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EDITORIAL

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, All Peace & Good! I hope that you and your loved ones have enjoyed a blessed and grace-filled Christmas and New Year!

Not too long ago, I was invited to lunch at the Capuchin Friary here in Oxford. At this same lunch was a Bishop from Italy who was, at the time, residing in Oxford to study English; we spoke about the challenges involved in learning a new language, and how just a little encouragement can go a long way. Over lunch, the theme of encouraging others, broadened somewhat, and I realised that I had the theme for the next Golden Thread – Encouragement!

It is interesting that a conversation concerning the importance of encouraging one another in our pilgrimage of faith, should take place between Conventual and Capuchin friars. In the *Life of St. Francis* (the first biography written of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano, 1228–1229) one of the descriptions of the saint from Assisi was that he was, *'friendly in behaviour, serene in nature, affable in speech, generous in encouragement... gracious in everything'* (Chapter 29). So, among his many other charming qualities, St. Francis was *'generous in encouragement'*. Here I am reminded of the Scriptural proverb, *'pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body'* (Proverbs 16:24). Indeed, words and deeds of

encouragement, when rooted in truth and witnessed to in charity, can have a profound effect in a person's life of journeying with the Lord; making the pilgrimage more fruitful and faith-filled.

It wasn't, however, until I started to write upon this theme that I discovered there is much less material on the matter than I had presumed there would be. Interestingly, for example, the noun 'encouragement' doesn't appear once in the English translation of the Catholic Catechism, although variations of the verb 'to encourage' do appear. Referencing many of my 'go-to' spiritual books, I have been surprised at the lack of direct references to 'encouragement' as a type of act of mercy. Although much of this can be put down to the fact that many synonyms exist, still, in a certain sense, I have been surprised at this apparent lack of attention paid to the importance of us giving heartfelt and Christ-imbued encouragement to one another in the spiritual life.

There is a lot of truth in the '*It is easier to pull down than to build up*'. Cities which have taken centuries to build can be effectively levelled in one night of heavy bombing. A giant Sierra Redwood which began growing at the time of Our Lord's birth, can now be felled in a matter of hours, by a few workmen with chainsaws. The saying, however, also holds true for less concrete realities. Lumbered, as we all are, with a fractured human nature

which makes us prey to all sorts of temptations and misunderstandings, it is often much easier (and attractive) for us to succumb to sin, than it is for us to undertake the hard work of striving for virtue with the help of God's grace. With hearts susceptible to a hasty hardening, and with minds that like to nibble on half-truths and gossip, how much easier is it for us to *'pull down'* a person rather than for us to encourage them and thus help to build them up? Being tender with the weak, compassionate with the scrupulous, patient with the difficult, and kind towards those sufferings can seem to take so much more effort than does muttering a cross or cruel.

With this Winter Edition of the Golden Thread focusing on the theme of Christian encouragement, we'll be able to see how it is that we can rightfully call upon Our Lady under the title: *'Mother of Divine Encouragement'*. Let us never forget that, far from diminishing us, when we take the time to encourage a person rather than simply chide or neglect them, we are mirroring and imitating Christ. Jesus reached out to us poor sinners and said, *'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'* (Matt. 11:28) and He told His frightened disciples to, *'Take heart, it is I; have no fear!'* (Matt. 14:27). Let us, then, seek to encourage one another! Let us not be afraid to encourage a person back to the regular and joyful reception of the Sacraments, back to Sunday Mass, back to daily

scripture reading, back to praying the Rosary, back to friends and family from whom they may have become estranged, back to living life fully with the grace of God! If the Prophet Isaiah was able to foresee that Our Lord wouldn't break the bruised reed or quench the dimly burning wick (Isa. 42:3), let we who know and love Christ seek, like the good Samaritan, to be compassionate with the wounded and struggling. Let us help to bind up their wounds with the Good News, and to generously pour the oil and wine of kind words upon the afflicted. Let us lift them up the downtrodden from their patch of distress and take care of them.

The title 'Our Lady of Encouragement' is, in fact, closely related to the title 'Our Lady of the Annunciation'; both titles, each in their own manner, help to equate the Blessed Virgin with the Springtime (the dawning of salvation, the heralding of new life, the advent of new hope, the kindling of encouragement for the future). What a wonderful time, then, to release this Winter edition of the Golden Thread! The days are just beginning to lengthen, and by the time you manage to finish reading this Edition, doubtless Spring will be in full force! It is my hope and prayer, as always, that reading this Magazine will help to give you some real spiritual encouragement, comfort, and consolation. Please be assured of my continued prayers, and please keep the friars and myself in your prayers! Our Lady of Divine Encouragement – pray for us!

Fr. Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.

ENCOURAGEMENT AS FOUND IN SACRED SCRIPTURE

THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, the word ‘encourage’ is most closely associated with the idea of *strengthening*. The English verb *to encourage* is used to translate the concepts behind several Hebrew words [ׁןָמֵט *(to be strong, to make firm)*, חֲזָק *(to be firm, to be strong, to grasp)*, אָמַךְ *(to support, to provide for)*]. Interestingly, in at least some English translations of the Old Testament (for example, the NRSV), the noun *encouragement* is not used once, although it would be a mistake to make too much of this. In the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament used at the time of Jesus), the word that is most often used to translate the Hebrew variants of ‘encouragement’ is *katischýō* (κατισχύω: *to prevail against, to overcome, to be superior in strength to*).

Without seeking to simplify things, it is fair to say that, in the Old Testament, *encouragement* tends to be given in one of two ways: firstly, good leaders encourage their followers, and secondly, fellow believers encourage one another. Here, encouragement is to be understood as provoking an interior change in another person: either in their recommitting to the mission entrusted to them, or in helping to change their attitude/heart – allowing them to remain faithful.

In this sense, the Old Testament understanding of *encouragement* might be described as being a natural kindness or a personal encouragement. This encouragement, however, is not to be belittled or overlooked, as it serves a profoundly important role in ensuring that, aided by God’s grace, people

remain faithful to the mission that God has given them, refusing to doubt His glory or power. Below, we will look at just a few examples when such encouragement is given, and we will reflect upon what lessons we might be able to glean for our own situations today.

It should be noted that, in this short overview, focus won't be placed on what might be termed 'sinful encouragement' (examples of which can also be found in the Old Testament). This is where some persons shamefully *encourage* others to engage in acts or behaviour which do not please God (Cf. 2 Sam. 11:25 – when King David seeks to encourage Joab after having had Uriah wrongfully killed; Ezek. 13:22 – regarding false prophets who have encouraged people in their evil; Isa. 41:7 – regarding those who encourage one another in the making of idols).

In the Old Testament, we find the Lord telling Moses '*Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter [the Promised land]; **encourage him** for he shall cause Israel to inherit it'* (Deut. 1:38). Here we have the Lord instructing Moses (an elder) to encourage Joshua (a younger) who would succeed him. This precept is given utterance again shortly afterwards '*charge Joshua, and **encourage and strengthen him**; for he shall go over at the head of this people, and he shall put them in possession of the land which you shall see'* (Deut. 3:28). Again, we see the Lord insisting that a man to whom He has chosen to entrust much, must be *encouraged* by those around him (including elders), and not belittled or cowed in the task at hand.

