

REFLECTIONS
FOR THE 140th
ANNIVERSARY
OF FOUNDATION

3

August 16, 2023

1883
2023
SSM

Love for the humanity of Christ in Mother Frances Streitel's spirituality

Sr. M. Vittorina Marini, SSM

The occasion of the 140th anniversary of the Foundation of the Congregation offers us the opportunity to reflect on the centrality of Christ in Mother Frances' spirituality and the unique consideration she had for the Redeemer's human traits. Incidentally, her attraction to Francis of Assisi's experience helped her to express in a unique way her piety and devotion to all the mysteries of Christ's humanity, from the Incarnation to the Cross.

However, we cannot underestimate the inspirational-charismatic component of her unique love for the Incarnation of the Son of God. Her desire to structure Eucharistic worship by relating it to the mysteries of Christ's humanity¹, or her focus on the cross from the very beginning, proves it. It is right there in the cross, that she recognizes the highest expression of Christ's humanity and Jesus' human-divine redemptive love.

It is in this core part of M. Frances' spiritual experience, that we can place *the mystery of the pierced heart*, represented by the image of the Sacred Heart. We find that this representation of Jesus, so commonly found in the popular piety of the time, is directly linked to her personal mystical experience of the beginning of the new foundation.

¹ Letters to Fr. Jordan, Lett. 78 (65), 3: «Now let me make one request in favor of our mutual Love, in favor of our Sacramental God. Reverend Father, would you not like to promise this God in the form of Bread, that as soon as He has taken place in the midst of your spiritual daughters, one of them will stand guard with Him by day and night, in such a way that every hour another Sister will be called to this guard of honor and every hour will be dedicated to another mystery of the Incarnate Love, somewhat like this: in one hour the Precious Blood, in a second one, the Sacred Heart, and in a third, the wounds of the Savior will be venerated in a special way. I had never thought about such a thing, but today it became clear to me that I should not read the next number of "The Missionary"; and after I had agreed to this with full inclination of my will, I was given to perceive how to render love and adoration to the Lord in His new vineyard. I am firmly convinced that in this manner the work of the Brothers and Sisters of our Society will have the special grace to do many and great things for the spread and renewal of the reign of Christ on earth».



She herself has given us record in one of her letters of the interior locution, mediated by a painting depicting the Sacred Heart, which made her realize that she was destined to found a new reality of consecrated life. Here is her testimony of the event: *"Now to come to the point: About nine months ago ² as I prayed thus, the word struck me, "You are to pronounce your vows into the hands of the bishop."³ [...] Soon after I had the above mentioned communication and was approaching the Divine Heart, asking why I was called to Carmel, I received the answer: "To unite the active life with the contemplative." At the same time it became clear to me that the Lord would call me to a foundation which would aspire to contemplation closely united with activity."*⁴

Naturally, nothing happens by chance in the spiritual life, and possibly neither did the fact that she heard the voice coming from the image of the Sacred Heart, and not from the Crucifix. Everything in the divine plan is shaped so that the person's life, who is placed in the *sequela Christi*, will reveal the signs of the particular mission to which he or she is destined.⁵

It is through this vision that M. Frances allows us to understand that the call she receives urges her



Oil painting on canvas depicting the "Deposition of Jesus from the Cross" (19th century). The painting was donated to the SSMs by Msgr. De Waal on the day of the dedication of the chapel in Borgo Santo Spirito. At that time Msgr. De Waal was the administrator of the temporal goods of the Congregation (1885-1886). The painting was later placed in the Chapter Room of the Generalate. Restored in 2009, the painting is currently located in the corridor of the Generalate offices.

² Nine months ago, June/July 1882, in the Carmel of Himmelspforten.

³ Vows are made to God, in the hands of one's superior.

⁴ Message and communication from above, and interpretation by M. Francesca. At that time, this image of the Sacred Heart was in the choir of the nuns, next to a large Crucifix. [See LETTERS TO FR. JORDAN Lett. 28 (17), 8, 9]

⁵ To deepen the meaning of the figure of the Sacred Heart in Christian Doctrine See: I. SANNA, *Sacro Cuore*, in S. DE FIORES – T. GOFFI, *Nuovo Dizionario di Spiritualità*, Edizioni Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1985, 1344-1352.

to meditate and love, in the Heart of the Redeemer, what the Church itself contemplates, namely, the image of the divine-humanity of the Son of God and His love for us. To put it in a word, this image offers Mother Frances *the essence of the whole mystery of our redemption* to be worshipped and served in the mission.

