



DEAR FRIENDS,

By tradition, 800 years ago, on 16th April, 1209, a former knight and soldier received verbal approval from Pope Innocent 111 to begin a new religious order — the Franciscans.

The former troubadour was a lover of non-violence, and this spirit dominated his whole life. Thus sin, for Francis, is anything that breaks the unifying bonds between people and the natural world, between God and us. For Francis, the Cross was the representation of the creed of non-violence.

Over these 800 years, we know the remarkable influence Francis has had on society. There have been films, theatrical premiers, plays and even music written on his life – even two indie bands in America cite him on their website. Clare Goddard recently wrote a play on the saint, and resolutely sets the story in the present day. I was impressed with her belief that “Francis never really died – more than any other saint, he continues to live in each of us.”

Did you know that when Maggie Thatcher entered 10 Downing Street in May, 1979, she prayed the Peace Prayer of Francis? I also read that the critics of Barack Obama’s tax plans, quoted Francis to the President “It is not lawful to take the things of others to give to the poor!” (It is interesting to note that, as a boy, the President attended the St. Francis of Assisi school in Jakarta.)

Besides his non-violence stance, we know that Francis’s message of poverty was a potent antidote in an age obsessed with material advancement at the cost of both human lives and earthly resources. Eight centuries later, his message is just as potent for us as it was in his time. Francis loved everyone equally, for he saw each person as a marvel of God’s creation. Are we able to see other cultures as friends, and not as “others”? Dr. Peter Vardy writes that this polarisation is happening in Iran, Afghanistan and increasingly in Pakistan. Therefore, we need to be willing to talk to those who are perceived as “different”, maybe to share a meal with them, to understand them and their perspective. St. Francis is surely asking this of us today.

As we celebrate these 800 years of Franciscanism, let us continue to follow and imitate this great peace-maker – let us not close ourselves off in our own selfish, comfortable little world. Sadly today, so many are as deaf

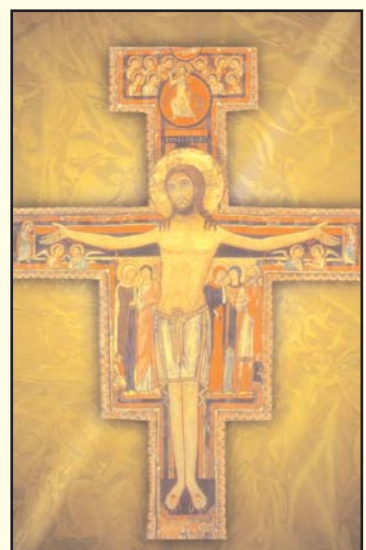


to his message as they were in his own lifetime. My prayer for us all, eight centuries after Francis established his Order, is that we always be mindful of his vision and ideal – *“Always obedient to the Church and firmly established in the faith, let them live according to the poverty, humility and the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Love,
Sr. Liz

THE CRUCIFIX THAT SPOKE TO FRANCIS

The San Damiano Crucifix is possibly the best known and venerated crucifix in the world. In 1206, it was probably hanging above the altar in the apse of the abandoned Chapel of San Damiano, just outside the town of Assisi, in the Umbrian region of Italy. (The Chapel was in a state of disrepair, and so the Blessed Sacrament would not have been reserved there.)



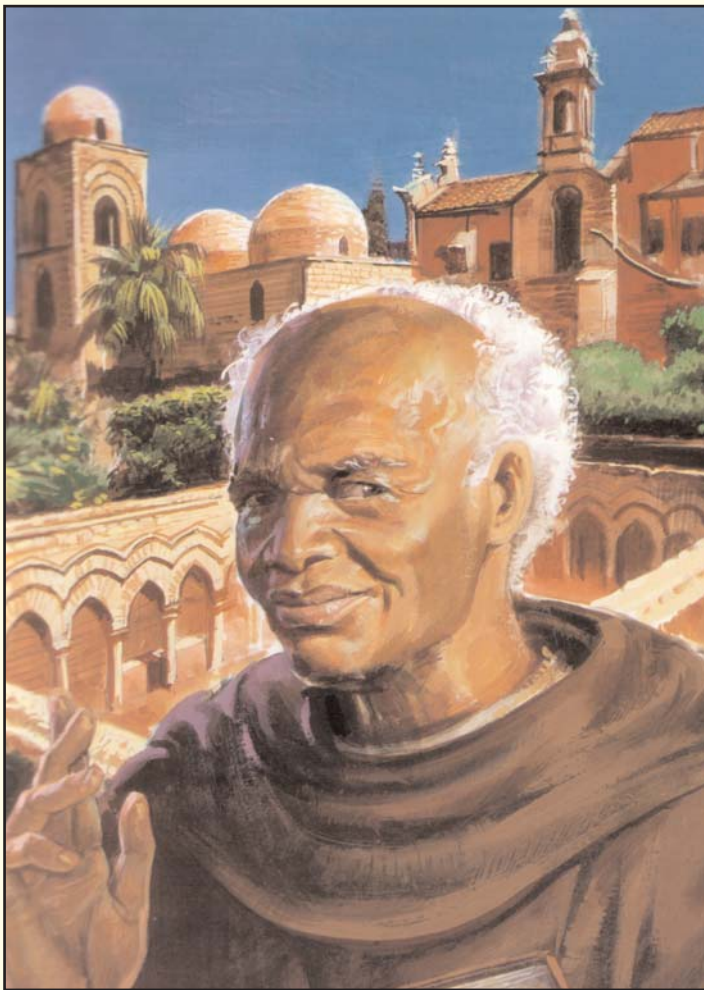
When the young Francis entered to pray, he heard a voice coming from the crucifix, saying, *“Francis, go and repair my church which is falling into ruin.”* When Francis left that chapel, he felt a deep sense of mission, and from that day on, his life was irrevocably transformed.

