

## Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message

Dec. 2017

Recently in the Spiritual Assistant on-line course, we spoke about the Franciscan aspect of the “Kinship of all creation”. This is the idea that because all creatures – including ourselves - are created by the same God, we are all to some extent “brothers and sisters”. We get this idea by the fact that St. Francis addressed creatures by those titles – such “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon”.

Furthermore, Francis’ sense of “kinship” with all creation is enhanced, not only by our creation under a common Creator, but also by our common “recreation” through a common Savior - Jesus Christ. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we see that God always includes creation in His covenants and promises of salvation fulfilled in Christ. After the flood, for instance, God establishes His “covenant with you (Noah), and with your descendants after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth.” (Gen. 9:9-10). Likewise, St. Paul reveals that “creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (Rom. 8:21) Other passages such as 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21 link “a new heaven and a new earth” with the salvation which is in Christ. Furthermore Jesus, Himself, commands His Disciples to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mk. 16:15) – not just to other people.

The fact that all creatures, along with us, are included in the recreation brought about in Christ speaks of our kinship with nature, but HOW it is brought about also speaks of it. This month we will celebrate the great Incarnation - Christmas. It is an important feast for Franciscans. We have the whole legacy of Greccio to establish its importance for Francis. It is awesome that God came to earth as a human like us, but that He came as a poor, helpless human baby is still even more awesome! St. Paul captures the same truth when he says in Philippians 2:6-8: “(T)hough he was in the form of God, (Jesus) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

It is from this, God’s great condescension (the crèche and the cross), that St. Francis gets his emphasis on “minority”, that is - poverty, humility and simplicity – which is so much part of his spirituality. And it is the humility of the Incarnation and the crucifixion that underlies Francis’ sense of “kinship with all creation”. Francis applies this humility to everything – including his approach to creation. Francis wanted to be humble, poor and simple as Jesus - even towards all creatures. In other words, as Jesus did not exploit his equality with God (Phil.2:6), so Francis does not exploit the God-given privilege of “dominion” over all creatures given to humankind. (Gen. 1:26-28).

During the season of Advent, we hear the prophet Isaiah speak of “The Peaceable Kingdom” when Christ’s salvation recreates all creation:” And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. Also, the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper’s den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain. For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” (Is. 11:6-9). And so, with readings like this we are led into Christmas where we witness that God does not consider it “below” Himself to be born among farm animals in a stable and “laid...in a manger” (Lk.2:7). What a sanction to our kinship with creation!

Merry Christmas, Everyone! Br. Gerry

## Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message

Nov. 2017

This October 31 marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (Oct. 31, 1517). During this year there will be many ecumenical prayer services and presentations throughout the world. For instance, I attended a series of five lectures on the topic of Martin Luther and St. Ignatius Loyola as reformers of the Church. It is interesting to note that these events are being called “commemorations” and not “celebrations”. 500 years of division in the Church is not something Christians should “celebrate”.

The Reformation is something that has always held a special interest for me because I was raised Protestant. Becoming a Catholic brought strife between me and my parents. The Reformation, therefore, is not just a distant historical event for me. I have experienced its division personally.

To “commemorate” this event, I have been slowly reading of the Augsburg Confession. This is the quintessential document that defines the distinctives of Lutheranism. It is very interesting and is worth a reading by Lutherans and Catholics alike. I think both might be surprised at their similar beliefs.

The Augsburg Confession, for instance, affirms that Lutherans believe in the presence of Christ in their Eucharist (Art. X). Likewise, although it does not acknowledge private Confession as a sacrament (Art. XXV, par.3), it retains its use (Art. XI, Art. XXV, par.1) and affirms the absolution pronounced by the minister (Art. XXV, par.1).

