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## Simplicity and Penance *In the life of Mother Frances Streitel and in the history of the SSM*

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Commonly the terms simplicity and penance can have negative or positive connotations. Thinking of a "simple" person can sometimes mean "not very educated", "naïve", or who presents himself, without artifacts. The term "penance" quickly brings us back to something tiring, hard, but, for those who know how to go further, it can testify to something extraordinarily wonderful<sup>1</sup>. The dictionaries define the word "simplicity" as a derivative of "simple", "from the Latin simplex (folded only once) which refers to a person means frank, sincere, genuine", while "penance" means "the sense of regret for a mistake made for a decision made, for a behavior assumed or a conduct followed, or, even, remorse for an evil committed, for an offence or damage caused to individuals or to a community"<sup>2</sup>.

The simplicity and penance lived by M. Frances are inserted in a wide and articulated historical, religious, cultural, Carmelite and Franciscan context. Having to focus the text on the subject matter, without digressions, I will "simply" dwell on a few considerations that can be useful for our reflection.

"God is infinitely simple" affirms St. Thomas Aquinas and in Sacred Scripture reveals himself and communicates with simple people<sup>3</sup>. On the path of salvation through simplicity, God invites and has always proposed penance, that is, conversion, to his children. Jesus himself, at the beginning of his public life, says: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the gospel"<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> «...what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation» *Testament of St. Francis Omnibus of Sources* page 67 – Franciscan Herald Press – Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>2</sup> See N. ZINGARELLI, v. *Semplicità*, v. *Penitenza*, in *Vocabulary of the Italian language* (2007) 1729; 1343.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 11:25 « "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children». (Other pericopes useful to the theme): Mt 6:19-34; Mt 10:1-15; Mt 10:16-33; Mt 18:1-11; Mt 19:13-15).

<sup>4</sup> See Mc 1:15.



Mother Frances is part of the earthly pilgrimage,<sup>5</sup> keeping in her heart a rather original desire: "I am willing to walk unusual ways if it pleases God. I will walk ways most sorrowful and painful, but after all this, I want to remain on the direct way that leads to heaven"<sup>6</sup>.

These are words that condense a profound human-spiritual experience in the relationship with God, "crucified Love"<sup>7</sup> and at the same time indicate the clarity of the path to be followed and the goal to be reached. This way that leads to the "perfection" is related to obedience<sup>8</sup> and crosses the spirit of simplicity and humility<sup>9</sup> (in the behavior and way of relating without presumptions, which also leads to beg pardon<sup>10</sup>). She asks the Lord to lead her soul in a very simply way according to the natural order of the spiritual life<sup>11</sup>.

Already when she was at the Carmelite convent in Himmelspforten, Mother Frances struggled inwardly because of her desire for a simple life, but inhabited by a special grace.



**Würzburg, Carmel of Himmelspforten**

I entered Carmel with the intention of serving the Lord there as perfectly as possible in seclusion and perfect obedience. I was a simple soul who was, however, frequently led by the Lord in a special way, but so clearly and definitely that for years. I did not have to mention in confession that I was under the special influence of grace. In that I was impelled to an active striving after self-humiliation and self-contempt in the environment of the spiritual life<sup>12</sup>.

The word "self-contempt" frequently used by her, which can come to us as rigid and austere, can be translated as "penance", meaning by it the total or partial renunciation, conscious, of one's own interest or ego, in favor of others<sup>13</sup>. Transported to the spiritual plane, it expresses self-denial aimed at the glory of God alone (conversion).

My Father! Why does the Lord not guide me on a simple way, which I love so much, a way most suited to my mental limitations, to my weakness in the practice of virtue? Why? I suffer and have suffered for years under this burden. I must want what I avoided. I must go where I do not want to go.1 Again and again I must accept an office which I fear because of its dangers, fear because of my wretchedness. I who

<sup>5</sup> See 1Pt 2:11: «Beloved, you are strangers and in exile [...]».

<sup>6</sup> 1883-07-17 *Letter 40(29),2 to Fr. Jordan*.

<sup>7</sup> See 1883-12-15 *Letter 73(51), 4* and *Letter 1884-03-28 95(58),5 to Fr. Jordan*.

<sup>8</sup> See 1883-09-02 *Letter 43(32), 4 to Fr. Jordan*.

<sup>9</sup> See 1883-10-20 *Letter 53(38), 4 to Fr. Jordan*.

<sup>10</sup> See 1883-11-24 *Letter 60(42),1 to Fr. Jordan*.

<sup>11</sup> See 1883-11-26 *Letter 62(43),2 to Fr. Jordan*.