From these short passages, we can extrapolate broader realities: the need, for example, for fathers to encourage their sons, for pastors to encourage their flock and for religious

superiors to encourage those placed in their care. In fact, the Second Vatican Council Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priest (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) clearly outlines this holy obligation, noting that the priest, *'can set up a sure hope for their faithful, that they may encourage those who are depressed by the same consolation wherewith God encourages them'* (§13.3, 1965, cf. 2 Cor. 1:4). Likewise, we can discern the need to pray for and encourage those to whom the Lord has entrusted the task of shepherding His holy people.

Nearly seven hundred years later (and over a century before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC) King Hezekiah *encouraged* the people to trust in God when the King of Assyria (Sennacherib) came to fight against Jerusalem. Scripture recalls how Hezekiah *'gathered them together to him in the square at the gate of the city and spoke **encouragingly** to them (spoke to their hearts), saying, "Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him; for there is one greater with us than with him" ...the people took confidence from the words of Hezekiah king of Judah'* (2 Chr. 32:6–8).

We see, here, how important it is for those who have been placed as shepherds and leaders over God's people, to *encourage* those who look to them for reassurance. Pastors and leaders are charged with helping to soothe the anxieties of their flock, by reminding their listeners that they belong to God, for Whom nothing is impossible (Cf. Matt.19:26; Lk.1:37). In Scripture, the giving of holy and faith-filled encouragement – especially to those who are, perhaps, weaker and less able than oneself – isn't presented as a sign of weakness, neither is it an

improper condescension. In fact, the very desire and the willingness to seek to encourage people to trust God, is affirmed as being one of the hallmarks of a person striving to reach full stature and maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:13).

Well over half a century later, we find another King – Josiah – encouraging his people. This time, encouragement is given to the Levites who are serving in the house of the Lord. Scripture recalls how Josiah *‘appointed the priests to their offices and **encouraged** them in the service of the house of the Lord. And he said to the Levites...“Now serve the Lord your God and His people Israel”’* (2 Chr 35:2-3). Although this scene is from Old Testament times, still, it isn’t improper for us to draw from this scene a lesson for today, namely, the importance of encouraging our priests in their vocation of service, in fidelity to Christ. Although Josiah himself wasn’t a Levite, this didn’t prevent him from giving gracious and heartfelt encouragement to those who were. Just as the shepherds and pastors of God’s Holy People ought to encourage the faithful, so too, the faithful ought to encourage their shepherds. Although encouragements can be of different tones and character, nevertheless, encouragement – like charity itself – is a two-way dynamic. To give encouragement is to recognise the dignity of the other, to accept encouragement is to accept that one’s own self has a dignity as a child of God.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

In English editions of the New Testament, the terms *encourage* or *encouragement* are typically used to translate the Greek verb παρακαλέω (parakaleō) and the noun παράκλησις (paraklēsis) or

a cognate. However, it should be noted that these same Greek words can be translated into many similar English words. For example, the verb *parakaleō* can also be translated as: to console, to urge, to comfort, to exhort and to beg. Likewise, the noun *paraklēsis* can be translated as consolation, comfort, appeal and exhortation. It can be observed that, in the New Testament, when the word is used to denote encouragement, comfort or consolation, these realities have, as their source, God Himself. A few examples of this are placed below. Unfortunately, these are only a small sample of the instances, because the verb *parakaleō* is used over a hundred times in the New Testament, and the noun *paraklēsis* is used around thirty times.

‘When he [Barnabas] came and saw the grace of God, he was glad; and he encouraged [parakalei] them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose’ (Acts. 11:23). Interestingly, earlier in the book of Acts, we find this same man, named Joseph (who was a Levite and a native of Cyprus), being given the surname ‘Barnabas’ by the Apostles – a name which means ‘Son of Encouragement’ [huius paraklēseōs]. Here we can ask ourselves if, in our parishes, religious communities or families, our own brothers and sisters in Christ would call us men or women of encouragement.

‘And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing encouraging [parakalōn] him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”’ (Acts. 16:9). Here, the encouragement given is explicitly linked to the proclamation of the Gospel – in this case, the first time that the Good News would be proclaimed on European soil.

*'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and **God of all encouragement** [Theos pasēs paraklēseōs], who encourages us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction, with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God' (2 Cor. 1:3-4).* The New Testament – illumined, as it is, by the Light of Christ and the flame of the Holy Spirit – teaches us that God is the source of all holy encouragement; it is from Him that we receive this encouragement, and in turn, we should then be willing to generously apply this strengthening salve to others. In fact, it was only while I was researching for this edition of the Golden Thread that it occurred to me that St. Paul's *Second Letter to the Corinthians* could be titled. 'The Epistle of Encouragement', as the verb 'to encourage/comfort/ exhort' appears eighteen times, to say nothing of the many other occasions in this letter that he uses the noun 'encouragement'.

'we beseech and encourage [parakaloumen] you in the Lord Jesus' (1 Thes. 4:1). As Christians, the encouragement we give one another must rise above natural encouragement alone (good as that might be); it must be rooted in, and oriented to, Christ. We ought to lift one another up, because we desire all to be saved; we must reject anything that would undermine the dignity of another, precisely because we know how precious each and every soul is to Christ, and at what cost we have been bought through His Precious Blood.

'For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement [paraklēseōs] of the scriptures, we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement [paraklēseōs] grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 15:4-6). Here St. Paul is highlighting that we, by affirming God's divine attributes and by cooperating with His grace,

might be God-like with one another; we imitate God's goodness and through this grace-filled and sincere imitation, we are woven together in a Godly unity. The Apostle is also describing how divine aid is given to the Church through the exhortations and encouraging events recorded in the word of God which, along with Sacred Tradition that has been handed on, helps to give the sure hope of final deliverance from the sufferings and trials of this life.

'may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father, Who loved us and gave us eternal encouragement [paraklēsion] and good hope through grace, encourage [parakalesai] your hearts and establish them in every good work and word' (2 Thes. 2:16-17). Here we find both the Divine Person of God-the-Father and the Divine Person of God-the-Son involved in giving us love and encouragement (comfort and consolation). When we understand that, elsewhere, St. Paul grafts the Holy Spirit into this same dynamic of encouragement (Cf. Phil 2:1-2: *'if there is any encouragement [paraklēsis] in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit...complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love'*) then we can see that the Divine bestowal of encouragement to the Church, has an explicitly Trinitarian character. While we would avoid saying that, from all eternity, the Three Divine Persons have 'encouraged' one another, we can certainly say that one of the ways that we mortals *experience* the eternal dynamic of Divine Love is through receiving encouragement, comfort, consolation and strength from God.

