

Our Prayful Reflections

The Challenge of The First Version of the Letter to the Faithful

By Stephen Pastick SFO
Queen of Peace Region
tauhouse70x7@hotmail.com

“The First Version of the Letter to the Faithful,” as you know, serves the Secular Franciscan Order as the Prologue to our Rule of life. Many would readily say that the challenge in this letter, written by St. Francis for the first members of his newly formed Third Order, would be his graphic description of what happens to a soul that has not done penance at the moment of the death of its host body: “The devil snatches the soul from his body with such anguish and tribulation that no one can know it except he who endures it.” [p. 4 SFO Rule] There have been some Inquirers who have lost interest in our Order after reading this, and it has proven to be a challenge to Formation Instructors as to how to explain the medieval mindset of St. Francis of Assisi. Yet I tell you, that it is not the primary challenge.

The treasure and the challenge to be found in this letter is the worldview of St. Francis of Assisi contained within. What is it? And can we of the 21st century make it our own? How binding is it? First, it must be acknowledged that there are those who feel that this Letter to the Faithful is really the first rule given to the Third Order. Benet Fonck, OFM, has written that, “Just as he did for the Lesser Brothers and the Poor Ladies, he gave these seculars a ‘way of life,’ or rule, which is preserved as the First Version of his ‘Letter to All the Faithful.’” [p. 03-7 Fully Mature] We can dig no deeper than this for our spiritual roots. Forget that lifeless Rule of 1221, which was not written by Francis. Consider this letter and the one that soon followed, “The Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful,” as our earliest Rules. I see the second version as an answer by St. Francis to those Third Order members who wanted Francis to better spell out as to how to do penance. How binding are these two documents? I think that the salvation of this world may very well depend on how we choose to live out these two exhortations of the prophet, St. Francis of Assisi.

What is St. Francis’ worldview? Examining the first letter we can see that there are 3 kinds of people who inhabit it. There are those who do penance and, then, there are those who do not do penance. These two groups are in the minority and are in constant tension with each other. I will suggest to you that it is no less

than mortal combat over the Kingdom of Heaven becoming a reality here on earth. The third, larger, group is only hinted at by St. Francis. He writes, “We (who do penance) give birth to him through a holy life which must give life **to others** by example.” This group of “**others**” is the majority of men and women in the world, who are caught in between the tug-of-war between good and evil. They are a noble group as they are made in the image of God, but many of them are fast asleep, content as long as they have enough to be happy. In a sense, they are the prize that is being fought over. Sometimes they are the required sacrifice to the gods of those who do not do penance, so that they may have even more, to possess what they covet. Fear and might and rules of right are coercive means of manipulating many of them to actively support the spoilers who would have it all without regard to cost. While the ones who do penance, knights in the happy employ of Sir Francis, can only enter the fray armed with faith, hope and loving kindness; wooing and winning souls by loving service, heralding the Peace and Goodness of Christ their only king.

What camp is it that I am a member of? I must confess to you my brothers and sisters, that I have had a foot in all three camps at one time or another. At present, I have a foot in the “**others**,” and a foot in the camp of those who do penance. I am a house divided, a work in process. What I want and what I desire most, and I beseech thee Lord most heartily for, is this: to “love the Lord with my whole heart, with my whole soul and mind, with all my strength, and love my neighbors as themselves...and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance.” [Paraphrased from the opening of The First Letter to All the Faithful] I want to have both feet firmly entrenched in the camp of those who do penance, to be counted among the holy, one of the Kingdom, who serves only one King, Jesus Christ and no other. For God’s sake, believe me, brothers and sisters. You do, too, you do, too. What if God the Father, Abba, sacrificed His only beloved Son for nothing? That the Prince of Darkness wins and eternal night reigns?

The question begs an answer. Is St. Francis’ worldview still relevant today? Is the Prophet’s truth of yesterday, still the truth of today? Is the Gospel of yore still the page of the play today? Jesus, over 2000 years ago, said, “The kingdom of heaven has been enduring violent assault, and the violent have been seizing it by force.” [Mt 11:12bc] Who could testify that this may yet be the truth? Ask Oscar Romero. Ask Franz Jagerstatter. Ask one of the children, who dies every three seconds in our world from hunger. St. Paul has warned us that our wrestling is not “against flesh and blood, but against the Principalities and the Powers, against the world-rulers of

this darkness, against the spiritual force of wickedness on high.” [Ephesians 6:12] If it is true that there are those amongst us who are ones who do not do penance, who wield such power and might and are so very persuasive, then we, little lambs of God, are in their way. Once St. Paul, one of the greatest examples of one who does penance, walked as a little lamb into a room and placed his head in the lion’s mouth. It was Nero, the Roman lion, one of the greatest examples of one who does not do penance. I can hear St. Paul boast just before his end, “When it is that I am weak, then it is that I am strong!”

I think that they are few in number. Most are safely locked behind walls of security. But there are some of their minions within our midst, who work to persuade and dupe and make us out to be fools for an unsound truth. It is the Gospel of Peace and Love being attacked by the Gospel of Violence, where their end justifies the means. It is all idolatry, so many bloody sacrifices to their gods. Beware the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Francis cautioned his brothers about the world and quoted the Master, “Behold, I am sending you forth like sheep in the midst of wolves. Be therefore wise as serpents, and guileless as doves.” [Mt 10:16] Do not think it otherwise. Once, I thought St. Francis too severe when he described what happened to a soul who does not do penance. Now, I do not think so. Those who do not do penance are small in number, without a conscience and knowingly do much harm. They live to serve another master, not our Master. They are spoilers. All they touch is spoiled or destroyed. Ultimately, the real challenge is Perfect Joy. Can we go about doing what is ours to do with a happy heart, no matter what? To do so, we must be as St. Francis admonished us to be, simple, humble and pure.

Quotes:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

John 15:12

God’s kingdom is love. What does it mean to love? It means to be sensitive to life, to things, to persons, to feel for everything and everyone to the exclusion of nothing and no one.

Anthony De Mello from The Way To Love.

Faith is the ability not to panic.

Unknown