<sup>12</sup> 1883-03-31 *Letter 28(17),3 to Fr. Jordan*.

<sup>13</sup> See N. ZINGARELLI, v. *Abnegazione*, Vocabulary of the Italian language (2007) 22.

would love to walk in solitude must again come forward, and having come forward, I find in my distressed soul nothing but the feeling of its weakness, humiliation, and untold suffering. The Lord allows everything to shape itself into a cross, and the Cross with its five marks of love will finally be deeply impressed into the soul, so that resemblance to the prototype Christ and His true image St. Francis will not be wanting in death. Life, for a long time, has been a continual nailing to the cross of reconciliation<sup>14</sup>.

This intimate sharing of Mother Frances reaches a high point and embodies the synthesis of penance that she herself wants to live in simplicity. The Franciscan spirit, which she nourishes, is a fundamental and inseparable part of her being and her actions. St. Francis, in his Testament, write as the first memory-testimony what was dearest to him, namely that when he was in sin, God led him to embark upon a life of penance among the lepers and he had pity of them<sup>15</sup>. In a concise summary one could dare to say that "life of penance" is equivalent to "have pity" (recognize and love Christ in brothers/sisters, especially in the suffering).



### February 9, 1904 - Aggregation of the SSMs into the Seraphic Order

It's truly uplifting to recognize in Mother Frances such a great determination in living the *Sequela Christi* that everything goes into the background, or rather, the priority lies in contemplating the wonders that the Lord continues to work in his plan of Love, as it was for the apostles, St. Francis and his companions.

<sup>14</sup> 1883-07-12 Letter 37(27), 2 to Fr. Jordan.

<sup>15</sup> See Testament of St. Francis Omnibus of Sources page 67 – Franciscan Herald Press – Chicago, Illinois.

Everything in M. Francesca exalts the essential (which recalls the style of poverty), starting from the furnishing of the house, the dress and veil worn, the food consumed, the titles (simply Mother, not necessarily reverend) and fraternal relationships, impregnated, instead, with a healthy wealth of cordiality, benevolence and charity.

The summary, which she herself proposes, we find in the notes of her notebook:

*Simplicity*

1. In everything that we do not search or desire other than to please God, because when you have another intention, the work is no longer simple, but double.
2. Have a simple filial relationship with God, focus on him alone, and leave aside all human consideration.
3. Never talk differently from what you think.
4. Detest even the smallest lie.
5. Make your interior uniform with your outer appearance, except you feel any unsorted stirring, because then it is not against naivety if you do disclose it.
6. Always be attentive to please God; never pay attention to what others do.
7. Do not think badly of others without reason; always have a good opinion of every-one.
8. Talk and respond with sincerity in dealing with others; do not use words that have an ambiguous meaning, especially towards superiors to whom you have to disclose your identity as it really is<sup>16</sup>.

Simplicity appears here as the great "container" of penance. The points listed above require, in fact, considerable personal work surpassing oneself, with the help of divine grace, to stay in truth and transparency in front of oneself and others. Here is a demanding path of penance: to return continually to God, keeping the relationship with sister and brother welcoming, patient and reconciled, thus "allowing" God to be Father of all.

How often has experience as well as the fatherly guidance of our spiritual Father taught me this. How often did I see too late, that patience with others is a higher virtue than all penances together which still did not convince me of the necessity of leniency with the weaknesses of others<sup>17</sup>.

Here the profound conception of penance for Mother Frances unfolds: if external penance remains neutral and does not develop solidarity with the person who is placed close to us, our practice is in vain. If, on the contrary, we extract resources from ourselves to be more "present" to the one next to us, we are fulfilling the Lord's will and working for His Kingdom.

My Father, it is a great grace to be able to be poor in will. I can say I have never found such a surplus of will as in souls who roughly persist in external works of

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<sup>16</sup> 1885-00-00 NOTEBOOK (Heft) THE RELIGIOUS VIRTUES #9.

<sup>17</sup> 1889-10-27 Letter 6(6),5 to Sr. M. Scholastica Demer and Sr. M. Joachima Hornung.

penance and who, at the same time, are attached to and stubbornly cling to very base things and to their more often very limited imagination<sup>18</sup>.

Warning against pharisaic actions, the Foundress has the value within herself clear and goes to the heart of living penance both in the sacrament (in asking God for forgiveness), and in works (personal renunciations that are not ends in themselves, but that lead to letting oneself be transformed and reconciled with Christ in God)<sup>19</sup>.