As well, much of what Luther protested at the time is now resolved. Catholics now celebrate Mass in the language of the people as Luther advocated (Art. XXIV, Par.1). Likewise, we now practice concelebration (Vat. II: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, ch.2, no.57) instead of multiple private Masses which Luther protested (Art. XXIV. par. 4). It is interesting to note that even earlier, St. Francis, advocated this: “Therefore, I admonish and urge in the Lord that only one Mass ... be celebrated each day...”. (Letter to the Entire Order, no.30)

Knowing some of the history of the Reformation (including its political entanglement), reading the Augsburg Confession, I can't help but feel a sadness. So much of this sorry division was caused by a lack of charity on both sides which led to an unwillingness to listen and dialogue. This, in turn led to a hardening of positions in opposition to each other. The Reformation experienced extremes on both sides; there were excessive over-reactions to excessive abuses. The fact that the passage of time and greater objectivity has brought agreement, on many issues that once divided, proves the existence of this damaging polarization.

The slow healing of division, however, is due to more than just the passage of time and greater objectivity. It is a work of the Holy Spirit. Although I am saddened, by the division of the Reformation, I am also encouraged by the mutual openness that exists today. There have been great strides over the years to heal the wounds of division. One great expression of healing was the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on Oct. 31, 1999. Justification was the main and most divisive theological issue of the Reformation. This agreement shows “that ... the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ.” It encompasses “a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.” (Joint Declaration: No. 5).

I am thankful for this healing and reconciliation. As Franciscans, reconciliation is part of our heritage. Many years before the Reformation, St. Francis opted to peacefully dialogue with the Sultan, instead of fighting him in the Crusades. Likewise, he was instrumental in several cases of bringing together opposing parties to negotiate peace – such as in the conflict between the Bishop and the Mayor of Assisi. This, then, is our Franciscan legacy of peaceful dialogue. In this anniversary year of the

Reformation, therefore, let us draw upon our heritage of reconciliation. Let us continue to pray for Christ's love to reign in our hearts so that the churches may remain open to listening and dialogue, for healing and reconciliation.

Br. Gerry OFM

### **Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message**

Oct. 2017

Recently I gave a presentation on honesty to two Serenity Weekends. It was a positive experience for my own growth so I thought it a good idea to adapt it considerably and share it with you.

"Honesty"; what do we mean by the word? Morally or ethically, honesty means acting in an upright fashion, or in right or righteous conduct. It implies that a person is "trustworthy", that he / she can be trusted not to cheat, lie or take unfair advantage of someone or a situation. Therefore, an honest person is not deceitful but rather truthful, straightforward, not deviant in behavior.

By extension, pertaining to relationships, honesty means being open and authentic. It means being transparent – not hiding alternative motives. It means dropping our masks, and pretenses. Honesty means not being a hypocrite, living without duplicity. It's being genuine, "real", not fake, false or a fraud. Honesty means not living a lie, but being who we are - being ourselves, our true selves.

Honesty needs to be practiced in three directions: towards self, God and others. This is the logical order in which it happens. And each area of honesty builds upon the other.

We can hardly be honest to God and others if we are not honest to ourselves. This happens when we are willing to fearlessly move out and beyond our self-deceptions and face our faults and failings. We usually are very good at denial, lying to ourselves and playing "games". We're afraid of what we'll see. But, when we are honest with ourselves, we can grow towards greater self-knowledge and understanding.

Furthermore, only when we are honest with ourselves, can we start being honest with God. It's foolish to think that we can pull one over on Him. We're not fooling God. Our dishonesty is no great revelation to Him. When we're honest with God, however, we find Him waiting patiently for us to finally come to the truth that we need His help. God waits, because He loves and cherishes us. If we are secure in this marvelous identity, being honest with God becomes easier.

Being honest to God, in turn, gives us courage to be honest to others. This is so important for Seculars because we are a fraternity. The more honest we can be the more authentic our fraternity can be. We fear not being accepted if we expose our real selves. Rejection is a powerful motivation for not being honest. But if we are to experience "abundant life" (Jn. 10:10) we need to take this risk. Seculars, however, know God's love and forgiveness and are ready to forgive others. (A point of discretion: Our honesty must not become an occasion of hurt to others.)