The Icon Cross that spoke to Francis has been in the care of the Poor Clare sisters since the time the saint took them to San Damiano shortly after their foundation. When they left the San Damiano convent in 1257 and moved to the safer convent in Assisi, they brought the crucifix with them. Since 1958, it has hung in the Church of Santa Chiara, where thousands of pilgrims to Assisi are able to pray before it, just as Francis venerated it so long ago.

The San Damiano Crucifix portrays a living, triumphant Christ – it is Christ, both human and divine, whom we meet through this Icon. It is unique in that it reveals the whole Paschal mystery of Christ – suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. It is no wonder Francis was so attracted to it.

The image of Jesus is dominant in the cross of San Damiano, just as Jesus was dominant in the life of Francis. Yet many other figures crowd the scene in this famous icon crucifix. Each tells a story, and in the following issues we shall reflect on these characters, who all show a sense of joy. They will surely produce feelings of joy in us, too, just as it did for Francis 800 years ago.

ST. BENEDICT THE BLACK



Remember the great excitement most of us felt when Barack Obama became the first Afro-American President? Recently, I was delighted to read that the

Patron Saint of all Afro-Americans is a Franciscan. His name is Benedict the Black.

As a slave who was given his freedom, Benedict the Black, also known as Benedict the Moor, devoted his life to God. Born near Messina in Sicily, Italy, in 1526, he became a hermit and later superior of a community of hermits. When the community was disbanded, Benedict became a Franciscan lay brother at St. Mary's Friary in Palermo, Sicily. At first he served as the cook, and was later appointed superior. However, he preferred a life of service, so asked to be relieved of such responsibilities, and became the cook again.

Benedict had a reputation for holiness, miracles and generosity. He was also a skilled counsellor, and many came to him for advice. He died in 1589, and as mentioned above, was made Patron of all Afro-Americans in the United States.

Refusing to allow his humble origins to keep him from his life's goals, Benedict pursued God's love and was richly rewarded. He turned the sting of slavery into the glorious freedom of the children of God. His Feastday is April 4th.

PRESENT MOMENT, WONDERFUL MOMENT

From time to time we need to remind ourselves to relax, to be peaceful, to set aside some time for a Retreat, a day of mindfulness, when we can walk slowly, smile, drink tea with a friend, enjoy being together. This is not a retreat – it is a **treat**.

During walking meditation, during kitchen and garden work, during sitting meditation, we can practise smiling. Smiling means that we are ourselves, that we are not drowned in forgetfulness.

Here is a short poem we can recite from time to time, while breathing and smiling.

Breathing in, I calm my body.

Breathing out, I smile.

*Dwelling in the present moment –
I know this is a wonderful moment.*

Breathing in, I calm my body - This line is like drinking a glass of ice water – you feel the cold, the freshness permeating your body. As you breathe in and recite this line, you feel the breathing calming your body, calming your mind.

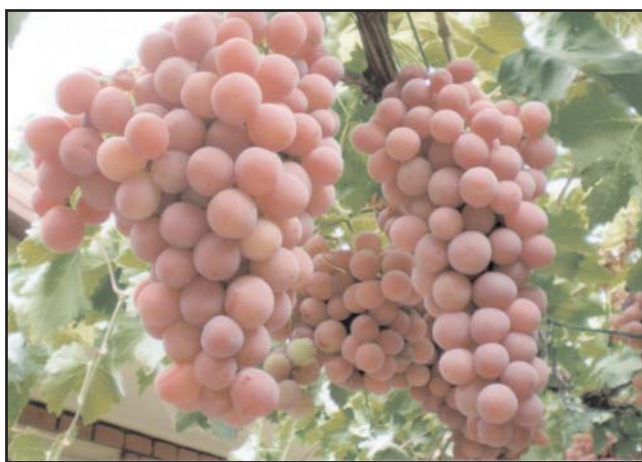
“Breathing out, I smile.” A smile can relax hundreds of muscles in your face, and relaxes your nervous system – a smile makes you master of yourself.