This is certain: the Lord has given me an immense capability to suffer and a spirit of penance which penetrates all my actions. I am never more free and inclined to do good and to fulfill my duties of office than when my soul and my whole being are moved by this two fold practice of "penance" and "suffering"<sup>20</sup>.

We must not let ourselves be destabilized by the terms used by Mother Francesca, but we are called, on the contrary, to bring her teaching back to our ordinariness to do good, not to lose sight of God, the Supreme Good.

Be angry with ourselves and our many sins and imperfections, take up small exercises of penance and be glad if others see your miserableness<sup>21</sup>.

Our challenge (penance) is precisely that of "expropriation": which leads us to give glory to God and not to ourselves, to give back all of ourselves, to recognize our misery before our brothers / sisters, for what we really are, to welcome ourselves as such, although immensely loved by the Father, and to desire nothing but the coming of His Kingdom.

In this direction our documents accompany us, a stable way that orients us to the goal.

In the Constitution SSM of 1885 In the Constitution of 1885 we read: "If a Sister wishes to perform a special external act of mortification, she must ask permission of the superior after having sought advice of the confessor"<sup>22</sup>.

The SSM Constitutions of 1898 recall that the Third Order of St. Francis is called the Order of Penance and invite interior and exterior "mortifications" ("in all occupations and works of religious life"), privileging humility and obedience, including fasting at various times of the liturgical year and feasts of the Community (except for certain categories of sisters: for example, those engaged in schools, assistance to the sick, heavy domestic work, the sick and sickly).

One can well grasp that everything must be pondered and lived with balance and wisdom, letting oneself be advised by those who are further along the way. Penance is certainly not imposed to annihilate the person; on the contrary, their meaning is precisely that of releasing the most beautiful energies to be placed at the service of God and others.

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<sup>18</sup> 1883-09-12 *Letter 44(76), 1 to Fr. Jordan.*

<sup>19</sup> See 2Cor 5:20.

<sup>20</sup> 1884-02-14 *Letter 92(56), 2 to Fr. Jordan*; See Lk 9:23: «Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me».

<sup>21</sup> 1885-00-00 NOTEBOOK (Heft) THE RELIGIOUS VIRTUES, #5.17.

<sup>22</sup> Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity of the Sorrowful Mother, 1885, #72.

The Rule of the Third Order invites those who belong to it to persevere in faith and penance, intending to live evangelical conversion in a spirit of prayer, poverty and humility (Chap. I,2); to begin the life of penance, aware that we must all be converted unceasingly and as a sign of this put on humble garments living in simplicity (Chap. II, 6); and, again, to repent inwardly with contrition and outwardly with confession for their sins, bearing fruits worthy of penance, fasting and trying always to be simple and humble (Chap. III, 13<sup>23</sup>).



**Devotional image of the Franciscan saint Mary Frances of the Five Wounds, given by Mother Frances to a sister, as documented by the manuscript: “Words and thoughts, trusting in God without complaining. This little image was given to me by Mother Frances Streitel in Castel Sant’Elia on October 6.”**

These texts can only be read in the light of the original intention of Mother Frances, when she was invited to collaborate with Fr. Jordan for the female branch of the Catholic Society for Education, she addressed him with these words:

<sup>23</sup> See Rule and the Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis Padova: Messaggero, 1983, cap. I,2; II,6; III,13.

By your love for the most Blessed Virgin and the glorious St. Joseph, I most earnestly beg you to permit your daughters three fast days, beginning with today, to which will be joined strict silence and deeper recollection in God all this to obtain for you, Reverend Father, light and understanding in regard to the Society as well as a profound insight into God's plans concerning your spiritual daughters,<sup>1</sup> of whom He seems to expect more the renewal of old but somewhat decadent Orders than the replacement of the old by entirely new ones. Do not worry Penance in M. Frances is clearly the form taken to put God first, within a progressive journey of return to Him first personally and, consequently, on an ecclesial scale, renewing from within what already exists, as Francis of Assisi had been called to do by the Lord about our health. The Lord has placed in three frail bodies a special strength for penance and reparation<sup>24</sup>.

Penance is clearly for Mother Frances the form taken to put God first, in a progressive journey of return to Him first personally and, consequently, on an ecclesial level, renewing inwardly what already exists, as Francis of Assisi did called to do by the Lord<sup>25</sup>.

You shall see that the Lord will let His work prosper and there will be beautiful fruits ripening on this new tree for Holy Church. God will be glorified. He will be glorified still more, the more we all know how to practice and become firmly established in self immolation, the more we maintain that the Creator is worthy of all honor, but the creature, deserving only of contempt and shame<sup>26</sup>.

With this intention Mother Frances prayed, worked, gave herself, and of this "tree" we have seen and contemplate its fruits.

