

TWENTY SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME. 2027

Today's Gospel from chapter 21 of St. Matthew indicates that the sinful tenants of the vineyards of Israel and the world would kill the Landlord's Son. His death on the Cross would not be the end of the story, of course.

Jesus Christ, the Landlord's Son, truly rose from the dead, conquering death just as He conquered sin on the Cross. Still, the Cross is at the center of the story of the Son of Man, so central that it must also be part of the story of every one of His disciples. Not surprisingly, to someone who knows the Gospels, the Cross of Christ was central to the story of St. Francis of Assisi, who died on 4 October, 1226.

As the Church celebrates the 8th centennial of St. Francis' "Natlia", his birthday into Eternal Life, one is struck by how many different versions of St. Francis there have been, over the centuries. Among the Franciscans, the Church's most numerous group of religious orders, there have been so many disagreements about who St. Francis really was that it has been impossible to have one Franciscan order. Each Franciscan order has embraced its own version of St. Francis, to the point that one Franciscan novice master remarked to me that for a fair minded life of St. Francis he assigns the one written by a Dominican Friar in 2012 (published by Cornell University Press).

For our purposes this Sunday, the many versions of St. Francis, ranging from the sublime (G.K. Chesterton - though it may tell us more about G.K. than about Francis) to the ridiculous (Richard Rohr, who manages to turn him into a cartoon version of a late 20th Century progressive), need not concern us. What we need to absorb is the lesson taught by Francis of Assisi and every disciple of Jesus Christ: we Christians must preach Christ crucified, and be willing to share in the Cross by which Christ saved the world.

In a sense, St. Francis, like his divine Master, our Lord Jesus, belongs to everyone. That is fine, as long as one keeps a firm grip on the central thread that we call the Paschal Mystery. Jesus died for our sins and rose for our justification, and we are called to share in His death and Resurrection.

Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!

The authentic writings of St. Francis and well attested words of St. Francis come back to that Name again and again, and yet again. St. Francis said very little about Himself, but said a great deal about Jesus. St. Francis said nothing against anyone, but he said a great deal in praise of Jesus. He preached Jesus to the noble Sultan of Cairo, el-Kamil, and survived, because he said nothing at all against Islam's prophet. Francis simply spoke in praise of Jesus Christ. For St. Francis, as for every saint in his or her unique way, everything in life came down to Jesus, knowing Him through the Sacred Scriptures, receiving Him in the Blessed Eucharist, imitating His charity, joining oneself to His Cross, and looking forward to a share in His Resurrection.

I am entirely sure that the only versions of St. Francis that would make Francos angry are the ones that leave out Jesus, the center and meaning of his entire life. In the 1960s, the great Franco Zefferelli gave us an operatic (and very 1960s) movie version of St. Francis, to which St. Francis himself would say something like, "very pretty - but where is Jesus in all this?" St. Francis might laugh at little plaster statues of himself with a birdbath, but after he laughed he would say something like, "cute - but where is Jesus?"

St. Francis, like every saint, said that spiritual life was not firstly a matter of good deeds, decorated with a bit of prayer. Spiritual life is firstly a matter of getting to know Jesus Christ and share in His life, through Sacred Scriptures and the Holy Liturgy. Then one can imitate Jesus in action and share something of His hope and love with the world. St. Francis said very little about what he did or intended to do. He said a great deal about what Jesus Christ did, in saving us from our sins and opening up the way to eternal life. In this respect, going out on a limb a bit, I will say that whatever the "Prayer of St. Francis" is, it isn't from St. Francis. Now, this prayer, set to music in the 1960s by the Anglican composer Sebastian Temple, isn't bad. I'm not banning it from the parish; but - please be patient - it just does not reflect St. Francis' spirituality. Putting on my nerd hat, I can say that it did not appear until 1912, when it suddenly popped up in a French magazine. More importantly, it is totally unlike St. Francis' authentic prayers. Why? One word is missing, or rather, one name: JESUS. The "Prayer of St. Francis" keeps repeating the words "I" and "me", which Francis did not do; but the really telling thing is that it leaves out the Name that was the center of Francis' life, the name of Jesus. Jesus Christ was so much the center of St. Francis' life of prayer that, in an amazingly well attested miracle, testified to by awed witnesses brought in to see his body as it was prepared for burial, he actually received on his flesh the marks of the Lord Jesus' passion (did St. Paul receive these? Galatians 6:17: Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus) Francis' spirituality was amazingly little concerned with what He was going to do, though he did a great deal. It was overwhelmingly centered on what Jesus did for him, and for us.

Beyond all the historical writing about St. Francis, some good, some bad, and some just plain ugly, there is a simple lesson in his life for all Christians: stay focused on Jesus. Let His love soak into us, and then share it. Don't try to change the world by your marvelous deeds and glorious plans. Just soak in the love of God poured out in Jesus Christ, and love the people God sends your way today. It may be said that Francis of Assisi's spirituality was much more about being than doing. First, be a good Christian, through Faith in Jesus Christ, and then do the things that a good Christian, filled with the love of Jesus, naturally does. St. Augustine famously wrote "love, and then do as you will." When that love is the real thing, flowing from God through our Lord Jesus Christ, this sentence is true, and St. Francis lived it out. Soak in the love of Jesus Christ through Faith, and then share it in humble action.