

Re : Workshop # 7: Mary, inspiration for our life

Excerpts from the CIOFS Manual : section FRANCIS AND THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

FRANCIS AND THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

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The Virgin Mary, humble servant of the Lord, was open to his every word and call. She was embraced by Francis with indescribable love and declared the protectress and advocate of his family. The Secular Franciscan should express their ardent love for her by imitating her complete self-giving and by praying earnestly and confidently. (Rule 9)

To develop a true knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made Man, calls for a tender devotion toward his mother, Mary. She was very much a part of his life, being with Christ in Bethlehem and Nazareth, but more importantly on Calvary. St. Francis recognized this special relationship with her son in light of our redemption. Therefore, he bade his followers to love her as their queen and their mother.

1. The Word of God

Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2:33-35; John 19:25-27; also Lk 1:39-56(Visitation); Lk 2:41-52(the finding in the temple); Jn 2:1-12 (wedding at Cana); Acts 1:12-14(Mary and the Apostles); Rv 12:1-6 (the woman and the dragon).

2. The Church Speaks

Constitution on the Church, 52 -69, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 4

The function of the Blessed Virgin in the plan of salvation: The sacred writings of the Old and New Testaments, as well as venerable tradition, show the role of the Mother of the Saviour in the plan of salvation in an ever clearer light and call our attention to it. The books of the Old Testament describe the history of salvation, by which the coming of Christ into the world was slowly prepared. The earliest documents, as they are read in the Church and are understood in the light of further and full revelation, bring the figure of a woman, Mother of the Redeemer, into a gradually clearer light.

Considered in this light, she is already prophetically foreshadowed in the promise of victory over the serpent which was given to our first parents after their fall into sin(Gen.3:15). Likewise she is the virgin who shall conceive and bear a son, whose name shall be called Emmanuel(Is.:14; Mic.5:2-3; Mt.1:22-23). She stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently hope for and receive salvation from him. After a long period of waiting the times are fulfilled in her, the exalted Daughter of Sion and the new plan of salvation is established, when the son of God has taken human nature from her, that he might in the mysteries of his flesh free man from sin.(LG 55). St. Irenaeus says, —being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race ||

The early Fathers asserted in their preaching : —the knot of Eve's disobedience was united by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith. || Comparing Mary with Eve, they call her —Mother of the living, || and frequently claim: —death through Eva, life through Mary. || (LG. 56)

The church has granted her several titles of distinction: Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, Mediatrix. .Mary is our helper on the road to salvation; she points the way to Jesus, never to herself. She is a model for the universal Church, leading others to Christ. Mary's title as —Mother of God, || *Theotokos* declared at the Council of Ephesus in 431. It is also mentioned that this is the oldest title we have for Mary, and the only title the Eastern Churches use to this day. An explanation can be found in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI *Marialis Cultis, For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, promulgated on February 2, 1974. Here, Paul VI goes into depth concerning Mary's place in liturgical worship, proper mention of her in the Liturgy of the Word., Liturgy of the Eucharist, and Liturgy of the Hours. Her prominent place on the liturgical calendar is pointed out.

3. Our Franciscan Heritage.

Francis embraced the Mother of our Lord Jesus with indescribable love because, as he said, it was she who made the Lord Jesus our brother, and through her we found mercy. After Christ, he put all his trust in her and took her as his patroness for himself and his friars. In her honor he fasted every year from the feast of Saints Peter and Paul until the Assumption. (Major Life IX, 3. Omnibus, p.699)

As he was living there by the church of our Lady, Francis prayed to her who had conceived the Word, full of grace and truth, begging her insistently and with tears to become his Advocate. Then he was granted the true spirit of the Gospel by the intercession of the Mother of Mercy and he brought it to fruition. (Major Life III, 1. Omnibus, p.646)

Toward the Mother of Jesus he was filled with an inexpressible love, because it was she who made the Lord of Majesty our brother. He sang special praises to her, poured out prayers to her, offered her his affections, so many and so great that the tongue of man cannot recount them. But what delights us most, he made her the advocate of the order and placed under her wings the sons he was about to leave that she might cherish them and protect them to the end.(II Celano 198, Omnibus, p.521), also Writings of St.Francis 4 Salutation of the Blessed Virgin (p.135); Celano,First Life 24 (248); Legend of the Three companions Ch.V 15 (905); Mirror of Perfection 55 (1177)

Francis was known for his great devotion, reverence and imitation of Mary, the Mother of God,. He acknowledged the unique position given her by God: she is the daughter of the Father, the mother of the Son and spouse of the Holy Spirit. From the titles Francis has attributed to Mary in the Praises, we can see the great reverence and devotion he had for the Mother of God.