Without Humility and Courage, we cannot be truly honest. We need these to honestly look at our lives, to face our faults and admit them to ourselves and to God and make amends to others. It can be painful, but with strength from God - through prayer and the support of our fellow Seculars, we are able. Looking at the truth of ourselves can be freeing. "The truth will set you free." (Jn. 8:32)

Honesty, also calls for trust and faith in God that if we take the risk of being honest with others, we will become better people for it. Even if we are chewed up by another for being honest, God can turn the experience into an opportunity to grow - if we are open to His guidance.

As Seculars we have marvelous examples of honesty in Jesus and Francis. Jesus' prayer on the cross is an honest prayer. Jesus felt "forsaken". He expressed his feelings even though he knew he wasn't. St. Francis also was an honest person. It was an aspect of his simplicity. He had a complete lack of duplicity. What you saw, is what you got. He had no hidden motives or agendas.

For Jesus and Francis, honesty was a way of life. Like them, we continue to grow more & more honest with ourselves, God and others as we cultivate our spiritual life. Growing in honesty is like peeling an onion. We gradually peel away the layers towards our authentic selves – where God resides. Our whole life is a journey toward complete honesty.

"In all honesty" – Br. Gerry

### **Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message**

June 2017

The kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the holy Spirit; whoever serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by others. Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another. Romans 14:17-19N (NABRE)

In the Liturgy of the Hours, we have just finished week II of the Psalter. The above reading is from Thursday Morning Prayer, week II. The context for the passage is the debate over eating food traditionally considered "unclean" by the Jews. Some Christians, now under the freedom of Christ, were not observing the Jewish dietary laws. They were eating this kind of food and offending others of weaker conscience. Paul, advises the offenders to consider their weaker brothers and sisters and, out of charity for them, abstain from eating this type of food. He says that although "the Kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink" – that is, not caught up in dietary laws, for the sake of not offending others, don't eat the food they still consider unclean.

This passage reminded me of another: Galatians 4:9-11 "Now ... that you have come to know God ... how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted." (NRSV)

In this passage, Paul expresses his disappointment with the Galatians who started off in the freedom of Christ but, beguiled by false teachers, have reverted to trying to obtain their salvation through laws having to do with "observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years".

What does this mean for us who do observe "special days" such as Ash Wednesday and special "seasons" such as Advent and Lent? What does this mean for us who do observe dietary practices such as abstaining from eating meat on Fridays? Is St. Paul saying that we are wrong when we observe these traditions? No. But on the other hand, we may see in these passages as a precaution not to treat these traditions as laws.

Both passages are about the freedom which is in Christ. Jesus freed us from our sins and the Old Testament ritual laws. He said that *He* was the fulfillment of the Law. (Mt.5:17) To treat our traditions, then, as if they were absolute laws and necessary for salvation, is to nullify this freedom. Jesus did not do away with the Old Testament ritual laws simply to inaugurate another set. Yet, this is exactly what we do when we treat our Church traditions as law. Jesus continually faced this issue with the Pharisees.

Once, over the same issue of dietary laws, referring to Isaiah 29:13, He criticized them for "...teaching as doctrine the precepts of men." (Mt.15:1-20)

Personally, I like traditions. They give me a sense of belonging to a spiritual family or lineage that spans the centuries and extends around the world. But I refuse to sacrifice the freedom of Christ by making them into laws. I will not be a Pharisee!

In the Thursday morning reading, St. Paul goes on to say that "The kingdom of God is ... a matter of ... righteousness, peace, and joy in the holy Spirit...". We are no longer under any ritual laws but, instead, we live in the joyful Spirit-led freedom of Christ. Paul says, furthermore, that "... whoever serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God ...".

May you all have a beautiful summer basking in the righteous Holy Spirit-led freedom of Christ!