Strengthened by the grace and love of God, and having received encouragement from God themselves, those who have been called to be shepherds in Christ's Church are to encourage, console and comfort the faithful. Likewise, believers themselves – who have been marked as belonging to Christ through baptism – are to encourage one another to imitate and love Jesus. This

dynamic of mutual encouragement must go way beyond simple words of goodwill or motivational sentiments; the encouragement that Christians ought to give one another must be aimed at encouraging people to strive to enter the narrow gate, through the grace of God (Cf. Lk.13:24). The inspired writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* puts it beautifully when he writes ‘*take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But encourage [parakaleite] one another every day...that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*’ (Heb. 3:12–13).

As Christians, we are part of the one body of Christ. When we embrace this mystical reality, we come to understand how it is that when we see another brother or sister in the Lord sinning, we can’t simply look away; instead, we must *encourage them* to re-fix their gaze and hearts on the Lord. We, too, must be open to such correction and encouragement if we have begun to err and fall away from the fulness of what Christ is calling us to. In the New Testament, there is great attention given to the encouragement of those who are weaker in the faith. All too often, we can be tempted to disregard or dismiss those who are struggling. Sacred Scripture teaches us that we must pour into the lives of others the same encouragement and strength that we have received from God.

Concluding this overview, I am here reminded of the words of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, who, in his Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) wrote the following:

Saint Paul describes kindness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). He uses the Greek word *chrestótes*, which describes

an attitude that is gentle, pleasant and supportive, not rude or coarse. Individuals who possess this quality, help make other people's lives more bearable, especially by sharing the weight of their problems, needs and fears. This way of treating others can take different forms: an act of kindness, a concern not to offend by word or deed, a readiness to alleviate their burdens. It involves "speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation and encouragement" and not "words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn."
(§223)

Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Our Lady of Divine Encouragement

It is my hope that, in this coming year, we can call upon Our Lady as '*Mother of Divine Encouragement*'. Why '*Divine Encouragement*', and not simply '*Encouragement*'? Well, the answer is very straightforward when we possess a sound appreciation of the richness of the Scriptural language associated with the Biblical theme of encouragement, and the Trinitarian and Christological dynamics at play. All good things – including holy encouragement – have God as their source and vivifying power. The dawning of Christ and the salvation that He has won for us means that, through baptism, we have been incorporated into His body; what we receive from God, we share with all the members of His body!

We can look at things this way. As a number of saints have described, Mary is like the neck of the Mystical Body: her maternal vocation is to support the head [Christ]; Mary is subordinate to her Divine Son, but she nevertheless occupying a singular place of privilege in helping to move His living members according to God's Will. Rather than possessing a type of productive power of grace – something that belongs to God alone – Mary's 'power', if it can be called that, lies entirely in her holiness and in her with Christ. This is the very reason why no homage is sweeter to Mary than that we should truly know and love Jesus.

Christ's faithful receive *Divine Encouragement* in many ways, most especially and ordinarily through the worthy reception of the Sacraments. But as Mother of God and as Our

Mother, Mary is involved in this nourishing and consoling of her children. Then, like a child that has rest in its mother's arms (Ps. 130:2), when we have been encouraged, comforted and strengthened by the Divine Grace of Christ that Mary has helped to mediate to us, we are compelled to share the fruits of this holy reception with others. This is why we can also use other Marian titles such as '*Mother of Divine Consolation*' and '*Mother of Divine Comforting*'. Here, I am reminded of that beautiful passage in the Prophet Isaiah '*as a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you*' (Isa. 66:13). Mary is our mother in the order of grace, and she comforts, consoles and encourages us with a mother's heart. Mary's desire to encourage and comfort us is rooted in her vocation as both virgin and mother; her virginity is her gift to God, her maternity is God's gift to her – and through her Divine Son – God's gift to all of mankind.

Indeed, the fortieth invocation of Our Lady in the current Litany of Loreto is '*Comforter of the Afflicted*' (or Encourager/Consoler of the Afflicted). In the New Testament, is the Greek noun θλίψις (thlipsis) which is typically translated as 'affliction' (but also as: oppression, tribulation, pressure or distress). We find this used forty-five times in the New Testament, with the verb, θλίβω (thlibō) used ten times. Regarding this verb, one of the beautiful images in the New Testament which helps to shine a light on the Blessed Virgin as '*Encourager of the Afflicted*' comes from St. Paul's *First Letter to Timothy* regarding the conditions which must be met for a widow to be enrolled:

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband; she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted [thlibó] and devoted herself to doing good in every way (1 Tim. 5:10).

Given that St. Paul and St. Luke were close companions, and given that St. Luke must have met with Our Lady (being, as he is, the only Evangelist to record so many of the intimate details of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Presentation and the Finding in the Temple), I don't think that it is a stretch to say that it could well have been St. Luke's report of the Blessed Virgin that provided St. Paul with the model by which to judge the qualities required for a woman to be enrolled as a widow; Our Lady is, as always, the exemplar, the perfect model of every virtue. Mary had been the wife of one husband (St. Joseph) and there can be no doubt that, in the Apostolic church, the Blessed Virgin would have been well-attested to for her good deeds and hospitality. Mary had brought up Jesus (her only child of the flesh) but was likely to have been a mother-figure for countless orphans or other family members. Given that her Divine Son had washed the feet of the Apostles, Mary surely would have imitated her Son in this act of humility and service. We can barely imagine the compassion and tenderness with which the Blessed Virgin relieved the afflicted and, as Christ's perfect disciple, the perfection of her life as she devoted herself to prayer.

In researching for the title 'Our Lady of Divine Encouragement' I discovered that, in Polish, the Blessed Virgin can be invoked – especially during the late winter months/early

spring – under the title ‘*Matka Boska Zagrzewnej*’ [Our Lady of Warmth]. After having discovered this Marian title, I spoke with a Polish Conventual Franciscan priest who lives with me in the Oxford Friary to gain a better understanding of its significance. Here is what I discovered. The title ‘Our Lady of Warmth’ is a title given to the Blessed Virgin Mary by the faithful in Poland, on the occasion of the Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord. This title is bestowed as, at that time, the days are getting warmer, brighter and longer.

In fact, in Polish Christian folk tradition, the Blessed Virgin Mary is venerated as the patroness and creator of all life that awakens in the spring. Here, we find can find other related Marian titles such as, ‘*the Virgin Mary of the Rosemary*’ (Mary’s sacred fruitfulness mirroring the opening and awakening of the soil to new crops), ‘*Matka Boska Ożywiająca*’ (Our Lady of Revival: at the end of winter and the beginning of spring) and ‘*Matka Boska Strumenna*’ (Our Lady of the Streams: as the ice on the rivers and lakes begins to melt). In fact, in Polish Catholic folklore, it was held that storks and swallows would arrive on the day of the Annunciation of the Lord, and there are also proverbs associated with this. The title ‘*Matka Boża Pocieszenia*’ corresponds directly to the title ‘Our Lady of Encouragement’ (or Consolation).