M. Frances loved the humanity of Jesus in all its expressions. Above all, the Eucharistic worship, which is closely related to the devotion to the Sacred Heart and all the images (e.g., the Blood of Christ, the Holy Wounds, etc.) that connect the Sacrament to the Passion of Jesus.

Thus, Mother Frances recommends to herself and her sisters to found their relationship with God on the decision to radically follow Christ to the *"foolishness of the Cross."*⁶ Her spiritual experience fathoms the climax of Christ's humanity as He suffered on the cross, for she understands that it is only in this mystery of divine-human pain that the new creation is "shaped". Supporting what the above says, her letters include such words as: "transformation into Christ", "configuration to Christ", "configuration to his cross", "likeness to Christ" and "union of love with Christ", "union with his sufferings to be sharers in the resurrection."

Mother Frances realizes that Christians can have access to the heavenly Father, open themselves to the Holy Spirit, and embark on a journey of communion with the Trinity only in the Incarnate Word and the Cross. The Foundress' human and spiritual life unfolds in the light of the Spirit, whence she recognizes and experiences that man and woman, and the whole world bear the seal of Christ and His Cross. Her love for the humanity of the Crucifix and her desire to conform to Him become the climax of her self-giving to the Incarnate Son of God. Indeed, she writes *"My Father, let us not stop asking the Lord to transform us into Himself and to form us in His image as a savior,"*⁷ *with His wounds, His pains, and His cross.*⁸ Mother Frances seeks to participate in the sacrifice of the Crucifix, in His human pain, so that the image of the good news of the Gospel that *God loves us* may be shaped in her flesh. We may say that the Foundress' love for the humanity of Christ is both gratitude to God for the manifestation of His mercy and awareness of her mission: that Christ may be loved, that the Church may be renewed, that the Lord Jesus may be known to all the men and women of the world for their salvation.

Alcune suggestioni per la riflessione personale

Il ritorno al *carisma di fondazione*, in modo creativo, considera il compito di lavorare allo sviluppo di una visione rinnovata della nostra vita consacrata, come ha sottolineato

⁶ LETTERS TO FR. JORDAN, Lett. 90 (45), 3.

⁷ See Rm 8:29; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 1:15; 3:10.

⁸ LETTERS TO FR. JORDAN, LETT. 76 (63), 3.

Papa Francesco⁹. Il 23° Capitolo Generale, sollecitando le suore a *radicarsi in Cristo*, persegue il rinnovamento guardando al *Carisma* e alle nuove istanze della *Missione*.

✓ Riesco ad esprimere il mio amore alla divino-umanità di Gesù e alla sua missione, nella mia quotidianità, in modo efficace e vitale? Sono in grado di essere aperta all'azione dello Spirito Santo, che mi guida verso Cristo e mi aiuta ad armonizzare *azione* e *contemplazione*?

✓ Curo la dimensione della preghiera personale e liturgica? E in che misura il mio modo di vivere lascia trasparire l'amore di Gesù Cristo e porta vita nel mio servizio?

✓ Riesco a vedere nell'umanità delle mie sorelle e del prossimo, l'umanità di Cristo?

⁹ PAPA FRANCESCO, *Omelia* per la XXVI Giornata Mondiale della Vita Consacrata (2 febbraio 2022): «Chiediamoci quali motivazioni muovono il nostro cuore e il nostro agire, qual è la visione rinnovata che siamo chiamati a coltivare e, soprattutto, prendiamo fra le braccia Gesù. Anche se sperimentiamo fatiche e stanchezze – questo succede: anche delusioni, succede –, facciamo come Simeone e Anna, che attendono con pazienza la fedeltà del Signore e non si lasciano rubare la gioia dell'incontro. Andiamo verso la gioia dell'incontro: questo è molto bello! Rimettiamo Lui al centro e andiamo avanti con gioia».