All that developed during the life of our foundress and after, has not lost the fundamental Franciscan values of simplicity and penance, as can be observed in the life of the communities in the United States. The sisters were called to serve the sick, the poor, the needy, children and young people, starting from very poor structures and rudimentary means, which arrived at wonderful works supported by the Holy Spirit, as Sr. Kiliana testifies to us: "The good example of the sisters - their lives of self-denial, mercy and charity, their simplicity and spirit of sacrifice - spoke more eloquently than words"<sup>27</sup>. Penance was combined with prayer, vigils, confession, pilgrimages, humility and detachment from earthly things. And in the following years the "ramification" was prodigious in American and Europe.

Our Way of Life, in chapter IV, summarizes how we SSM are oriented to live penance, like the grain of wheat that, fallen into the earth, dies and produces much fruit (see Jn 12:24)

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<sup>24</sup> 1884-05-07 *Letter 97(101), 1 to Fr. Jordan.*

<sup>25</sup> «*Francis* - he tells him calling him by name – *Go, repair my house which, as you see, is in ruins* ». 2 Cel, VI, 10.

<sup>26</sup> 1883-02-18 *Letter 2(2), 6 to Fr. Jordan.*

<sup>27</sup> See *History of the Community of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother*, pages 223-236 ST. MARY'S HOSPITAL, RHINELANDER, WISCONSIN 1893.

and we are invited to "witness to the living presence of Christ's redemptive love" in the daily life of our fraternal life in community and apostolic service, aiming to detach ourselves from sin in order to return continually to God through the sacrament of Reconciliation, prayer, fasting and works of mercy.

Our General Directory, 2012 dedicates Chapter IV to penance and at the beginning it is written: "...through choosing self-imposed limitations that sharpen sense awareness, through confronting self-serving attachments, and through cultivating an attitude of minority whereby they neither seek nor cling to power, prestige, or privilege". It is an essential synthesis, followed by indications in order to live personal and common life of the various dimensions.

I would associate in the following way the calls of the 23rd General Assembly, which can signify our theme. Regarding simplicity: "God calls us to let go of individualism and independence and to renew our vocation in order to foster trust and give ourselves for". About penance: "Standing with Mary under the cross, our shared fragility can be transformed into reconciliation and forgiveness".

Since these are rather open "calls", the risk is that they are expressing everything in a vague and non-pragmatic way. What has been said so far can help us to place them with more concrete roots and to define them with more ordinary attitudes.

In conclusion, we can say that simplicity is not to be confused with ignorance, but is based on inner clarity that makes us move consciously towards the One for whom we have chosen to "give" life, renouncing ourselves. Francis of Assisi summarizes this with two key terms: expropriation (detachment from oneself) and restitution (everything we have received as a gift we give back to the Creator). So is the penance that helps us to live this synthesis. It is not to be understood as a renunciation as an end in itself, but as the freedom to let oneself be conformed to Christ Jesus the Lord.

Let us ask for the grace to keep alive the desire for conversion (penance), nourished by a simple lifestyle, which goes to the heart of the Beloved God.

On reflection we can ask ourselves:

- Do I live relationships in evangelical and Franciscan simplicity or with interior pride?
- Do I love God above all and my neighbor as myself?



ASSMR

INSIGHTS

## DOCUMENTS AND MEMOIRS OF SSM'S

### *Simplicity and Penence in Mother Frances Streitel* Some testimonies

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*Sr. M. Johanna Ankenbrand*

"She was very temperate, always self-restrained. When it came to food, she preferred the simplest things, never wanted exceptions, and was so modest that the confessor sometimes had to force her not to deprive herself of what was necessary. Once, after receiving some olives from a benefactor, I thought they were zibibbo grapes and put them in a risotto with milk as a condiment: the Servant of God ate them quietly, saying: 'Today the Lord has given us some of His gall and we must take it with joy.'"<sup>1</sup>

*Sr. M. Regina Galletti*

"[Mother Frances] lived an ordinary life in an extraordinary way, as she often encouraged me to do; everything in her was simple and natural, but one knew well that it was the effect of divine grace. She exhorted me by word and even more by example to fulfill all the duties of the religious state, even in the smallest things. She advised me not to do anything without the permission of the Superior."<sup>2</sup>

*Sr. M. Stanislaa Schön*

"There were about eight sisters when I entered. [...] When we arrived in Rome, Mother Frances immediately said, 'We live very simply,' and then we had a small bun and some coffee for breakfast."<sup>3</sup>

"Regarding food, she had a weak stomach and would eat only the simplest food. She used to say, 'Bread and water are the best for me.' But she provided for the reasonable needs of the sisters. She was really simple in her dress. She spent very little on herself. Her room was furnished in the most simple way."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SACRA RITUUM CONGREGATIONE, *Nepesina seu Herbipolen., Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Franciscae Streitel. Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, Rome 1956, Pages 34-35 §§ 138-139.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 79 § 304.