### **Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message**

May 2017

"Sin speaks to the sinner in the depths of his heart. There is not fear of God before his eyes. He so flatters himself in his mind that he knows not his own guilt." Psalm 36:1-3

So often we speak of listening to God in the depths of our hearts. I was struck this morning as we prayed Psalm 36 because the first part was not about *God* speaking to the heart but the very opposite - sin! Lately I've been listening to a lot of "Fifth Steps" in the A.A. Twelve Step program. In this step, after making a "fearless moral inventory" of his life, the reforming Alcoholic tells someone "the exact nature" of his failings. This experience influenced my reading of this Psalm. With this as a background, I would like to make a few comments on these verses. Even if you do not struggle with an addiction, we all have obsessions that do not give life. Those in recovery are just extreme example of us all.

"Sin speaks to the sinner..."

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word translated "speak" is used elsewhere only of the Lord speaking to his inspired prophets. (footnote to Ps. 36, NAB Bible , 1986 edition) This indicates of how profoundly deep our sinfulness can be rooted in us. It indicates how profoundly we can be "inspired" to act wickedly, or in an unhealthy manner. How deeply entrenched our sin, or compulsions *and our fatal attractions* can be!

"(I)n his heart."

Expanding on this idea, the heart has always been an analogy of, or an image for the very centre of our being - that part of us that is most essentially, elementally and authentically us. This core of our being does not change with time and circumstances. (It is what philosophers call "essence" or "substance" and theologians "soul".) So, when we say that something or someone "speaks to the heart", we mean that it is touching our very souls.

"There is no fear of God before his eyes."

Our obsessions can become so all-consuming that our spiritual eyes are blinded. And they can block out even our fear and respect of God and God's punishment. (God's punishment is usually to let us experience the consequences of our poor choices with the hope that in so doing, we recognize the error of our ways and call upon Him.) But our obsessions cannot only block out our fear of God, they can also

blind us generally to God's presence in our lives. The opposite is also true. If our obsessions blind us to God, they can also blind us to the harm we do to ourselves and to others.

"He so flatters himself in his mind..."

In fact, we may be more than just blind to the harm we do; we may even "flatter" our selves thinking that we've done good and that all is well! Our spiritual eyes can become so blinded that our minds can't see our insanity. Our logic becomes warped. Recovered alcoholics call this "stinking thinking".

"(T)hat he knows not his own guilt."

Over time this "stinking thinking" not only warps our logic, but it also makes our consciences insensitive. We fail to see our own guilt in the harm and the dysfunction of our lives. Over time, our "mind" or brains can become "hard wire" and we form emotional bonds to unhealthy ways of acting and thinking and addictions are formed.

Psalm 36 is not all negative, however. Verses 6 to 10 speak of God's love, kindness and faithfulness. Verses 7 to 12 gives three very positive images of God. It speaks of how to let God and not sin, speak to our hearts. Verse 7 speaks of finding refuge in the shelter of God's wings. Verses 8 and 9 speak of drinking deeply from God the fountain of life. Finally, verse 12 speaks of God as ultimate light. All these images suggest deeply abiding in God. Every day we must seek refuge under God's protective "wings" for we are powerless against our obsessions except for God's grace. Daily we seek God's loving kindness by drinking fully of His Word. And lastly each day we seek the clarity which God's light provides in the Scriptures, the sacraments and in the fellowship of the Christian and Franciscan community.

This concludes my "cheery" little article. Hmmm... have I been hearing too many Fifth Steps lately?

Psalm 36:1-3 New American Bible (Revised Edition) (NABRE)

<sup>1</sup> For the leader. Of David, the servant of the LORD.

<sup>2</sup> Sin directs the heart of the wicked man;

his eyes are closed to the fear of God.

<sup>3</sup> For he lives with the delusion:

his guilt will not be known and hated.

Psalm 36:1-3 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

1 Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart;

There is no fear of God before his eyes.

<sup>2</sup> For it flatters him in his *own* eyes

Concerning the discovery of his iniquity *and* the hatred *of it*.

<sup>3</sup> The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit;

He has ceased to be wise *and* to do good.

Psalm 36:1-3 Revised Standard Version (RSV)

Transgression speaks to the wicked

deep in his heart;

there is no fear of God

before his eyes.