Mother Frances Streitel **Testimonies of her conformity to Christ**

Mother Johanna Ankenbrand: "She always kept the mysteries of the faith in her mind. I remember that she instilled in the novices a special devotion to the mysteries of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation and the Passion of Jesus. She had a great devotion to the Holy Spirit: she wanted the Sisters to correct the forgetfulness in which the Holy Spirit is left by so many, and she would explain how much we owe Him.¹"

Fr. Crescentius Munstermann: "I remember that during her last illness she was always resigned in the will of God, without ever complaining. I was at her side some nights and I was greatly edified: once I asked her if she was in much pain: she answered me by putting her hand on her head as if she had a crown of thorns: there was a picture of the Crucifix on the wall next to her, she pointed to it and added: "Be all for Him." I also remember that before she died, she kept her eyes closed for a few days, during which time I had the impression, from the expression on her face, sometimes smiling, sometimes sad, that she was reliving her whole life. When she opened her eyes, I asked her, "Mother, is the Cross very heavy?" and with a nod and a certain smile, she answered, Yes.²"



This oil painting of the Holy Family was brought to Rome by Mother Frances Streitel. It was a gift from her family. Before this image, which was placed on the altar first in Borgo Nuovo 151, then in the house in Vicolo del Falco, and finally in the Oratory in Borgo Santo Spirito, the first investitures and professions were celebrated. The painting is currently located on the second floor of the Generalate, in the corridor of the Generalate offices.

¹SACRA RITUUM CONGREGATIONE, *Nepesina seu Herbipolen., Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Franciscae Streitel. Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, Rome 1956, page 20 § 78.

²*Ibid.*, page 108 § 427.

«You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished!»

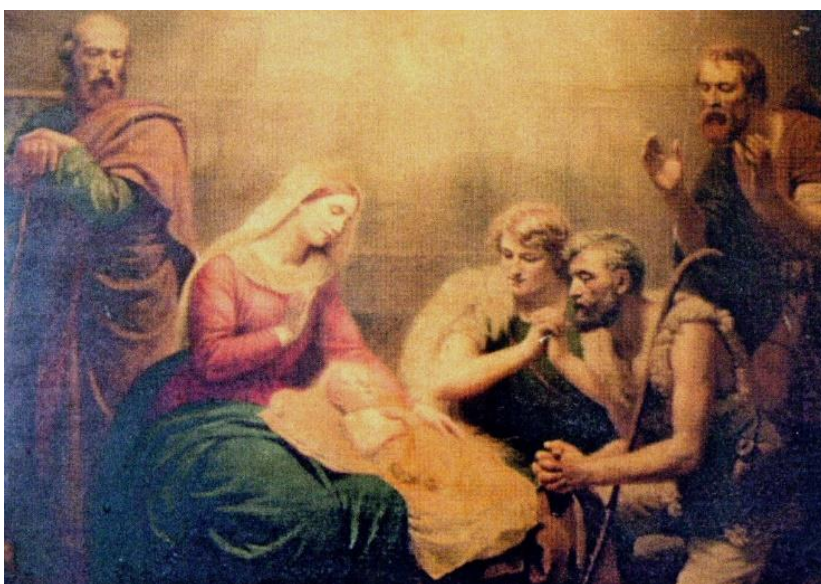
Theological Consultors: "Mother Frances' humility, self-denial, prayer, silence in the face of accusations, patient acceptance of trials of various kinds, and progressive conformation to Christ crucified are clear signs of correspondence to the love that God had bestowed on her. (*"Her behavior after her removal as Superior shows every sign of Christian fortitude,"* the texts state.)³"

SSMs and conformity to Christ in the General Directory for Ongoing and Initial Formation Journeying

Principle 2: "The goal of all formation efforts is to nourish the grace of religious vocation so that throughout our lives we grow in:

- being consecrated fully to the triune God,
- conforming our entire lives to Jesus in his total self-giving
- seeking perfect charity in the service of the mission of the Church.

Through religious consecration we strive to reproduce in ourselves what Jesus accepted in the Incarnation..., the mystery of God's presence in human experience and the divinization of our humanity (VC 16). God the Father anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power, sending him into the world to be one of us in all things but sin. Jesus consecrates himself to God for the sake of humanity expressing his complete trust in participating in the Father's plan. The Holy Spirit continues to empower us and transform the world through the dynamic gift of divine love. It is this gift which enables us to be a sign of God's presence and to exercise a preferential love for the poor."



***Adoration of the shepherds -
Painting on canvas by artist
Becker for the Motherhouse
of the Sisters of the Sorrowful
Mother, Rome 1889.***

³CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Franciscae a Cruce. Relatio et Vota Congressus Peculiaris die 15 Maii An. 2009 habiti*, Rome 2009, page 109.