<sup>3</sup> Testimony collected by Sr. M. Beda Hack in *Recordings by Sr. M. Beda, Book 1*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> SACRA RITUUM CONGREGATIONE, *Nepesina seu Herbipolen., Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Franciscae Streitel. Positio super virtutibus, Summarium*, Rome 1956, Pages 193-194 §§ 767-768.

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

*Sr. M. Bernarda Hümpfner*

"She thought of herself as a simple sister, and wanted to be just like the others."<sup>5</sup>

*Sr. M. Gudelia Feierlein*

"The Servant of God had a great horror of sin, so much so that she avoided even the slightest fault and practiced special penances for the conversion of sinners."<sup>6</sup>

*Sr. M. Seraphina Eberth*

"The Servant of God prayed a lot and did a lot of penance, for herself and for others."<sup>7</sup>

*Sr. M. Casimira Teresia Seelmann*

"The Servant of God often encouraged the Sisters to pray and do penance for the conversion of sinners. She herself led an intense life of prayer and severe penance: I believe for the conversion of sinners too."<sup>8</sup>

## FROM THE HISTORICAL CONSULTORS

"The humble example of her love for prayer and her tireless zeal for faith and penance had an irresistible charm on people. In many regions, she was able to speak to people with relative ease, touching their souls and winning them to the Gospel.

Charity, benevolence and devotion shone through her features. She was



Photo of an SSM with sick children from the sanatorium "Maria-Amalya Asyl" in Veli Lošinj.

The photo was recently found as part of research into the presence of SSMs in Veli Lošinj at the time of Mother Frances.

The photo, of which we do not have the original and whose custodian we do not know, was published in 1999 in a volume edited by G. Ivanišević about the sanatoriums on the island of Veli Lošinj [Title: *Dječja bolnica (Sanatorij) i morski ljekoviti činitelji u Velomu Lošnju*], and was sent to the General Archives by the local library (*Gradska knjižnica i čitaonica Mali Lošinj*).

Interestingly, the editor of the volume, while citing the work of the SSMs in Veli Lošinj, highlights the effectiveness of their work in both health and educational and religious aspects, pointing out, among other things, that it was a "strict" order known as the "Sisters of Charity of the Seven Sorrows."

<sup>5</sup> SACRA RITUUM CONGREGATIONE, *Nepesina seu Herbipolen.*, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Franciscae Streitel. Positio super virtutibus. Summarium Additionale*, Rome 1956, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290 § 1132.

<sup>7</sup> SACRA RITUUM CONGREGATIONE, *Nepesina seu Herbipolen.*, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Franciscae Streitel. Positio super virtutibus, Summarium. proc. ap. Vindobonensis*, Rome 1956, p. 331 § 1295.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320 § 1251.

indeed a person who was able to win people's hearts by her goodness of spirit, her sincere compassion for all who suffered, her simplicity and agreeableness."<sup>9</sup>

"God Who called her to propose again, without half measures, the poor, humble, obedient and simple lifestyle of St. Francis and St. Clare."<sup>10</sup>

## FROM THEOLOGICAL CONSULTORS

"S. of G. was a pious, energetic and honest girl. Her simple life gave more emphasis to Christian wisdom and common sense."<sup>11</sup>

"As a true disciple of St. Francis, she loved evangelical poverty, and one of the reasons for her dissatisfaction in the institutes where she stayed, including that of Fr. Jordan, was the search for a sober, simple and austere lifestyle."<sup>12</sup>

"The example of her love for prayer and her tireless zeal for faith and penance had an irresistible charm on people."<sup>13</sup>

"*The various stages and changes in the life of the S. of D.* are not to be attributed to her psychological fragility, but to her tormented search for the fulfillment of a plan of God that called her to propose again, without half measures, the poor, humble, obedient and simple lifestyle of St. Francis and St. Clare. Mother Frances did not cease her search until she felt that she had found the right path with the foundation of an autonomous Institute, later called the *Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother*."<sup>14</sup>

"She loved God and taught everyone to love Him. She always prayed and did penance for the conversion of sinners."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Franciscae a Cruce. Relatio et Vota sulla seduta dei Consultori Storici, Rome 2004*, Pages 42-43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> CONGREGATIO 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*, p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.