

# The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

## Newsletter for Secular Franciscans - Assumption BVM Province

June 2006 - No. 5

### Francis and Mary



The Annunciation from inside the Porziuncola Chapel

Francis's devotion to Mary is well known. Of the churches he repaired during the early years of his conversion, his favorite was the one dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels. He loved this place more than any other in the world. Thomas of Celano (1 Celano 21) talks of Francis's affection as he writes:

From there he moved to another place, which is called the "Portiuncula," where there stood a church of the Blessed Virgin Mother of God built in ancient times. At that time it was deserted and no one was taking care of it. When the holy man of God saw it so ruined, he was moved by piety because he had a warm devotion to the Mother of all good and he began to stay there continually. The restoration of that church took place in the third year of his conversion.

The foundation of Francis's devotion to Mary was the fact that Mary was the Mother of our Lord Jesus. It was she who made the Lord of majesty our brother. The scripture readings for the Feast of St. Mary of the Angels, August 2, support this view. In the reading from Galatians 4: 3-7, Paul says: "God sent his Son, born of a woman... so that we might receive adoption as children." The gospel passage from Luke 1: 26ff has Gabriel say to Mary: "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus... The child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

Mary becomes the Mother of the Word, the Son of God. Because of that we become sons and daughters, adopted children, of God. The Porziuncola epitomized this mystery and truth for Francis.

And as Mary gave birth to Jesus, Francis gave birth to a brotherhood at this place. Bonaventure says: "This is the place (St. Mary of the Angels) where the Order of Lesser Brothers was begun by St. Francis under the prompting of divine revelation." (Major Life II, 8)

Francis's devotion to Mary was not sentimental, nor did he place her on a pedestal. A marvelous sentence in Francis's Second Letter to All the Faithful, 51, shows the true character of Francis's Marian spirituality: *We are [Christ's] mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example.*

(continued on next page)

### Salutation of the Blessed Virgin St. Francis

Hail, O Lady,  
holy Queen,  
you are the virgin made church  
and the one chosen by the most holy Father in  
heaven whom He consecrated with His most holy  
beloved Son and with the Holy Spirit the  
Paraclete,  
in whom there was and is  
all the fullness of grace and every good.

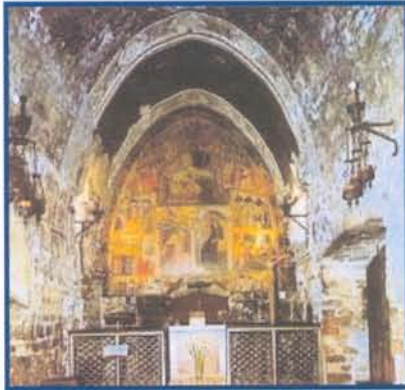
Hail, His Palace!  
Hail, His Tabernacle!  
Hail, His Home!  
Hail, His Robe!  
Hail, His Servant!  
Hail, His Mother!

And, hail all you holy virtues  
which through the grace and light of the Holy  
Spirit are poured into the hearts of the faithful so  
that from their faithless state you may make them  
faithful to God.



In order to be mothers of the Word and embrace the poverty and humility of Mary and her Son, Francis also found it important to pray like Mary. There is a place in Christian spirituality for praying to Mary, whether in word or in song. When, however, we explore Francis's devotion to Mary it seems that he wanted, more than anything, to pray like Mary in order to give birth to Jesus.

How did Mary pray? The answer to this question comes from the Scriptures, particularly the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke. After Gabriel came to Mary, Luke tells us in 1:29 that "she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." After the shepherds left the child in the stable at Bethlehem "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (2:19). After Mary and



Interior of Porziuncola Chapel, Assisi

Joseph found Jesus in the temple "...they did not understand what he said to them. He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart" (2:50-51).

The way to allow the Spirit of God to pray within us and speak of God's love is to ponder, like Mary, to question, to search, like Mary, to reflect and wonder, to humbly stand in openness, listening and reflecting on the mystery, gazing on the wonder that came into her life. If I pray like Mary, then the same things that happened to Mary can happen to me: Jesus is conceived within me, the Word becomes flesh, I become "full of grace," the will of God happens, I give birth to the Lord, and I am blessed.

Further, the external sign of Francis's devotion to Mary was not the churches he built, or images before whom he prayed, or pilgrimages to Marian shrines, or prayers he said. The external sign of his devotion to Mary was Francis's determination to share her poverty.

There is a story from Thomas of Celano (2 Celano 67) that illustrates this quite plainly:

Brother Peter of Catanio, the saint's vicar, saw that great crowds of brothers from other places visited Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, and that the alms received were not sufficient to provide for their needs. He told Saint Francis: "Brother,

I don't know what to do; I don't have enough to provide for all the crowds of brothers pouring in from all over. I beg you, please allow some of the goods of those entering as novices to be kept so that we can have recourse to these for expenses in due season." But the saint replied: "May that piety be elsewhere, my dear brother, which treats the Rule with impiety for the sake of anyone." "Then, what should I do?" asked Peter. "Strip the Virgin's altar and take its adornments when you can't care for the needy in any other way. Believe me, she would be happier to have her altar stripped and the Gospel of her Son kept than have her altar decorated and her Son despised. The Lord will send someone to return to his Mother what He has loaned to us.

We too can honor Mary not by placing her on a pedestal but by sharing her poverty and presenting Christ to the world as she did. Our shrines to Mary ought to be the shelters for the homeless who share her poverty. Our words in praise of Mary ought to be the words and deeds we say and do to bring an end to war and terrorism in the name of the Queen of Peace. Our pilgrimages in her honor might be a walk for the poor.

Mary gave birth to the Word, and therefore our brother. And so Francis could encourage us in turn to be "mothers of the Word, to give birth to Jesus in our lives."

## SFO PILGRIMAGE

The SFO Pilgrimage, September 7-16, 2006, which was announced in the previous Newsletter, will not take place this year. There were only two possible registrations.

I will try again in 2008, looking at either March or November dates when costs are lower. I still encourage Secular Franciscans to try to make a pilgrimage to Assisi. It is enriching beyond imagination. In 2007 Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs will have 25-30 pilgrimages. Contact the office for information.

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