Mary: Virgin and Mother

Being conceived without sin, Mary was loved into existence by God in a unique manner; from her very first moment, Mary was a singular object and locus of the Divine Love of the Triune God. The Blessed Virgin is, therefore, the only creature to have been

able to respond to the immaculate love of God, with the gift of a love flowing from an immaculate heart. While a pilgrim on earth, Mary herself received comfort, consolation and encouragement from God, and she now seeks to share herself with her spiritual children.

As the Blessed Virgin once nursed Our Lord from her own body, helping to strengthen and comfort Christ's sacred flesh (through which our salvation would be won), Mary now nourishes us with the heavenly graces won for us by her Divine Son, that we might attain the salvation Christ holds out to us! What Jesus won for us on the Cross, Mary now distributes, applies, pours out and clothes us with, precisely because God has given her the vocation of being a mother, not only to His Divine Son, but to all of His faithful and, indeed, to all of mankind.

Mother of God, Mother of the Church and our mother.

The very first day of every new calendar-year is dedicated to '*Mary, the Holy Mother of God*' – a solemnity of profound theological significance regarding the Goodness of God and the majesty of His creation. God reserved for the Blessed Virgin, the most perfect and highest place in His created order. Indeed, this truth was testified to, in a wonderful manner, by Pope Bl. Pius IX in the very first chapter of his Bull '*Ineffabilis Deus*' (8th Dec 1854, which dogmatically defined the Immaculate Conception)

'God enriched Mary, so wonderfully far and away beyond all the angelic spirits and all the saints, with the plenitude of every celestial favour drawn from the treasury of the Divinity, that she, entirely free as she always was from every stain of sin, and all beautiful and perfect, presented such a

full measure of innocence and sanctity, that a greater than it, under God, is not understood; and no one, except God, can ever in thought comprehend’.

The Church calls Mary ‘Mother of God’. This doctrinal matter was settled, definitively, at the Council of Ephesus (431 AD; Third Ecumenical Council: *Anathemas of Cyril*). The closing chapter of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church – *Lumen Gentium* – is dedicated to reflecting upon ‘*Mary in the Mystery of Christ and the Church*’ (§52–69). Throughout this Chapter, the theme of Mary’s motherhood is revisited continually, with a type of Marian litany of the *Motherhood of Mary* presented with wonderful imagery. Here, while the Blessed Virgin is situated, unambiguously, *within* the Mystical Body of Christ, Mary is also the perfect icon of the Church: virgin and mother, immaculate yet fruitful.

Lumen Gentium carefully details how, owing to her unique proximity to God and to His saving work, Mary occupies a place of special honour within the Church. At all times, the wonder and glory of Mary is attributed to her spiritual (and through Christ, familial) relationship with the Three Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity. The Chapter then broadens the scope of these familial bonds, expressing how, through Mary’s relationship with God, the Blessed Virgin is also the mother of the members of Christ. After all, Mary gave birth to Christ, the head of the Church; a mother never simply gives birth to a *head*, but helps to bring forth the *whole body*. Profound spiritual realities must be extrapolated from the fact that Mary truly conceived and gave birth to God incarnate.

Owing to the wholly singular manner in which Mary cooperated in the salvific mission of her Divine Son – helping Him to restore, to souls, the supernatural life that had been lost through sin – Mary is rightly understood to be a mother to each one of Christ’s faithful ‘in the order of grace’ (*Lumen Gentium*, §62). Mary truly is, then, ‘Mother of the Church’ and, in an Address given at the conclusion of the Third Session of the Second Vatican Council (21 November, 1964, §29-30, 32), it was Pope St. Paul VI who formally declared this Marian title. Below is a short extract from this Address:

it seems necessary to us that, in this public session, we officially enunciate a title with which the Blessed Virgin Mary is to be honoured, which has been requested by various parts of the Catholic world and is, to us, one which is particularly dear and agreeable, because with an admirable synthesis, it expresses the privileged position that, in regards the Church, this Council has recognised as being proper to the Mother of God. Therefore, for the glory of the Blessed Virgin and for our consolation, we declare Mary Most Holy Mother of the Church, that is, of all the Christian people, both of the faithful and of the Pastors, who call her the most beloved Mother; and we resolve that, with this title, all Christian people henceforth ought to pay greater honour still, to the Mother of God, addressing supplications to her...Just as, in fact, Divine Maternity is the cause for which Mary has an absolutely unique relationship with Christ, and is present in the work of human salvation

accomplished by Christ, so also Divine Maternity flows, above all, from the relationships that exist between Mary and the Church; since Mary is the Mother of Christ, who as soon as He assumed human nature in her virginal womb, as Head, united to her, His mystical Body, that is, the Church. Therefore Mary, as the Mother of Christ, is also to be considered the Mother of all the faithful and the Pastors, that is to say of the Church.

In 1980, the Holy See granted the faculty to add the invocation of the title '*Mary, Mother of the Church*' in the Litany of Loreto, and in 1986, the Holy See published other formularies in the Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Then, on 11th February 2018, Pope Francis signed a Decree inserting, into the Roman Calendar, the Memorial of '*Mary Mother of the Church*'. The Decree outlined how this Memorial '*should be inscribed in the Roman Calendar on the Monday after Pentecost and be now celebrated every year*'. In this Decree, the Virgin Mary is titled '*both the Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church*'. By citing St Augustine and St Leo the Great, the Decree highlights how the title of Mary as *Mother of the Church* is one that has been present in the mind of the Church since her earliest days. After providing a succinct scriptural overview of Mary's relationship with Jesus within the context of man's salvation, the Decree cites certain recent developments which paved the way for establishing the universal Memorial of '*Mary, Mother of the Church*'.

In a Notification which was published a month after the Decree, it was highlighted how the texts of the Memorial

'illuminate the mystery of Spiritual Motherhood' and that the Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church *'is linked to Pentecost, as the Memorial of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary is similarly linked to the celebration of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus'*. The recognition of the extent to which Mary's maternal vocation is interwoven to the salvific mission of her Divine Son's, lies at the core of a sound understanding of the title 'Mary, Mother of the Church'.

Mother of our faith

When proclaiming His Good News, Christ spoke about the 'good soil' (*Parable of the Sower*, Lk. 8:4-15) capable of receiving God's word. The Blessed Virgin Mary, owing to her immaculate heart and soul, possesses an unparalleled receptivity-of-heart to God, and a perfect docility to His Holy Will. Whenever, therefore, we think of the Blessed Virgin Mary in terms of Virgin and Mother, we must think of her in terms of *'Mother of the Church and Mother of our faith'*. We must never lose sight of the fact that, both before and after the Annunciation (Lk. 1:26-38) Mary is a fully human person, and although she has been conceived without sin, while on earth she nevertheless still had to make a human response to God (termed in Scripture as 'the obedience of faith', Cf. Rom 1:5; 16:26). Indeed, the Catechism affirms that *'the Virgin Mary most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith'* (CCC. 148).