<sup>2</sup> For he flatters himself in his own eyes

that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.

<sup>3</sup>The words of his mouth are mischief and deceit;  
he has ceased to act wisely and do good.

Psalm 36:1-3 New International Version (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>I have a message from God in my heart  
concerning the sinfulness of the wicked:  
There is no fear of God  
before their eyes.

<sup>2</sup>In their own eyes they flatter themselves  
too much to detect or hate their sin.

<sup>3</sup>The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful;  
they fail to act wisely or do good.

### **Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message**

April 2017

Happy Easter Everyone! Here is April's message. I started to write a message, but then, after hearing Fr. Bob's homily on the reading for Evening Prayer of the Wednesday in the Octave of Easter, I decided to send that instead. - A nice break from me!

On the Wednesday within the Octave of Easter (April 19), the Friars celebrate Solemn Vespers at which our Provincial Fr. Robert Mokry gave the homily. Since it was on a reading from the Liturgy of the Hours - which I have been doing for my monthly messages - I thought to use Fr. Bob's message. So, you get a break from me!

Come to the Lord, a living stone, rejected by men but approved, nonetheless, and precious in God's eyes. You too are living stones, built as an edifice of spirit into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

These two verses from St. Peter's first letter are very rich, and bring us right to the very core of what We've just celebrated during our Easter Triduum; and they remind us of what it means to be a Christian.

Peter calls us to come to Jesus himself, and, using the image of a house, or temple, made of stones, he tells us that Jesus is the "key stone" that God has given to us so that we can be fashioned into God's own temple.

Jesus is a "living" stone because, though rejected and cut off in death, he has been raised from the dead and now lives for ever.

But Peter goes even further: he now applies the imagery of Jesus the living stone directly to us the Christian people. Like Jesus, we are to become living stones who let themselves become a spiritual house by participating with Jesus. We the Christian people, by our faith in Christ risen from the dead, become the dwelling place of God; we are brought together to form "a dwelling place of God in the Spirit". We are no ordinary house made of lifeless stones but a true spiritual temple made up of living members, with Christ himself the key stone of the temple.

More than this, we are called to serve in this house as a holy priesthood. What does Peter mean by calling us, and the whole Church, a "holy priesthood" called to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ? Our answer is found a few verses later, in this same passage (in verse nine

which was not included in the reading), when Peter announces that believers in Christ have become a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own.

Peter asks us to consider Israel's, and our, salvation history – he asks us to reflect on God's promise to Abraham and his successors (a chosen race); and then he asks us to reflect on how God directed this holy race by anointing kings (David and his successors) to make of it a holy nation; and then when this kingly dynasty died out, we are called to consider how God directed the people of Israel through prophets and finally by the priestly caste of Levi who served in the temple in Jerusalem. But, in the fullness of time, God himself came among us in Jesus Christ who is a descendent of Abraham, in the kingly line of David, and the fulfillment of the prophets.

But unlike the priests from the lineage of Levi, Jesus was "a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek" – that mythical and mystical righteous king who made a priestly offering to God on behalf of the people.

Christ is the continuation and the fulfillment – the Alpha and the Omega – of God's personal relationship with the men and women he created, and continues to create, and with all creation.

Peter's four phrases – a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own – communicate the incredible love God has for us and the dignity that is ours in Christ. We have become a "race," a "nation," and a "people," specially chosen by God for his own possession, to be holy as he is holy.

By virtue of our incorporation into Christ, we have attained a truly kingly and priestly status not only as individuals but more importantly as a people, the Church.

We have now become a "spiritual house" and a priesthood offering "spiritual sacrifices." "Spiritual" does not mean immaterial or unreal or only otherworldly. "Spiritual" refers to the divine life and activity of the Holy Spirit in and through us. Because each of us, by baptism, has been called to be a member of a "royal priesthood", each of us is also called to participate in the mission of Jesus' priesthood to the whole world.