The first four titles share with us the ways in which Francis envisioned Mary as holding within herself the Son of God. Palace, Dwelling, Robe, Tabernacle are all words that conjure up thoughts of enclosure. Mary held within her, both physically and spiritually, the Word of God. One of the first examples of Mary that Francis tried to emulate was her hearing and obeying the will of God.

Several Marian traditions have been attributed to the Franciscan charism. Legend holds that the Angelus might be one of them. While visiting the Sultan in 1219, Francis was inspired and awed by the Muslims call to Prayer five times a day. On his return home, in a Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples, he exhorted them: — *that every evening an announcement be made by a messenger or some other sign that praise and thanksgiving be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God.*”

Following Francis’ fervor, the members of the Franciscan Family have always held Mary in high esteem. Two followers in particular have championed her cause. One is the beloved St. Anthony of Padua, the —Evangelical Doctor. || In his many sermons, Anthony praises Mary for her role in our redemption, from her initial —Yes || to her stalwart stance at the foot of the Cross.

A second Franciscan worthy of mention in regard to Mary is Blessed John Duns Scotus. He was a Franciscan Philosopher and theologian who, against most of the prominent voices of his time, including St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure, held firm to the concept that Mary was conceived without the stain of Original Sin. Duns Scotus’ argument for the Immaculate Conception was very simple. In Latin, —Potuit, deicit ergo fecit; || translated, —God could do it, should do it and so he did do it. || It was possible for God to grant this favor to Mary, her release from Original Sin before the actual act of redemption, and he deemed to do so.

These two teachings held so firmly by our Franciscan forbearers are two of the three dogmas proclaimed infallible by the Church, Mary’s Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1854 by Pope Pius IX and her Assumption on November 1, 1950 by Pope Pius XII. These dogmas were reaffirmed by the Council Fathers of Vatican II *Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.*

4. Franciscan Focus

Our love for Jesus includes his mother. St. Francis loved Mary as a devoted son. As the spouse of the Holy Spirit, she not only made Jesus, the Son of God, our brother, but Francis saw how she shared his poverty and suffering. Being our mother too, she gives her example to strengthen us in our efforts to be poor and humble servants of the Lord.

Mary is the mother of the whole Church, of all those baptized into the death of her Son. Through her union with his sufferings on Calvary, she gave birth to his Body the Church. Francis called her the queen and mother of his Order. He wanted her to love and protect those of her children who give her honor by serving the Church according to a life-style that reflects her Son’s earthly life - and hers. Francis loved her so much because he felt she showed him how to fulfill his desire to follow wherever Christ would lead him.

Our own Franciscan tradition holds up for our consideration two devotions to Mary as alternative means of praying the Liturgy of the Hours: the Franciscan Crown Rosary and the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. Francis noted Mary to be the first disciple of our Lord. He followed her example unreservedly. He urges us to do the same.

In the Office of the Passion, Francis made an exception. He wrote an Antiphon to the Blessed Virgin to be prayed before and after each psalm. In it, he praised Mary in her trifold role as Mother, Daughter and Spouse; he also petitioned her to pray for us from her privileged place at the side of her Son.

A deep and abiding love for Mary, the mother of Christ and our spiritual mother, is a characteristic mark of the Franciscan Order. The constitutions of the SFO fix this love in Secular Franciscan life (Article 16). Saint Francis himself prayed to her before each hour of the Office:

—Holy Virgin Mary, there is none like unto you born in the world among women, daughter and handmaid of the most high king, the heavenly Father! Mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ, spouse of the Holy Spirit, pray for us with Saint Michael the Archangel and all the virtues of heaven and all the saints, to your most holy, beloved Son, our Lord and Master. Amen. ||

5. Mother of the Franciscan Order

The cradle of the Franciscan Order was the Portiuncula (*—The little Portion ||*), the poor little church outside Assisi which was dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels. It was no accident that this greatest of mothers should stand again at a poor cradle. To Francis, Portiuncula was a royal castle, like that other one at Bethlehem, for poverty was the badge of the noble children of God. He said, *— Poverty is a royal virtue, because it shone so brightly in the King and Queen ||* (Celano, *The life of Saint Francis*)

Like all good mothers, Mary teaches us. Above all, she teaches us humility. It is beautifully expressed in the song of Mary, the Magnificat. Mary was humble in recognizing her complete unworthiness before God. She trusted confidently in the perfect love of God always eager to lift his creatures up to divine childhood and perfect joy.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why is Mary the Mother of the Franciscan Order?
2. What virtue does Mary especially teach us?
3. Read Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter 8 and give personal reflections.
4. Describe your relationship with Mary, the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of God, our Mother.
5. What event in Mary's life brings you closer to her as your mother?
6. How often do you recite her rosary?