However, in some concrete sense, faith can never simply be a private or individual reality – faith is always something which implicates and encompasses a community or congregation; Mary herself, at the Annunciation, was to be found within a living,

wider community of believers who, further still, shared a common history and journey of faith. While a pilgrim on earth, Mary used her natural human faculties to give assent to God's purposes, allowing her life to be conformed entirely to His Divine will. Mary's example, in turn, *encourages us*, her spiritual children, to place all of our natural human faculties at the service of our Lord. As a mother, Mary calls us – both as the Church and as individual believers – to welcome the tidings and promises brought about by the advent of her Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and to then render our full assent to His saving truths, taught to us 'forever whole and alive' by the Catholic Church. (Cf. Vatican Council II, *Dei verbum*, §7.1, 1965). Our Lady of Divine Encouragement – pray for us!

Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.

ST. MAXIMILIAN MARIA KOLBE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

The theme of encouragement certainly features in the writings of St. Maximilian, and it does so in a variety of simple and touching ways. For example, in a letter concerning a priest who had died, Fr. Kolbe wrote to his younger brother, *'How many times did he give me strength and encourage me to go ahead with the work for the Immaculata when I visited him, anguished and almost discouraged'* (6th March, 1927). Maximilian's younger brother – Fr. Alfons Kolbe – was also a Conventual Franciscan priest, and was likewise involved in the Militia Immaculata (MI) apostolate.

Reading such material helps us to realise that, when they lived on earth, even those destined to be canonised saints nevertheless appreciated the consolation and encouragement of others in their labours. On another occasion, when Fr. Kolbe was writing to drum up support, ideas and contributions to help with the Marian apostolate at Niepokalanów, he penned a little phrase in one of the monthly magazines published by the friars, directing the readers to: *'Suggest, encourage, persuade'* (Knight of the Immaculate, April, 1928). Perhaps I should adopt this little slogan for the Golden Thread as I seek much needed help for Our Custody's Marian apostolate!

At other times, it is Fr. Maximilian who is seeking to give encouragement, like the time he was writing to a cleric of the Mariological section of the Militia Immaculata circle in Krakow

And now a few words of encouragement...The MI was started and developed through holy Obedience. It could not have been otherwise, for its essence is to belong to the

Immaculata. Being of the Immaculata, as a servant, child, slave, possession, property and so on. In short, belonging to her in every respect. To annihilate oneself and become her. The essential component of such a transformation consists in conforming, in merging, in uniting our will with hers (18th April, 1934)

Indeed, it is quite common, in his letters, for St. Maximilian to acknowledge the importance of brothers encouraging one another, *'I am enclosing a few letters to encourage you'* (14th June, 1934) and *'I always strove to encourage him, to comfort him, and if he acted rashly because of his lack of health, I would always wait for the right moment to admonish him'* (8th May, 1938). It is very clear from his writings just what a balanced, well-adjusted, spiritually and humanly mature person Fr. Kolbe must have been. He acknowledges, with a glad spirit of gratitude, the many and various types of encouragements he himself received from others – and he isn't shy to admit how important such words of encouragement were for him at the time. Similarly, he is generous, warm and joyful in the encouragement he gives others. The encouragements he gave were entirely lacking in sentimentality, formality or flattery. Instead, they were personal encouragements given to help build people up, and to acknowledge their efforts and sacrifices.

Within a year of the Second World War having started, Fr. Kolbe wrote a letter (16th July, 1940) in which he included extracts from fellow friars. These friars had written to Fr. Kolbe to express their suffering at no longer being able to live their consecrated religious life in Niepokalanów (the City of the Immaculate, Poland) owing to the persecutions, expulsions,

dangers and difficulties of the war. In one extract, a Franciscan friar had written, '*longing for monastic solitude causes me unspeakable pain, the lack of religious companionship and fraternal conversation makes me painfully suffer. Next to me, I do not have any of my religious brothers, in whom I could confide, comforting each other, encouraging each other to a more willing forbearance of this moral suffering*'. Deeply saddening as such extracts are to read, they do serve to give us an insight into the rich and genuine culture of fraternal charity and encouragement that Fr. Kolbe had helped to foster, among the friars, at Niepokalanów.

In the magazine *Knights of the Immaculate Informer* (published at Niepokalanów) Fr. Kolbe wrote the following. It is a lovely example of his writings on which to conclude this current overview:

Let us turn our gaze to Jesus, our most perfect model. He, God, holiness itself, gave Himself to the Immaculata with no reservation. He became her son, wanted her to lead Him as she liked for a good thirty years of His earthly life. Could we possibly need better encouragement? Let us follow the example of Jesus and from this moment renew the promise made to the Immaculata. Let us endeavour to live in such a way as to become every day, every moment increasingly the property of the Immaculata; let us fulfil, that is, the will of the Immaculata ever more perfectly' ('Will of God and Will of the Immaculata, September, 1938)

Quotations taken from: *The Writings of St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe*, vol. I [Letters] & vol. II [Various Writings], ed. DI PIAZZA, A., Nerbini International, Firenze, 2015.

Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Friar Peter George Flynn OFM Conv.

Friar Peter George Flynn, OFM Conv. is a solemnly professed Conventual Franciscan friar, living in our Oxford Friary. He is currently undertaking theological studies at Blackfriars. Friar Peter George assists our Custodial Delegate for Vocations (Fr. Jeremiah Budău, OFM Conv.), and he has kindly submitted, for publication in this edition of the Golden Thread, the following conference he recently gave to a group of men who spent a weekend with the friars in Oxford to discern a Franciscan vocation. In a Golden Thread Edition which has focused upon Encouragement, it is wonderful include something that was written to both instruct and encourage those discerning a vocation. Please pray for vocations to the priesthood and to consecrated life, and please say a special prayer that our Custody might receive vocations from the Lord. Prayers, also, for both Fr. Jeremiah and Friar Peter George as they engage enthusiastically with this vitally important ministry. In fact, Fr. Jeremiah can be seen in a photo which appears later in the 'News' section of this edition.

FRANCIS: THE GREAT INTENTIONAL DISCIPLE

A CONFERENCE FOR THOSE DISCERNING THEIR VOCATION.

Based on an original idea by Fr. Jeremiah Budău, OFM Conv.

An 'intentional disciple' is someone who intends to follow Christ's teaching on the understanding that Christ is their

personal teacher and friend. It is the opposite of what used to be called a 'Sunday Catholic', and nearly synonymous with what Protestants refer to as 'a personal relationship with Christ', but without the individualistic bent which that phrase can convey. There are five steps which a Christian, growing in the faith, will pass through as they become an intentional disciple.

1. Trust
2. Curiosity
3. Openness
4. Seeking
5. Intentional discipleship

The story of St. Francis' vocation is one of the many steps of many seemingly false steps. – but if even one of these steps had been omitted, it would not have been Francis' vocation. It will be the same with anyone reading this article who has considered a Franciscan vocation – the wrong turns, the U-turns, the dead ends you have taken will become clear when you find out what is God's plan for your life. All the loose ends will come together. I cannot promise you happiness, but I can promise you that much.