We are now the house where God's Spirit dwells and we are called to announce the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

To do this, each of us needs to know and experience the wonder and freshness of being called to share in God's own life, given to us by our baptism into Jesus. We should recall Peter's first words this evening: "Come to the Lord." Like the people to whom St. Peter wrote 2000 years ago, we who are in Christ constantly have to make an effort to come nearer to Christ. And when we do, we will discover the great deeds that God has worked in our lives; we'll be grateful to God for the great love and the life he gives us; and we will be able to witness, just by being who we are, how God works in our own lives.

t have received--only what you have given."

— Francis of Assisi

### **Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message**

March 2017

The next reading from the Liturgy of the Hours that I would like us to pray with is Philippians 2:12b-16a:

"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For God is the one who, for his good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work. Do everything without grumbling or questioning, that you

may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like lights in the world, as you hold on to the word of life."

This is the reading for Evening Prayer of Ash Wednesday. Unfortunately, the Bible translation used in the present Liturgy of the Hours is taken from the 1970 publication of The New American Bible. Since then the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine has revised the New Testament of the "NAB". This reading conforms more closely with other scholarly translations. It is this revised (more accurate) translation that I will comment on. I also included a little more because it is profound. I'll make my comment based on this translation.

What caught my attention last Ash Wednesday was the juxtaposition of the idea of *our effort* and *God's grace*. Throughout Church history, this has always been a creative (and sometimes destructive) tension. Even in the Bible we see this tension. The Apostle James reacted to those who overemphasized grace through faith at the cost of any effort on our part. He addresses this issue in James 2:14-26 and ends by saying "Faith without works is dead." (vs.23). It continued to be an important issue throughout Church history. In the Protestant Reformation for instance, to oversimplify it, Catholics emphasized our effort, while Protestants emphasized God's grace. Of course, "It's not either, or; it's both, and" - to quote my old theology professor.

What intrigued me in the reading for Ash Wednesday (Philippians 2:12b-15a ) was that the two aspects of our effort and God's grace are presented side by side. In the first place, St. Paul admonishes the Philippians to "work out" their salvation. Not only that, but he uses a traditional Old Testament expression to emphasize the humility and earnestness with which we are to do so - "with fear and trembling". (See Ex. 15:16; Jdt. 2:28; Ps. 2:11; Is.10:16) On the other hand, he follows this up right away in the next verse (13): "For God is the one who, for his good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work." So, while we are to make an effort towards our salvation, we must always keep in mind that it is by God's grace alone that we can accomplish any level of holiness or even to *desire* it.

There are two aspects of grace, one passive and one active. First, the passive aspect of grace is God's unearned, unwarranted, undeserved, unmerited love towards us. There is nothing we can do to earn God's love because He already offers it freely. You can't earn it by doing any amount of good works because it's free. St. Paul said in Romans 6:23 "The wages of sin is death, but the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (emphasis mine) Second, the active aspect of God's grace is that it is Divine strength or ability given to us to achieve what is humanly impossible given our sinful, "fallen" state. Perhaps this is most obvious when it comes to forgiveness. God enables us to forgive when we are just incapable of overcoming resentment. Historically, Protestants tended to emphasize the first, passive aspect while Catholics the second, active aspect.

This echoes another passage of St Paul's in which he, again, juxtaposes our efforts and God's grace. In this passage the Apostle adamantly insists that "...by *grace* you have been saved *through faith*; and this is *not your own doing*, it is the *gift* of God - *not because of works*, lest any man should boast." But in the next verse He says "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:8-10. Emphasis mine) So, although we are not saved by how good our deeds (works) are - they can never be good enough for God - in response to God's grace we do good works. In other words, we are created and saved so that we can manifest God's love in the good deeds we do.

A few more words on this passage: The phrase "with fear and trembling" connotes the attitude which we must have in order to be receptive to God's active grace enabling us to do things otherwise impossible for us (such as recovering from an addiction). With this attitude we are able (we have the ability) us to receive God's grace.