“*Dwelling in the present moment*” - Now is the present moment to be alive – to *be* in the present moment, to be aware that we are here and now, and the only moment to be alive is the present moment.

“*I know this is a wonderful moment*” - This is the only moment that is real. To be here and now, and enjoy the present moment - it is an important task. “*Calming, Smiling, Present moment, Wonderful moment.*”

Being Peace
- Thich Naht Hanh

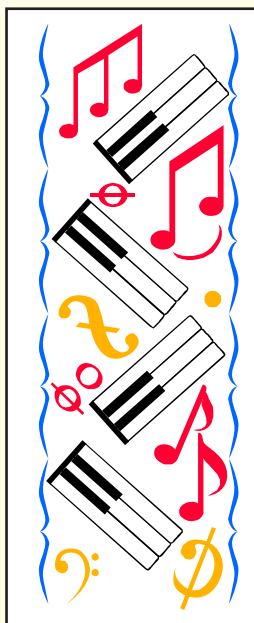
WE ARE THE GRAPES OF CHRIST



*We are the grapes of Christ
If we are pressed
in the wine press of suffering.
We shall become pure wine.*

JOYCE RUPP WRITES ...

“The song of God needs an instrument to give it shape and voice ... imagine how differently we might live if, when we awakened each day, we envisioned ourselves as an instrument of God. We would know each day that we are never alone. We would draw comfort and joy from the Divine Musician, making a melody of goodness with our gifts and talents God’s breath of love working through us can do amazing things.”



Listen to some of your favourite music very closely ... receive its beauty. Let it be a moment of refreshment for you, and also a moment of desire to become God’s instrument ... Thank Him for the times when you have known you were His instrument - and His song flowed through you.

PACE E BENE



By the door of just about every house in Assisi, you will find a traditionally decorated ceramic tile. It might be blue, brown or sometimes red. There are written three words in either Italian or Latin – **PAX ET BONUM – PACE E BENE – PEACE AND WELL-BEING.**

It can be a greeting, a farewell or a blessing that comes to us from Francis. It is used very much in common speech. These tiles are inexpensive, and come in different sizes. Countless pilgrims and visitors bring a tile home to put on their own doors as a prayer reminder of Francis and his hometown, Assisi.

PREACH THE GOSPEL WITH YOUR LIFE

This year we lost two wonderful women who followed in the footsteps of Francis and served their Lord so faithfully and joyfully.

Sr. Mary Lucy Wooden

For Lucy, God was a source of strength and power that connected her to her family, her friends and her religious community. She was a great lover of nature, fond of walking in the mountain setting of Springbrook and Tambourine in the Gold Coast hinterland. I can remember when I was in the Coolangatta community in 1965, the wonderful holidays we



had on Macleay Island, the visit to Grafton for the Jacaranda Festival, and the loaded tray of goodies on feastdays.

Lucy was a prayerful person, vigorous and energetic, generous and thoughtful. She was an enthusiastic teacher, and this enthusiasm got the best out of her pupils. She always looked forward to the visits of her sister, Sr. M. Rose, from Papua New Guinea. It was a joy for her to spoil Rose in whatever way she could.

Lucy was known to thank people for even the smallest act of kindness. As the nurses told the Funeral Director after her death, she “was a lovely lady.”

Dear Lucy, we pray now that you enjoy life in all its fullness at the finish of the race you ran so well.

Sr Laura Ingham



Laura entered the Braintree Franciscan Sisters in England in 1952. In 1968, she travelled to Australia to minister here and in Papua New Guinea.

Like Lucy, Laura loved nature. In PNG, she loved to walk along the beach and gather shells. She was gifted at craft and was an avid reader, with a great interest in history. Laura had great faith, and always firmly believed that her God would always take care of her. She used what was needed, and the “things of this world” always remained peripheral in her life. She never hoarded or accumulated things, and never wasted precious time.

Laura was a quiet person who never dominated a conversation or imposed her views on others. People used

to love to sit with her and chat, for she was an interesting person, who loved to share her wealth of knowledge on various topics. I remember with great fondness the time Laura spent with Sr. M. Raymond and myself in Dajarra. We took her to the Dajarra Races, that coincided with her visit – she was just as excited as we were when we saw our horse pass the winning post amid the dust and heat of the outback desert.

Dear Laura, may you rest in peace – we loved you during your lifetime, and will continue to love you in death.

IN CONCLUSION ...

As followers of Francis celebrate the 800th anniversary of Pope Innocent’s approving Francis’ Rule of Life, let us all celebrate the grace of our origins by remembering the past with gratitude; living the present with enthusiasm, and opening up with confidence to the future.

Keep smiling and continue to be instruments of God’s love.

- Sr. Liz