The first step which anyone must take is to trust someone. A person comes to faith by trusting someone who has faith – a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a missionary. St. Francis was to begin a new way of life, so there was no-one to teach him how to do it – except Jesus. Our Lord had to win his trust – Francis had to come to trust Christ and no other. And so, Francis, the jolly man-about-town, the life and soul of every party in Assisi, was

stricken down by illness, an illness which worked a healing we cannot imagine. The other moment of trust was when he felt called to be a knight. He trusted in his armour and weapons, and these failed him. He was taken prisoner at the Battle of Collestrada and was a prisoner-of-war in the common gaol of Perugia.

This experience must have caused him to trust more in the Lord. When he returned to Assisi, the city he had failed to defend successfully with his sword, the city perched on a rocky outcrop defended by sturdy walls and watchtowers, he may very well have stood on his head as G.K. Chesterton imagined he did, and saw that the city which seemed so strong and indestructible right-side up, turned out to be so fragile and dependent when seen upside down, dangling and ready to drop off into outer space except that it was sustained in place by the will of a loving God. The stone walls and houses could never respond to this immense grace of sustenance with which God embraced it, but Francis could – with TRUST.

The next step is curiosity. We try to get someone interested in our story by finding something they like to latch on to and connect it with the Gospel message. Have they a favourite cause or hobby or hero whom we can fit into our narrative? If we find something which they like, which piques their interest in God, we have to realise that it is a gift from God, a grace which only he could give and which we can only understand through his guiding us. I met a Catholic lay-preacher from the States once, who believed that she could reach a person by showing them that there was a saint in heaven who shared a common interest with them: the Holy Grail which she was seeking would be a canonised

or beatified who had been a Star Wars fan – how many people who feel they would be more at home in heaven if they knew that a Skywalker fan was, for want of a better word, a ‘sky-walker’! How did God, having entrusted Francis with a tremendous sense of trust in Him, stir a curiosity in the possibility of beginning a new way of following Him?

Each person grabs on to some aspect of God, something which will satisfy what they need in particular. Now God is One, True, Good, and Beautiful. St. Augustine came to know God as One, the simple immutable eternal God who was the only one who could unite and integrate the shattered fragments of his soul. St. Thomas Aquinas in his thirst for wisdom came to know God as Truth, as indeed did St. Bonaventure. Certain artistic rascals who lived scandalous lives but produced stunning works of devotional – like the Franciscan tertiaries Michaelangelo and Franz Liszt, and Francis Thompson – came to know God as Beauty, even though they probably would only have said their prayers when they were in trouble. Many Franciscans discover God through his oneness, his beauty, and his truth, and these play a part in Francis’ vocation too, but Francis saw God above all as Good.

We find it in Francis’ own writings, where he called God, All Good, Supreme Good, and Complete Good. The characteristic of people who find God through His Goodness is that they love friendship, they love helping people, and they altogether wear their hearts on their sleeves. We see it in those moments of joy where young Francis, on a night out with his friends, was enraptured by... something... and his mates teased him, saying that he was thinking about some girlfriend he had not yet told

them about. 'Yes' responded Francis, *'and a more beautiful bride than you can imagine'*.

Lady Poverty turned out to be her name. He sought out beggars and marginalised people. However, the first act of goodness which we know that Francis performed was while he was still a prisoner of war. There was an extremely annoying fellow-prisoners whom all the other POWs shunned – all except Francis who went out his way to be with this guy and to cheer him up. (This is a skill which is quite necessary in religious life, and indeed in Christian family life!)

The next act of charity which we know that Francis performed was to a poor knight who came to Francis, begging. Francis gave him first his cloak and then whatever money he had. Then he was rewarded by God with two dreams – the first was of a castle filled with weapons and trophies and spoils of war, without commentary. He didn't quite get the gist, but as a former knight, his curiosity was ignited. He had a second dream – he was back in the castle, and he heard a voice:

'Francis, which is it better to serve, the servant or the Lord?'

'The Lord,' replied Francis.

'Then why do you persist in serving the servant?'

Henceforth we see Francis moving from being merely curious to being open. It is not as cataclysmic as the move from trust to curiosity, or as definitive as the final commitment, but it is necessary. It involved Francis taking himself to holy places. He went on pilgrimage to Rome to pray at the tombs of the Apostles. (Would he have dreamt that, someday, the tombs of the Apostle

Philip and James the Lesser in the Basilica of Santi Apostoli would be entrusted to his Conventual Franciscan Order? Or that his conventual friars would be the Confessors at St. Peter's Basilica where he used to throw heaps of pennies through the grating down into the tomb of the first pope?)

He dressed in the clothes of a pauper and hung around with the poor people in Rome. He was living the life that Pablo Picasso said he wanted to live: 'I want to live as a poor man on a rich man's salary.' Though he slummed it not his hearts content in Rome, he would have the assurance of returning to his father's cloth businesses in Assisi and the comfortable lifestyle it afforded. That stage of openness when we live between two world and it is up to us to shut the door behind us, or is it? Here we discover the primacy of prayer, the most enduring aspect of the phase of openness to the Lord. Francis went to pray in the caves and hills which surrounded Assisi. He also prayed every time he passed a church: 'We adore you, O Most Holy Lord Jesus Christ, here and in all your churches that are in the world, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.'

During one of these moments in prayer, a temptation directly from the devil assailed him. He saw in his mind's eye a hunchbacked woman who was a familiar sight in Assisi. The devil, with much bravado, boasted that he would put the hump from her back upon Francis'. As he was quivering in terror at the thought, he heard the consoling voice of the Lord saying: 'What is bitter to you, I will make sweet.'

We reach the stage of seeking, hovering between seeking and final commitment. Seeking is indispensable but it is something which should only be temporary. It can be like dating

– it should be a prelude to making a choice whom to marry. Some people just want to keep seeking – they can never abandon the excitement of exploring, the thrill of falling in love, the wistfulness of being curious over a question to which one knows the answer already. God never shuts one door without opening another, but some people are more intent on watching the phenomenon of God’s perpetual door-opening, hoping to see what’s behind the next one, rather than stepping through the only door which matters: the one before him.

The seekers are not always to blame: often, people in vocations promotion mistake a seeker for a curious person, and instead of giving him proper encouragement, treat him as a write-off. Other times, a vocation director will mistake a curious person for a seeker and end up putting a lot of undue pressure on him.

It would seem as if St. Francis is the patron saint of perpetual seekers when see corny pictures of him wandering here and there, befriending the local livestock, and in general being the hippy-dippy vagabond of the Lord. But if Francis seemed to live a life of seeking, it was due to a very definitive choice which served to rupture him from his previous life. The definitive moment when God, as promised, caused Francis to taste what was once bitter as sweet, was when Francis broke the habit of a lifetime. Francis had an aversion to the sight of lepers. He would go two miles out of his way to avoid a leper colony.

