



**"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"**

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

## **Holy Rule Chapter 4: What are the tools of good works.**

"First of all, love the Lord God with your whole heart, your whole soul and with all your strength. Then: love your neighbour as yourself... Bring comfort to the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, bury the dead. Go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing. Your way of acting must be different from the world's way: nothing must be preferred to the love of Christ."

## **Monastic Voices**

"Everything when informed by love leads to God, and when we live according to grace, we are made like God. In fact it is written, "If you love earth you are earth; if you love heaven you are heaven. If you love God, what shall I say? I will say, you are God." And so the Psalm says, "I have said you are gods and sons of the Most High" (Ps 82:6; Jn 10:34), and again, "Who cleaves to God is one spirit with Him" (1 Cor 6:17). So may the power of love be yours, and the vision of the true light.

On the other hand, the obsessive love of possessions leads to every impurity, and whoever is unhappily possessed by it becomes devilish, carrying out in almost every way the work of the devils. These try to inculcate love of possessions into our souls. As a result the virtues in every state of life are reduced, and consequently, the vices grow. From love of possessions comes murder, adultery, quarrelling, gluttony, laziness, and other evils. But with love of poverty and of the common life all good things come. Why have I said this? Because a spark from that holy source which is love has urged me to say it and I do it for your good. Read the things written about what we are seeking for; take the holy path of humility. We follow this above all through mortifying our own judgement and will, and placing ourselves in the hands of others.

To enjoy the perfect contemplative possession of God is certainly not given to all. It was only Peter, James and John before whom Jesus was transfigured; but to humble oneself, to be submissive, is, according to the saints, for everyone, and is not only useful but needful. Indeed the person who has all the other virtues but lacks humility and poverty behaves like someone throwing dust into the wind."

*(From the writings of St. Bernard Tolomei, 1272-1348, founder of the white-habited Benedictines of Our Lady of Mt. Oliveto, to whom St. Frances of Rome made her Oblation 15 August 1425. His feast day is 19 August. Cockfosters and Turvey are Olivetan Benedictine monasteries today).*

"Although she had a household filled with servants and wealth, the spirit of humility and poverty completely possessed the soul of the Lady Francesca. Often she would go out with her sister-in-law Vannoza, who was joined to her by ties not only of blood but also of shared ideals, and, without the knowledge of their husbands, they would enter some town where they were not known, and beg for alms to give to the poor. Pretty often they received, instead of charity, only insults and derision.

This handmaid of the Lord lived so perfectly according to the graces she received that she fulfilled in literal truth the words of the Apostle: "our homeland is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). She received many divine favours in the form of visions and ecstasies. But she tried her utmost to keep them hidden, and only spoke about them to her spiritual director. Even then, if he had not commanded her, she would have kept their details secret. But so perfect was her spirit of obedience, that even when she was carried out of her natural senses by the force of rapture, and was enjoying the vision of heavenly realities, she would immediately do what he ordered, if he was present at the time.

Her burning love for her neighbour so dominated her mind at every moment, that very soon her home became much more like a hospital than the mansion of a noble family. No pauper who came to the door was ever turned away empty handed. Sometimes when she had stripped even her husband's private store-room bare, miraculous increase would restore what had been taken."

*(From the Life of St. Frances of Rome, 1384 - 1440, by Giovanni Mattiotti, her confessor and first biographer. St. Frances was canonized in 1608. Her feast day is March 9.)*

## Dear Oblates and friends,

I expect that many of you are thinking about making the pilgrimage to Rome next year, in celebration of the Great Jubilee. If so, I hope you will find time to visit, among all the other attractions, the Monastery of the Oblates of S. Francesca Romana - St. Frances of Rome - at Tor de' Specchi, in the via del Teatro Marcello. The holy foundress of this monastery was a Benedictine Oblate, and is one of the patrons of Oblates. She is called "of Rome" rather as Montgomery was called "of El Alamein". The Romans are proud to consider her their special patron, even though they already have SS. Peter and Paul, and all the Popes, and so many other spiritual riches and privileges besides. One of the Church's really great Saints, Frances was a married woman, a profound contemplative and a mystic.