Living a life "without grumbling", but in joy is a powerful witness. As you know, joy is an important aspect of Franciscan spirituality. And as Seculars Franciscans inserted into "the midst of a crooked and perverse" society, it is your joy that will "shine like lights in the world". And this is none other than "the light of Christ". Being joyful in the Lord gives people an opportunity to inquire how you can remain so positive. This gives you a chance to speak of Christ. And how do we continually access this joy from Christ? By "hold(ing) on to the word of life." In other words Praying the Scriptures (Word of God) is our resource to the joy-fill life in Christ. And this is a joy that is not contingent on external circumstances. It is a deep, calm delight that remains constant in our souls. "Pax et Bonum!" Br. Gerry

### **Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message**

Feb. 2017

The next reading from the breviary that I would like to comment on is from Friday Morning Prayer, week 3 of the Psalter. The reading is 2 Corinthians 12:9b-10: "I willingly boast of my weakness, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I am content with weakness, with mistreatment with distress, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ; for when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong."

The immediate context of this reading is Paul describing a certain "thorn in the flesh" that God allowed to "harass" him as "a messenger from Satan" to keep him "from being too elated by the abundance of revelations" he had. (All quotes: 2 Cor.12:7) After imploring God three times (2 Cor.12:8) to remove this "thorn", Paul received this answer from God: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor.12:9)

This, then, is why Paul "willingly boast(s)" of his weakness - because his weakness makes God's power more perfect. But isn't this an odd statement? I mean, in what way, or how, does Paul's weakness "perfect" God's power? And what is said of Paul, of course, applies to us well. How, then, does *our* weakness exalts God's power?

Firstly, God's power is made perfect in our weakness in that it is perfected *in us*. That is to say, God's power, itself, is not perfected but it is perfectly *accessed and used and made evident* in us. When we accept our weakness and depend on God's strength, then truly "... the power of Christ" is able to "rest upon" us.

Secondly, our weakness makes God's power more *evident*. When we do by God's grace what is not possible for us to do - given our weaknesses - we give *witness* to God's power. When we do what people know is not possible by our own strength, they will know that it is by God's power that we do it.

It strikes me that this is most evident when it comes to forgiveness. So often we find it difficult not to hold a grudge - even when we don't want to; even when we know that our grievances are "petty" compared to the atrocities that some have gone through. We sometime see acts of "heroic" forgiveness where people have forgiven others for horrendous harm against them and their loved ones. We realized

that this is beyond human ability and can only be done through God's strength. Forgiveness can only happen when we admit our weakness to forgive and cling to "the power of Christ".

As well our weaknesses keep us *dependant* on God. They keep us from becoming prideful and too self assured or "elated" (New American Bible) or "exalted" (New American Standard Bible). When we get too self-assured we are bound to fall. We fall into pride, arrogance, egoism, and this always leads to sin - that is, to not acting in love. And pride leads to bondage, addiction and to unhealthy life styles that spiral downward into greater unhealthiness.

Furthermore, Paul said "I am content with weakness, with mistreatment with distress, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ". The word "content" caught my attention and reminded me of two other passages where Paul uses the word - Philippians 4:11-13 and 1Timothy 6:6-10. In these he says "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. (Phil.4:11) and "There is great gain in godliness and contentment". (1 Tim.6:6) If we are grounded in Christ and dependent on His power, being aware of our weaknesses, and do everything we do "for the sake of Christ", we can have an inner contentment which is not altered by the negative circumstances of life.

Lastly, this Scripture reading also led me to reflect on God's answers to our prayers. I believe in miracles. I believe God always answers our prayers. But sometimes His answer might be "No". Sometimes God's answer to our prayers might be "I know what is best for you, and it is better that I do not take this ailment away. My grace is sufficient for you. For when you are powerless, it is then that you are strong in My power." Sometimes we may have to accept an answer like this. If we do so with humility and see it as a challenge to live by "the power of Christ", we will always become more loving people.

-----

\* Many scholars think that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" may have had some sort of eye ailment. In Galatians 4:13-16 Paul says "(Y)ou know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*. ...I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. (NASB) Again, in the same letter - 6:11 - Paul said "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." This seems to imply that the letter to the Galatians was dictated. Was this because he had trouble seeing? The part that he does write with his own hand is, apparently, larger. Again, is this due to poor eye sight?