And then one day, despite his best efforts, a leper crossed his path. He was going to fob him off with some money but he was overwhelmed with the divine desire to embrace the leper. He stopped in his tracks, turned round, embrace the leper, and

never looked back. Or rather, he did look back momentarily to take leave of the leper and saw that there was no-one there. The leper had disappeared ... and so Francis realised that all his great efforts began and ended in God's initiative, and in condescending to embrace the leper, he realised that God had first condescended to embrace him.

We mark out the moment when Francis hugged the leper and resolved to become an intentional disciple as if it were a spectacular moment. And it was. But it was one moment in a sequence of moments, starting with his baptism and followed by moments of clarity, encouragement, victory over temptation, trust, curiosity, and seeking. Any readers who have been contemplating a vocation have been blessed with at least one such moment. All of us Christian disciples are waiting for the next moment, whichever that might be. One may be tempted to rush or one may be tempted to dawdle. It is clear, however, that the Lord was always the first mover in such moments. Francis knew that the vocations to his Order were gifts from God. He did not seek out brothers. He did not go on a vocations promotions tour. In fact, the brothers were a trial for him. Instead of a small, pure band of brothers, he got a huge swell of applicants looking to be friars or fakers, idealists or idlers, bringing to the order more talents and more troubles. Francis himself said: 'And the Lord gave me brothers.' Vocations to the Franciscan Order were God's idea; dare I say, it was God's desire! Our good desires are God's first of all – we only respond to them. To what is the Lord giving you?

Questions to consider:

- Am I an intentional disciple or a Sunday Catholic?
- Am I the kind of person who understands God as One? Do I understand God as Good? Or do I understand God as Truth or Beauty?
- If I am discerning, which step on the path to intentional discipleship have I reached?
- Do I have any companions, either friends in this life, or particular Catholic saints, who are accompanying me in my journey?
- Who is St. Francis for me?

Friar Peter George Flynn, OFM Conv:

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NEW CONTRIBUTORS TO THE GOLDEN THREAD

As the Custodial Delegate for our Order's Marian Apostolate, part of my fraternal responsibility towards the Custody is to continue producing our online Marian Magazine – the Golden Thread. For some time now, it has been my intention to broaden the scope of those contributing articles to the Magazine. As well as encouraging my own Conventual brothers to put pen to paper, I have also sought to include the contributions from other Franciscans – both religious and secular.

Sr. Ewa Maria Hop, OSC (Order of St. Clare of Assisi)

It is, therefore, with great joy that I introduce a contribution from Sr. Ewa Maria Hop, OSC. Sr. Ewa comes from Tychy in Upper Silesia (Poland). Since 1993, she has been a Poor Clare nun. Sr. Ewa completed master's studies in fundamental theology and postgraduate studies in anthropology, psychology and Christian pedagogy. She is fascinated by the possibility of getting to know God and His saving presence in history. Her broad interests in biblical exegesis, theology, philosophy and culture are verified in the silence of her monastic life, prayer and service to the community.

Sr. Ewa recently published her own book *The Passion according to Saint Francis of Assisi* (Bratni Zew, Kraków 2023) in which she presents one of the important prayers composed by the Saint. The prayer, modelled on the Liturgy of the Hours, consists of 15 psalms which are compilations of biblical verses. The image of Christ that emerges from these psalms is beautifully

consistent with the preaching of the Church. Sr. Ewa conducts sessions on Christian meditation, and is involved in catechetical work concerning our Crucified Lord. Her next book about Saint Francis' prayers will be published soon. A short section from Sr. Ewa's first book, currently only available in Polish, has been translated for this edition of the Golden Thread by Sr. Ewa herself (reviewed by Sr. Danuta Wloczka, FDC – the Daughters of Divine Charity). Sr. Ewa's book is available at www.bratnizew.pl and searching for the book title '[Pasja według świętego Franciszka](#)'. It should also be noted that, in addition to her notable intellectual and academic gifts, Sr. Ewa has also made (i.e. sown and stitched) many beautiful things for the Oxford Friary, including a golden cope for Eucharistic Adoration, and heavy winter mantles (coats for friars) to keep the brothers warm in the cold and wet weather!

BOOK: THE PASSION ACCORDING TO SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Extract: The Portiuncula, pp.68-73

The house of Mary, the Mother of Jesus and ours

If St. Francis spoke about the Son of God, Jesus, he could not omit the One whom He Himself had chosen. In the *Office of the Passion of the Lord*, besides the Person of Christ and the Father who listens to the voice of the Son, Mary is the third person who is clearly present in this prayer. In the Antiphon, which is repeated with each psalm, St. Francis asks for help from Mary as the most important intercessor with Jesus.

The Poverello was full of heartfelt love for the Mother of Christ. He saw her in relation to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, but what inspired him most was Her participation in the life of the Son of God. He contemplated Her role as mother. She made Him our brother when She received Him into her womb and gave birth to Him in Bethlehem. She was by His side during various events of His earthly life and, through His exaltation, She was also assumed into heaven.

When Francis, at the beginning of his conversion, set about repairing neglected churches, one of them was the church called the Portiuncula. The patroness of this church was Mary in the mystery of her Assumption, which in popular piety was rendered as *Santa Maria degli Angeli* – Holy Mary of the Angels. At that time, the church was located in the midst of a dense oak forest. It is also often called a ‘chapel’, because it is small and, at that time, there was no fixed horarium of prayer observed there. It served the Benedictine monks of Monte Subasio during periods of work in the nearby fields.

In this little church, Francis received another new light for his conversion. After a dream on the way to Spoleto and an extraordinary call in San Damiano, here this young man, during the Liturgy, was moved to the depths of his heart by the Gospel reading: the command of Christ to the apostles to proclaim the Good News.

After talking to the priest, who explained this passage to him, he was overjoyed and exclaimed: “*This is what I want, this is what I am asking for, this is what I want to do with all my heart!*” Then he also changed the hermit’s garb to a poor tunic, sewn in the shape of a cross; instead of a leather belt, he tied a

simple cord around his hips; he also began to walk without sandals and without a walking stick. He clothed himself entirely in the victory of the Cross – we can conclude with Brother Thomas – and took up a life according to the Holy Gospel: following in the footsteps of Jesus.

When the first friars joined St. Francis, and when the Pope had approved their form of life, they initially settled in Rivotorto, but soon began to look for a new place. It was then that the Poverello received the Church of Our Lady of the Angels from the Benedictines. There, together with his brothers, he founded the first monastery, or rather a group of hermitages made of branches and clay (romitoria). Francis' hermitage also looked like this. This is where he returned after his expeditions and where he wanted to die. His romitorium was later turned into a little chapel of relics.

At that time, few friars could read, and few knew how to recite the breviary. Francis composed simple prayers for them based on verses from the Holy Scripture. Francis also composed a prayer to the Virgin Mary, which reveals how deeply he reflected on her relationship with the Persons of the Trinity, especially with Christ. The Poverello meditated with empathy on Mary's maternal love for Her Divine Son. Perhaps this was partly because he himself was much loved by his mother, Pica. She built up his self-confidence, protected him from his father's wrath and, when he was punished by being locked in the dungeon at home, she bravely released let him and let him go to seek his destiny.

