

Faithful Living

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans; home bound and others.

THE APOSTOLATE OF SUFFERING

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The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross

--Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2015.

Brother Francis' apostolic experience began from the very beginning of his conversion until his death, and for him, the whole world was the "theatre" of his apostolate! Following closely the example of the apostles, Francis sought personal holiness, giving glory to God and preaching conversion wherever he went. During the early years of his apostolate, Francis began by announcing peace, doing penance, fasting, serving the lepers and rebuilding churches. As the fraternity of friars grew, Francis' apostolate, like that of St. Paul (I Thes.), became a service of ordinary work for their daily bread, of assistance to the poor, of continual prayer, and of suffering. This service or apostolate of suffering, due to lack of rest, illness, persecutions and interior spiritual anguish began early in Francis' call to conversion.

During his imprisonment in Perugia in 1203-1204, Francis had his first serious illness. After his conversion, the itinerant life and malnutrition left him more susceptible to tuberculosis, anemia, stomach ulcers, liver and gall bladder problems. During his trip to Spain in 1215, he suffered from fevers, inability to speak for 3 days and a general physical collapse. After a series of eye infections beginning in 1219, Francis suffered from glaucoma and cataracts, which eventually left him totally blind by 1224. Francis was plagued by recurrent severe fevers from 1220-1221, possibly caused by malaria. In the fall of 1224, bearing the wounds of the Stigmata, Francis returned to Assisi giving thanks to God for granting him the grace to endure the constant pain and total blindness.

Often bedridden "by his sister infirmities," his general declining health and bouts with depression, Francis had to depend more and more upon his faithful brothers Leo, Angelo, Rufino, John and Maseo. Despite his poor health, Francis continued to be faithful in his vocation, taking an active interest in the wellbeing of the Order and its ministry.

"I worked with my own hands, and I am still determined to work; and with all my heart I want all the friars to be busy with some kind of work..." The Testament of Francis, 1226

The Canticle of the Creatures, written during Francis' final years, give testimony to his strength of will to persevere and dwell in a climate of grace - his perfect joy!

"All praise be yours, my Lord,... through those who endure sickness and trial.
Happy those who endure in peace; By you, Most High, they will be crowned."
--The Canticle of the Creatures, 1224

St. Clare and St. Anthony, contemporaries of Francis, also endured many years of severe illnesses. Clare, bedridden for many of her final years, continued to be involved in the administration of her Poor Ladies, and received papal approval of her Rule just prior to her death in 1253.

"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."
St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 12:1

All of us will experience times of difficulties and illness during our lives. Illnesses may even prevent us occasionally from active participation in fraternity life, yet as Franciscans we can take solace from the examples of Franciscan life as lived by the many blessed before us. We can offer our very selves and our sufferings to our Heavenly Father as our spiritual worship. If like our Brother Francis, we can compose a canticle of praise with our lives, whatever our circumstances may be, we will experience a climate of grace and perfect joy.

"Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks, and serve him with great humility."
The Canticle of the Creatures St. Francis of Assisi

Further reading: St. Francis & the Cross by R. Cantalamessa, OFM Cap.
and Cardinal C. M. Martini, SJ