The present Superior at Tor de' Specchi sent me the enclosed pictures of St. Frances, refusing all payment. Hot-foot on their track, there followed a gift of the original Life by Giovanni Mattiotti, recently re-published, in Italian and Latin: all 995 pages of it, with colour illustrations. These reproduce the beautiful 15th century frescoes depicting scenes from the Saint's life. Her monastery and Church would be well worth visiting just to see them. If you do, please thank the sisters for their generosity.

There were certainly many very extraordinary features about St. Frances' life. She went in for extreme personal austerities, and seems to have been almost reckless in her almsgiving. As well as her many and frequent visions, she undoubtedly had the gift of miracles. She was also much troubled by the devil, rather in the manner of the Curé d'Ars. Finding he gets nowhere with ordinary temptations, the devil is sometimes allowed to attack God's favoured servants openly. All of this will probably be outside our own experience. But Frances remains attractive and accessible, because she was warmly human, and like us, had many struggles and sorrows to endure. In some ways her life was rather a mess. She always felt that her desires to serve God were frustrated by circumstances: but of course it was precisely through those circumstances that He led her to do His will, for her good and His glory.

The first big decision of her life was taken out of her hands, to her bitter grief. From early childhood, she had determined to dedicate her virginity to the Lord. Her parents resolutely opposed this. Some Saints, in the same situation, like Catherine of Siena, Rose of Lima, or Teresa of Avila, fought their parents, by fair means or foul, and eventually gained their holy desire. Others, like St. Catherine of Genoa, or St. Frances, lost this battle. So it was that at the age of just 13, she bowed to relentless pressure, and married the noble and wealthy bridegroom her parents had chosen for her.

Situated very near the top of the social ladder, Frances was now expected to dedicate her attention to the social whirl, and to her appearance. Longing always for the religious life, of the strictest possible variety, she was miserable to the point of despair. A great consolation came with the discovery that her sister-in-law, Vannoza, shared all her ideals. They became fast and life-long friends. Another consolation was her husband, Lorenzo Ponziano. A very good man, he soon came to love and respect his wife, and accepted that she could never fit into a conventional mould. She, for her part, returned his love with genuine devotion. It is said that through all their married life, they never once had a quarrel.

Soon after the birth of her first son, John Baptist, while still only 16, Frances was given charge of the entire Ponziano household. This involved the administration of large estates and properties, and many servants and employees. So she was always very busy, and above all, constantly being interrupted. Her attitude to this has come down to us in a famous remark. "It is most laudable in a married woman to be devout," she said, "but she must never forget that she is a housewife. Sometimes she must leave God at the altar, to serve Him in her housekeeping". She tried to remain faithful at least to her "little office". According to the story, one day duty called her away from this 5 times in succession. When she doggedly returned to the same page on the final occasion, she found the words of the Antiphon she had been trying to read were written in letters of gold.

All pictures of St. Frances depict her with a small angel standing by her. Mattiotti tells us what he is doing there. Frances had lost her second son, Evangelist, in the plague, aged about 8. One day he came to her in a vision, accompanied by an archangel. His message was that she must prepare herself now to lose also her little daughter, Agnes. But for a consolation, she was henceforth to be allowed always to see her guardian angel. Since no human could gaze on the full glory of an angel, he took the appearance of a boy aged about 8, wearing the dalmatic or tunicle of a minor cleric at Mass. He would always be there to comfort her amid her trials, and to assure her that the devil had no power to separate her from the love of Christ. He ordered her, incidentally, to mitigate some of her harsh penances. The light radiating from him enabled her always to see in the dark. This prompted Pope Pius XI to declare her also patron Saint of motorists!

These were the days of the Great Schism of the West (1378-1417). Civil war raged in Italy, as armies loyal to rival Popes fought to gain control. Lorenzo, defending the City on behalf of the true Pope, was severely wounded in street fighting. His party defeated, he was exiled. All his estates were confiscated, his house destroyed, and his surviving son taken as hostage. Rome was sacked by the victorious army, only to be engulfed by floods, and the famine and plague that followed in their wake.