Her attitude was for Francis a model of caring, sincere and genuine love. He recommended that the friars should be caring

for each other like mothers. He himself was often called Mother by his friars. He also had great respect and love for his friars' mothers. One testimony tells us that he ordered a book to be given to one of the mothers because she was very poor. He wanted her to sell it and so obtain the means to support herself. He also instructed the friars that the mother of one of them was the mother of each.

Francis was convinced that in order to know, imitate and accept Christ well, we must learn from Mary. She shared with Christ his poor life. She carried within her the presence of the Holy Spirit, who helped her to see events and persons not with the 'eyes of the flesh' but in God's light. She accompanied her Son faithfully when He taught, and also in Jerusalem when He was condemned and crucified. By her humility, She became the Mistress of all the Saints.

The Saint of Assisi believed that through the special relationship that Mary had received to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, She would obtain salvation to every repentant sinner, and liberation and eternal rest to the deceased. Therefore, he asked Pope Honorius III to grant the grace of plenary indulgence to those praying in the church of Our Lady of the Angels. At that time, such a privilege was granted to pilgrims to Jerusalem, Rome and Compostella. Such pilgrimages could be afforded by very rich or very determined people. Lost in the midst of the Umbrian woods, the Portiuncula thus became yet another place of spiritual rescue and deliverance, thanks to the graciousness of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer.

Today, the Portiuncula Indulgence can be obtained in any parish church when one fulfils the conditions assigned to this

spiritual privilege. The indulgence – that is, the grace of being freed from the punishments of Purgatory, or in other words, from the spiritual consequences of the evil committed – can be asked of God for oneself or for a deceased person.

Sr. Ewa Maria Hop, OSC

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

Edmund Matyjaszek

Another new contributor to the Golden Thread is Mr. Edmund Matyjaszek. Edmund, who lives on the Isle of Wight, is a poet and a playwright. He has written extensively on Walsingham and on Our Lady. His book, *“The Rosary: England’s Prayer”* is published by St Pauls Publishing, Westminster (www.stpauls.org.uk) and the Franciscan Seculars on the Isle of Wight have featured his poetry on their website. Below are two of Edmund’s poems titled *Christmas Night* and *Padre Pio* – thank you Edmund!

Christmas Night

Sacred, sombre, silent night.
Stars, unstill in fierce assertion,
Seize the sky. The moon steers
A sickle sail through clouds of muslin light.
I study
The cold air chilled on the spiked white ground
From morning’s nativity.

A spear of sorrow Jack-Frost piercing
In sharp iced steel.
“Simeon, Simeon”
I stagger
Uneasy
With the stare of stars.

Rejoice! Rejoice!
The carolling sky of Sirius,
Blue with an acid that touches off pure flame,
Revolves
Declarant constellations
And there
The high bright star in its sure place,
Pouring down rimed roof-tops cascades of praise.

Padre Pio

It was the hands - a slight fragrance,
Like soft, not quite burst summer flowers,
Tender with promise, still encrusted,
Edged with ridged petals of blossom
And life. I came to understand
The heart struck that day you fell back,
Marked with stark insignia of service,
Fifty years of suffering and pain.

I do not know where Eden flourishes,
When we, bereft of our instincts, fail
To find her; but there, in cupped hands,
You lift its covenant - Christ's wounds - to the world.

NEWS

On Sunday the 24th of September 2023, the feast of our Lady of Walsingham, Roksana Drycz, Matthew Drycz and Carl Southward made their final profession to the Third Order of Saint Francis. This celebration of Holy Mass and profession was made at the Church of St. Clare in Blackley, Manchester, with Father Jeremiah Budau OFM Conv. presiding. Liam Redmond, regional minister, and Lesley Anders, regional formation minister, served as the ministers in the profession and Peter Gordon Smith and Peter Orr served as witnesses from the St. Clare's fraternity. The Holy Mass was accompanied by live music provided by the children of Roksana and Matthew Drycz and was attended by other members of the St. Clare's fraternity as well as family and close friends.

It was a very special and joyous day to witness the devotion and excitement with which these newly professed entered into a life more reflective of the Gospel. During the Mass, Fr Jeremiah spoke about the image of St. Francis embracing Jesus on the cross, and how it can be used to symbolise Jesus helping St. Francis onto the cross and to share in His sufferings. It was such a powerful way of introducing the importance of our crosses in the new life of following St. Francis. It was an honour to sing our thanks to our Lord and our Lady for the graces received from this day.

*Written by Lucia Drycz,
a daughter of Roksana and Matthew Drycz*

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Extracts from Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis – Holy Mass on the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God - St Peter's Basilica: 1st January, 2024.

God becomes man and He does so through a woman, Mary. She is the means chosen by God, the culmination of that long line of individuals and generations that 'drop by drop' prepared for the Lord's coming into the world. The Mother, then, stands at the very heart of the mystery of time. It pleased God to turn history around through her, the woman. With that one word, 'woman', the Scripture brings us back to the beginning, to Genesis, and makes us realise that the Mother and Child mark a new creation, a new beginning. Thus, at the beginning of the time of salvation, there is the Holy Mother of God, our Holy Mother... Just as Mary, the, played a decisive role in the fullness of time, she is also decisive in the lives of each of us, for no one knows better than a Mother the stages of growth and the urgent needs of her children... Let us look to Mary, in order to become artisans of unity. Let us do so with her maternal creativity and concern for her children. For she unites them and consoles them; she listens to their troubles and she dries their tears. And let us look upon that tender icon of the *Virgo lactans* [of Montevergine Abbey]. *That is how our mother is with: how tenderly she looks after us and draws close to us. She cares for us and remains close to us. Let us entrust this coming year to the Mother of God. Let us consecrate our lives to her. With tender love, she will open our eyes to their fullness. For she will lead us to Jesus, who is Himself 'the fullness of time', of every time, of our own time, of each one of us.*

ENCOURAGEMENT: A PRAYER POEM

A word can hurt or heal, so speak the Good and let Him live.
A viewing of the world sees both shadow and the Light,
so focus on the Bright, and let His glare win out.
The breath brought in, can come to live as either sigh or smile,
so strive to breathe out Godly peace.
What is sown is later reaped,
and what is tasted helps to make the man who sows.
So, choose sound and sacred seed to scatter,
choose cheerfulness and thoughtfulness,
choose gentleness and hopefulness,
choose gratitude and joyfulness, redemption and forgiveness.
The bad is quickly done,
and its bitterness is seasons in the lasting.
The Good takes grace and strength to do,
but its beauty, self-renewing, lasts eternal days.
Encourage, console and comfort!
Urge, appeal and beg!
Your brother, like all things touched by sin,
is prone to wear and wound:
your words can either help to mend or break him.
Grace is at its greatest when it finds us on our knees.
So we must pray and speak and act with love,
and seek to set our brother free.
For very little grows in hale and chill,
but gentle rain and gentle sun,
help lift the eyes and raise the man.

Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv