

The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans - Assumption BVM Province

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SOLITUDE AND RESURRECTION THE EASTER MYSTERY



The Carceri, a Mountain Wilderness, Assisi

Note: This edition of the SFO Newsletter is being sent by e-mail to all who have given me an e-mail address. All others will receive the newsletter by surface mail.

What happened that first Easter morning? There were no witnesses, no CNN news team, no camera footage. Just an empty tomb. Yet our entire faith is built on belief in the resurrection of Jesus. What do we know?

The information we have concerns little of what happened to Jesus. What we know concerns the apostles; we have a lot of evidence that something happened to them.

When Jesus was arrested and sentenced, they were demoralized and fled into hiding behind locked doors. Fear dominated. A few days later, however, they experienced something that made them over from broken and fearful individuals into men and women of courage, pillars of faith that swept the world.

What was this experience? It was meeting Jesus alive. They experienced a new presence which turned them around. Story after story in the resurrection narratives reveals this truth, showing how God transformed the timid, motley crew of non-witnesses into bold witnesses of the resurrection and the power of the Spirit. The disciples met a new Jesus, and they became new, and could now carry this new presence to all corners of the known world.

FRANCIS AND THE EASTER MYSTERY

As we study our Franciscan Sources, we might draw a parallel between what happened to the disciples and what happened to Francis out of his experiences of solitude.

The early sources are unanimous in reporting that going off to places of solitude held a great attraction for Francis. Even before his conversion we see Francis drawing away from his carefree companions and retreating to some solitary place, such as the caves near Assisi. There he prayed and begged the Lord for light.

The cave for Francis was the furnace of transformation. From this experience he would go out and act on the new courage and boldness that emerged within his heart: facing his father, embracing the leper, begging stones to rebuild a church, proclaiming the Good News.

The Legend of the Three Companions, 12, relates: *Francis often went into a cave near Assisi, and, while he went alone inside, he left his companion outside ... Inspired by a new and extraordinary spirit, he would pray to his Father in secret, wanting no one to know what was happening within...*

He endured great suffering and mental anxiety... For he was burning inwardly with a divine fire, unable to conceal outwardly the flame kindled in his soul... When he emerged from the cave, he seemed to his companion to have changed into a different man.

SFO RULE 6

They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words.



Cave at Fonte Colombo

Thomas of Celano, First Life, 26, gives further testimony: *One day he was marveling at the Lord's mercy in the kindness shown to him. He wished that the Lord would show him the course of life for him and*

*his brothers, and he went to a place of prayer, as he so often did ... He began to lose himself; ... certainty of the forgiveness of all his sins poured in ... then he was caught up above himself and totally engulfed in light, and, with his inmost soul opened wide, he clearly saw the future. As that sweetness and light withdrew, **renewed in spirit, he now seemed to be changed into another man.***

That people experienced a new Francis was seen in his preaching. Thomas of Celano points out that when people met up with Francis, or heard him preach, it was not simply a question of listening to words of peace and joy. Nor were people merely persuaded to reflect upon reasons for forgiving each other, doing penance or praising and thanking God. Rather they were personally confronted with these realities in the person of Francis. They were in the living presence of forgiveness, peace, of faith and love, because Francis had inte-

grated these values into his person. Celano says: "Everyone who experienced Francis's preaching – young, old, men, women, clergy, laity – thought that he or she was in the presence of an appearance from another world, a new world, the world that had been proclaimed by the prophets." They were in the presence of one who made the resurrected Lord alive in his own life.

In quiet we also put ourselves into the context for meeting the transforming power of Christ, and the realization that He alone can remake our hearts into His image. In other words solitude gives one the opportunity to surrender to Christ and experience rebirth, as the disciples did on meeting the resurrected Christ, and as Francis did in the places of solitude throughout Italy.

SFO RULE 19

Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon.

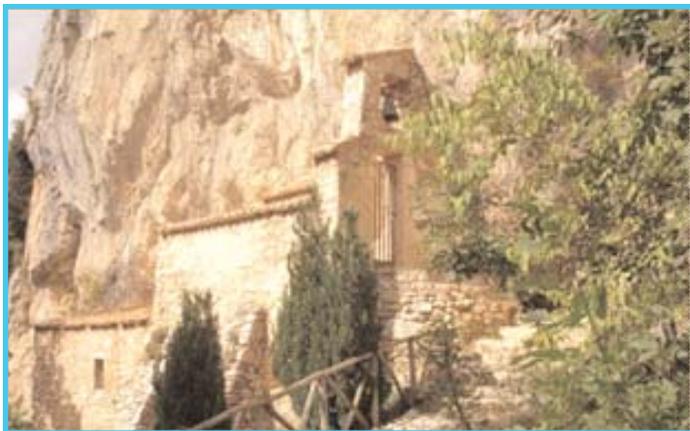
Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others.

Perhaps this Easter we might take note of what happened to the disciples after the resurrection. And we might take note of all that happened to Francis in his moments of quiet. As Jesus' new presence touched the apostles and transformed them, so too that same presence is ours. And it is our human experiences of fear, panic, frustration, grief, joy and love that are the stuff through which Christ reaches us at the deepest core of who we are.

May we, in our moments of quiet and solitude be open to Christ's ever-abiding presence which makes us over, transforms us, so that we know in our hearts a boldness, courage, wholeness and peace, most of all joy. Then when others meet up with us, like Francis they will meet the presence of the resurrected Christ in us.

SFO GC 17.1

Called to work together in building up the Church as the sacrament of salvation for all and, through their baptism and profession, made "witnesses and instruments of her mission," Secular Franciscans proclaim Christ by their life and words. Their preferred apostolate is personal witness in the environment in which they live and service for building up the Kingdom of God within the situations of this world.



Mountain Hermitage, Poggio Bustone

In Jerusalem, I once celebrated Mass inside the Empty Tomb.

Alleluia!

A Blessed Easter to All!

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