncula, upon condition that it should always continue as the major church of his Order. But St. Francis refused the gift of the property and would only accept the use of the place. In token that he held it only from and for the monks, he sent them each year a basket of small fish called 'laschi' He was

asked one day which of the virtues is most agreeable to God? He replied, *"Poverty is the way to salvation, the nurse of humility, and the root of perfection. Its fruits are hidden, but they multiply themselves in infinite ways."* (You may be aware that in August each year there is an Indulgence connected with the church of St. Mary of the Portiuncula.)

St. Francis was not the first saint to embrace poverty for God as most important to their spiritual lives. Nearly all saints have done so to varying degrees. Much later after the death of St. Francis, Cardinal St. Robert Bellarmine S.J., whose feast was on 17th September, wrote a treatise on 'The Ascent of the Mind to God', in which he reflected on man's ultimate good. Part of this has a bearing on our attitude to poverty and riches, which is helpful for everyone. *"Therefore consider that to be for your real good which brings you to your goal, and that to be really bad which cuts you off from this goal. Prosperity and adversity, riches and poverty, health and sickness, honour and ignominy, life and death should not be sought after for themselves by the wise man, nor are they to be avoided for themselves; if they contribute to the glory of God and your eternal happiness, they are to be sought after; if they are obstacle to this, they are evil and to be avoided."* For St. Francis, riches, and the acquisition of such things as property, were an obstacle to be avoided; and, poverty, with a complete dependence on God for all his needs, was a good to be sought. It is the way of living shown us by Christ.

The Franciscans increased in numbers, and foundations were made outside Italy. During the absence of St. Francis on one of his missionary journeys, certain deviations from the idea of strict poverty began to creep in. On one such mission, to convert the Saracens, he met up with the Crusaders and was deeply disillusioned by their loose-living behaviour. He denounced this and, leaving them, managed to pass through the enemy lines, and met the Sultan who was deeply impressed by him but remained unconverted. Francis refused all the rich presents offered him and returned to the Christian armies. He then spent a few months on pilgrimage in the Holy Land until he was recalled urgently by news of changes, which had been happening in the Order he had founded. He got back to find some of them living in not so simple houses, altering the strict dress customs, and planning to open a school connected to the University. Realizing that he was not the administrator the Order now needed, he resigned his office of Minister General at the General Chapter of 1220 and handed over to Brother Elias of Cortona. In 1221 Francis drew up another Rule and after certain modifications, it was approved in 1223 by Pope Honorius III. Some of these modifications were regretted by Francis, but he was no longer in a position to effectively resist the changes. In 1224, while on Mount La Verna he had a vision and received the Stigmata. The wounds of which remained with him for two years, but were hidden until after his death and were described by one who saw them as, *"the wound in his side was an open wound from which blood used to flow. The wounds in his hands and feet had hard black nail like flesh with heads and with the points bent over. There were four such nails, not three."* Even in death St. Francis remained a true image of his Crucified Redeemer. During the last year of his life he became blind, and died at only 45 at the Portiuncula Assisi on the 4th October 1226. In 1228, he was canonized by his old friend Pope Gregory IX, (the nephew of Pope Innocent III), who as Cardinal Ugolino had had a lot to do with the Franciscans. As a Cardinal he would often don their habit, and walk barefoot with Francis and his disciples.

The life of St. Francis of Assisi contains many lessons for those trying to follow the vocation of a victim soul of substitution. The booklet, which presents that vocation (English version - *'Identification with the Sacred Host'*) was written by two Franciscan nuns, so it is not surprising that the love of Christ Crucified shines through it, in much the same way as it did in the life of this great saint. St. Francis of Assisi, Patron of the Tabernacle of St. Francis, pray that we follow the vocation of a victim soul of substitution in the way shown by Our Crucified Redeemer. We join St. Francis in praying;

*"O Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace:
where there is hatred, let me show love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, harmony;
where there is doubt, faith;*

where there is despair, hope.”

*“O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.”*