St. Frances remained in Rome. She had always been extremely generous to the poor. Now that the poor and suffering were everywhere, with no-one to help them, she devoted her energies all the more to their relief. She managed to create a hospital out of the ruins of the family home. When the Schism ended, and Lorenzo was able to return, he willingly allowed her to continue her charitable works. But he was a broken man, physically and mentally. So he himself now received the best of her loving care.

All of this was not enough for Frances. She also went out to seek the afflicted in their homes, and in the public hospitals. There, she would feed them, make their beds, and bandage their sores. The filthier and more nauseating they were, the more carefully and scrupulously did she tend them. Often she would take away their ragged and filthy clothing, and wash and mend it, as if it was to be used by the Lord Himself. It would be returned to them, carefully folded in lavender. And very often, by a word or a touch, she would leave the sick or the wounded completely restored to health.

But her works of mercy were spiritual as well as corporal. She became famous for her ability to reconcile enemies, and turn people away from thoughts of hatred or revenge. On her visits she would help and encourage sinners to seek God's forgiveness through the ministry of the Church: and she would seek out priests to bring the sacraments to those who needed them.

Frances' example had inspired many noble Roman Ladies to help her in this work. With the active support and encouragement of the Pope, she eventually decided to bring them together into a new Religious Institute. They dedicated themselves to God not as enclosed nuns, under vows, but as Oblates. They lived in community, but were free to go out to help the poor wherever they were needed. Their oblation was received by the white-habited Benedictine monks of the Church of Sancta Maria Nova. The Institute of the Oblates of St Frances of Rome has survived, from that day to this.

Lorenzo died in 1436. His last words to her were, "I feel as if my whole life has been one beautiful dream of purest happiness. God has given me so much in your love."

Her married obligations over, Frances was at last free to embrace the Religious life. On the feast of St. Benedict, she entered the Institute she had founded. She wanted to live as the least of all the Sisters, but of course they immediately elected her Superior. Her visions and ecstasies now became more frequent. She often spent whole nights in prayer. Then in 1440, aged still only 56, she became ill. On the evening of March 9 her face shone with a strange light. "The angel has finished his task," she said; "he beckons me to follow him". As soon as

news of her death got out, all Rome mourned: huge crowds came to venerate her body. Many people who prayed to her then received miraculous healing.

Frances was of course very Roman, and very Catholic. So it is natural that her devotional life should have centred on the Holy Eucharist, and on Our Lady. Receiving Holy Communion came to have the almost inevitable effect of throwing her into an ecstasy. Those around her often saw a light shining about her head at that moment. In her raptures she was able to converse familiarly with Jesus, and with His Mother. Once our Lady covered Frances with her mantle, indicating that she would also specially love and protect all her spiritual daughters, the Oblates. St. Paul the Apostle, St. Mary Magdalene and St. Benedict also frequently appeared to her, to advise and console her.

Obviously, the inability of St. Frances to live the monastic life as she wished did not prevent her from reaching the heights of sanctity. In fact, as a lay woman, she was able to fulfill St. Benedict's instructions about active charity in a way enclosed religious rarely can. This is a feature of Oblate spirituality that was always very dear to Dom Maurus. It is good for monks to know that their own oblates are out there in the world, actively seeking out people in need, and mediating to them the compassion of Christ. And the life of St. Frances shows that when someone truly burns with the love of God, they can transform the world. They will most certainly not be spared trouble and affliction, but they will be rewarded with a closeness to God beyond anything we can imagine or describe.

Sparkling jewel of the Benedictine Order, lovable St. Frances of Rome, you whom Providence led by the various states of the Christian life so as to be virgin, mother and widow, model of every virtue: ask of the divine Redeemer that we may be detached from worldly vanities; that we may be guided by our Guardian Angel, progress daily in the love of God, the Church and our neighbour, and have a share in the heaven of your everlasting happiness. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.