"Pax et Bonum!" - Br. Gerry

### **Regional Spiritual Assistant's Message**

January 2017

With the arrival of the new year, I began to pondered on what approach I might take in writing my monthly messages. I reflected that many of you are committed to praying the Liturgy of the Hours. So, finally I decided that each month I would give a short reflection on a Scripture passages from the Liturgy of the Hours. I'll choose them from either the Psalms or the readings from Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer - since these are is the Offices with which you are most familiar. Likewise, except for high feast days such as Easter, I'll choose them from the Four-week Psalter of Ordinary Time. Once again, these are the Scripture passage with which you would be most familiar. Hopefully, the next time you pray these passages, your experience of the Liturgy of the Hour will be that much fuller.

To start this off, then, I would like to comment on the first reading of the four-week Psalter of Ordinary Time. It is the reading of Sunday Evening Prayer 1 of Week 1 and its reference is Romans 11:33-36.

How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How inscrutable his judgments, how unsearchable his ways! For "who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has given him anything so as to deserve return? "For from him and through him and for him all things are. To him be glory forever. Amen.

This passage is the conclusion of chapter 11 in which St. Paul speaks of the salvation of Gentiles through the disobedience of the Israel. It is a rather complex chapter and somewhat difficult to understand. For this reason Paul ends the chapter with this poetic flourish on the mystery of God.

In a sense, this is the conclusion of all our ponderings on God. Ultimately so much of God is mystery. Even St. Gregory the Great concluded that the Scriptures were "like a river ... broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim." (*Commentary on Job (Moral. inscr. 4 [CCL 143:6])* (<http://andynaselli.com/on-swimming-elephants>) We can only understand God to a limited extent, and in the end, we are left praising God's "inscrutability" (God is ultimately unknowable and incomprehensible).

And yet St. Paul also says that "He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God..."(Col.1:15 RSV). Jesus, himself, said of himself "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." (Mt.13:16-18 RSV) St. Paul, likewise, reiterates this same thought about Jesus: "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him," God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God." (1 Co.2:8-10 RSV)

How, then, is Jesus the fullest revelation of God if God is ultimately unknowable? Although Jesus is fully God, it is His *revelation* of God (His making God known) that was limited. It was limited by what our finite minds and hearts could comprehend. Secondly, although we cannot fully comprehend God, Jesus is the fullest revelation of God in that there will never be anyone else who will reveal a clearer understanding of God.

We still wait, then, for the fullness of revelation. This will come when we meet God "face to face". St. Paul again concludes: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." (1 Cor.13:12 RSV)

This thought gives us hope, yet in the mean time we approach God with great humility because of His ultimate "unknowability" and our finiteness. I have always thought that the last part of the reading of Romans 11:33-36 was humbling: "For from him and through him and for him all things are." It takes us out of our anthropocentric (man-centered) perspective on the world. Ultimately, the world is not made for us; it's God's and He made it for Himself. We may have a special part in God's creation, yet we, along with all other creatures, are part of creation which God made for Himself. This line reminds me of the second half of the Colossians passage I quoted above. Referring to Christ, St. Paul said "(I)n him all things were created ... all things were created through him and for him. (Col.1:16 RSV)"

Let us, then, this year approach the Great Mystery (Mysterium Tremendum) who is God with humility. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom..." (Prov. 1:7; 9:10 RSV) For though God is utterly beyond us "Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:27 RSV)

If any of you have a Psalm or Scripture reading from the four-week Psalter in Ordinary Time that you would like me to reflect on, please e-mail me the Bible reference and where it is found in the Liturgy of the Hours - What day of the week, Evening Prayer or Morning Prayer and in what week of the four weeks of the Psalter. (Example: Judith 8:25-27, Monday Evening Prayer of week 4) My e-mail: gerryclyne@outlook.com

Have a blessed new year! Br. Gerry