

Homily for the General Chapter Sanctuary of LaVerna – May 31, 2015

The readings from this Sunday, which follows the Solemnity of Pentecost, introduce us to the mystery of God. God is a mystery that cannot be explained or fully understood but rather must be experienced in a profound way in our lives, in a way that helps us to become living tabernacles! The brief conclusion to the Gospel of Matthew, which we have just heard, reminds us that even before the Gospel story was written down, it was being lived. The believing community was enlivened by the Spirit of the living Lord. They went out and announced the Good News, and baptized new children of God, following the command: “Go...make disciples...and baptize them.”

First there was the evangelical life being lived in obedience, the liturgical celebration, the experience of the Risen One and the Spirit crying out in believers, “Abba, Father!” Then came the written Gospel as believers sought to go deeper in understanding and reasoning out what their new faith meant. The Trinity was first seen by these redeemed children of God and experienced in their fraternal communion. Only *then* did it come to be understood on the level of written dogma. What a precious thing for us to keep in mind!

We will never reform our lives or the Order by producing final documents. These only capture the last moments of a process. Francis himself only wrote the majority of his works during the last six years of his life. Before this, the life was being lived, being prayed, being experienced and shared, including the mistakes that were made. He didn't simply write down what needed to be done, first he did it. He prayed, he took risks, he compromised...As an obedient son, without “being enslaved again to fear” (see Rom 8:15) he let the Lord mold him. And beginning with a prayer that the Lord would “enlighten the darkness of his heart,” he slowly moved more into prayers of praise, admiration, and trust in the Most Holy Trinity.

Here, in this precious spot of LaVerna, we know that Francis once freed a brother from a violent temptation. We know that he experienced the stigmata and that he also, with his own wounded hand, wrote a beautiful prayer and blessing for the consolation of Brother Leo. Maybe our pilgrimage can give us the courage to pray for ourselves what Francis asked of the Lord: “that I feel as much as possible in my body the love and the pain that You, Lord Jesus experienced in Your Passion.” (see FF 1919). Maybe we too can ask this grace: that we be signed in our bodies by the Passion of Jesus (knowing the love that moved Him and the pain He experienced), that our *flesh* too become *vessels*, become quasi-sacraments of the Lord's redemption.

Perhaps our stigmata will not be an external one. Maybe a wounded humanity is our stigmata, wounded by life but given the efficacious grace of redemption! The world we live in today does not need more teachers, more written documents, more empty words. We need witnesses, we need bodies in which the wounds of Christ can be seen and touched. We need bodies like that of Francis, a theology written on our flesh!

After celebrating Christmas at Greccio, Francis celebrated the Paschal Triduum here. Here is where we see his maturation and transformation, in the Pauline sense (Romans 8). Here he experienced a dissonance: on one hand he experienced the “loss” of the Order by definitely turning it over to God's care, but on the other hand, his lineage experienced new life in his stigmata. John Paul II in a pilgrimage to this place in 1993, said to the Friars in their refectory: “Francis was born in Assisi, but Franciscanism was born here at LaVerna.”

After his personal Paschal experience, Francis no longer had followers, he had descendants, the fruit of God's blessing, according to what the Bible promises. He released control of God's work and allowed it to play out according to God's will. He generated sons and fathers, heirs of God and

coheirs with Christ! His “flesh” was no longer the same, it was transformed so that, in the words of the first reading from Deuteronomy “his sons would prosper and have long life on the land which the Lord, their God, had given them forever!”

My dear brothers, we not only must contend with the difficulty of *understanding* the Trinity with our minds, we must also confront our resistance to entering into Trinitarian life! Perhaps our flesh resists entering into the heart of the Trinity because we do not want to pass through the *doorway*, which is the Cross! We can do good works, be generous givers, respect the environment, be active pastorally, and still not enter into the heart of God...

Our founder Francis went before us: now it is our turn, we Ministers and the Friars under our care, to pass through the doorway: “to keep the Passover with Him,” as Saint Bonaventure would say when he reflected on the gift of the stigmata and wrote his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* in this very place.

After the stigmata, with his own hand Francis wrote the *Praises of God* and the *Blessing for Brother Leo*. He wanted to give consolation and to free his brother from the torment he was undergoing. This great act of mercy helps us understand what Francis experienced here: he encountered a God who seeks not to receive but to give. And Francis responded with a desire to go beyond himself and give to his brothers, something that we must strive to do, even when we have to fight against our cumbersome egos.

Truly the Passover of Jesus is the ladder that led Francis to transcend into Divine life, into the Triune God! This ladder stands before us as well. It contains the next steps in a maturation that will truly make us sons who are fertile and have the continued ability to generate more children. “Go...make disciples...baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (MT 28:20).

Praises of God Most High

You are holy, Lord God, who works wonders.
You are strong, You are great, You are the most high,
You are the omnipotent King, You, holy Father, King of heaven and earth.

You are three and one, Lord God of gods,
You are good, all good, the highest good, Lord God living and true.
You are love and charity, You are wisdom,
You are humility, You are patience,
You are beauty, You are meekness,
You are security, You are rest.
You are gladness and joy, You are our hope, You are justice,
You are temperance, You are all our riches and sufficiency.
You are beauty, You are meekness.
You are the protector, You are our guardian and defender,
You are strength, You are refreshment.
You are our hope, You are our faith, You are our charity.
You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life, great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God,
Merciful Savior.

Blessing to Brother Leo

The Lord bless you and keep you,
(May God) show his face to you and have mercy on you.
May the Lord look upon you with kindness and give you peace.
The Lord bless you, Brother Leo.