

REFLECTIONS  
FOR THE 140th  
ANNIVERSARY  
OF FOUNDATION

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January 16, 2024

1883  
2023  
SSM

## ***Mother Frances Streitel*** **Contemplation and action**

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**Sr. M. Teresina Marra, SSM**

**“A modern woman, aware of being the keeper of a charismatic gift”**

“To affirm and to put into practice contemplation and action,” write the Historical Consultors in the *Relatio et Vota* for the Cause of Beatification, was the charism lived by Mother Frances and transmitted to the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother. “It is evident,” they add, “that the S. of G. draws on divine inspirations to affirm what she feels is the charism that she must live and transmit to the new foundation.”<sup>1</sup>

The genuineness of her vision was fully and unanimously recognized by the Church, which considered Mother Frances to be “a modern, emotional and sacredly restless woman, in love with God and the poor, in filial dialogue with the Hierarchy, but also aware that she was the keeper of a charismatic gift.”<sup>2</sup>

What we have received as a gift through Mother Frances is not a domestic treasure to be enjoyed intimately, but a river of grace that flows into the Church and benefits the Church itself.

In view of this, we can certainly say that the two mountains of her vision are for us the two edges of a single road, or, as Mother Frances puts it, “twin sisters,”<sup>3</sup> or parallel lines of the road that leads to God and, at the same time, leads us to others.

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<sup>1</sup> “It is evident that the S. of G. draws on divine inspirations to affirm what she feels is the charism that she must live and transmit to the new foundation: to affirm and put into practice contemplation, action and austerity while committed to apostolic service.” (CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Franciscae a Cruce. Relatio et vota on the Meeting of the Historical Consultors held on February 24, 2004*, Rome, 2004, p. 32).

<sup>2</sup> CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Franciscae a Cruce. Relatio et vota congressus peculiaris super virtutibus, February 24, 2004*, Rome, 2004, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> F. STREITEL, *Letter to Fr. Jordan #39 (86)*.



We are called each day to take our steps on this road, and along the way, on our journey to the summit, we are given the gift of touching the infinite love of God, of letting ourselves be touched by Him, and thus becoming capable of touching with compassion the wounds of our brothers and sisters, and of practicing, as Mother Frances said, "active love of neighbor."<sup>4</sup>

## **To go immediately to God, to go quickly to others**

"I feel an unusual strength for prayer,"<sup>5</sup> wrote Mother Frances. And then added: "I am not readily disposed to *prayers*,"<sup>6</sup> while we know well that she considered the "Prayer of the Church" a source of "special power and blessing"<sup>7</sup> and the night vigil before the Blessed Sacrament a special point of attraction:<sup>8</sup> a "fervent,"<sup>9</sup> "urgent,"<sup>10</sup> "heartfelt,"<sup>11</sup> "devout"<sup>12</sup> prayer made of "love and adoration to the Lord,"<sup>13</sup> that truly renews our union with Him every day,<sup>14</sup> making us stand still in the storm,<sup>15</sup> bathed in light, ready to "fight with our ego, with the world, with the powers of darkness"<sup>16</sup> to be transformed into Christ.<sup>17</sup> A prayer that is sometimes even "remarkably violent," as she emphasizes in a strong tone, always ready to ask the Lord "to crush *us* under the force of His grace."<sup>18</sup> Above all, a prayer to be put into practice in life,<sup>19</sup> with actions that "may awaken the cold, lukewarm and slothful hearts from their slumber, guiding them back to the path of virtue and duty."<sup>20</sup> It is not surprising that while she did not consider herself able to teach the novices contemplative prayer in its various degrees, she hastened to add:

"If I can do anything at all, it will be to train for the Society simple, selfless, and poverty loving Sisters, who have become humble because they are poor; devoid of self will because they are obedient."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #68 (45).

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #68 (45).

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #5 (4).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Letter to Fr. Jordan #82 (94).

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #7 (5).

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #28 (17).

<sup>11</sup> Letter to her sister #20 (19).

<sup>12</sup> Letter to msgr. Anton De Waal #4.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #78 (65).

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #38 (28).

<sup>15</sup> See Letter to Fr. Jordan #42 (31).

<sup>16</sup> See Letter to Fr. Jordan #43 (32).

<sup>17</sup> See Letter to Fr. Jordan #72 (53).

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #66 (47).

<sup>19</sup> See Letter to Fr. Jordan #48 (78).

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #75 (52).

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Fr. Jordan #54 (37).

Here we understand how simplicity, selflessness, humility, poverty and obedience are the concrete ways in which the fruitfulness of our prayer is expressed and weighed. And we also understand – and this is the SSM vocation – *how* each Sister of the Sorrowful Mother is called by grace to desire, experience and live the two dimensions of the charism:

***To go immediately to God, every day.*** And that means being there, in His presence, in prayer, so that He may manifest Himself and give grace, as Mother Frances writes in the *Norms*: “every Sister should go to the tabernacle; [...] she should beg the Lord most earnestly to be near her constantly in everything with His supporting grace, so that in everything she does in the course of the day, His greater glory may be her goal.”<sup>22</sup>

***To go quickly to others every day,*** so that they too may meet the Lord, become His home, and feel loved by Him through our charity, as we read again in the *Norms*:

“All the Sisters are challenged by the love of the Good Shepherd to care for the sick with merciful love, to foster and train the little ones with motherly attention and watchfulness. In all these souls a dwelling must be prepared for the Lord. Oh, that we may succeed in transforming many hearts into temples for the good God!”<sup>23</sup>

And I emphasize “every day” because, as Mother Frances used to say, “so-called days of vacation are unknown in our Order.”<sup>24</sup>

Of course, this daily experience of “active and contemplative” charity, which is a source of “holy joy,” must come to terms with what Mother Frances calls “nature:” “Human nature and all that is connected with it which can hinder our ascent to God, must die, and the soul must live to bear fruit for God. The less attention we pay to the voice of nature, the more worthy we shall be made to hear the voice of Him, at which sound the soul trembles with joy and exults in jubilation over the voice of the Beloved. Finally, when He is the sole Lord of our thoughts, emotions, inclinations, and concerns, will not the soul then melt at the gentle sound of the mysterious voice of the One Who has fashioned her and imprints in her His form, the form of the holy Cross.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> F. STREITEL, *Norms 1883*, #111.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, #103.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, #108.

<sup>25</sup> *Letter to Fr. Jordan #81 (68)*.

## One question

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“Mother Francis’s foundational vision of Alverno and Carmel merging, provides a model of how we are to carry out our apostolate according to our charism” (*Our Way of Life*, 53).

**How do I perceive and fulfill this fusion in my life?**





ASSMR

INSIGHTS

## DOCUMENTS AND MEMOIRS OF SSM'S

### “Safe ways and effective means”

To be shaped by Christ, to have His form imprinted on our souls, the form of the Holy Cross:<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the Congregation has committed itself to being shaped by Christ, preserving and renewing the gifts received through the spiritual insight of Mother Frances. Our Congregational documents testify to this: Constitutions, General Directory, Manual and Formation Programs. Then, from General Assembly to General Assembly, successive General Superiors have encouraged and exhorted the Sisters to go to the source/roots of our spirituality.

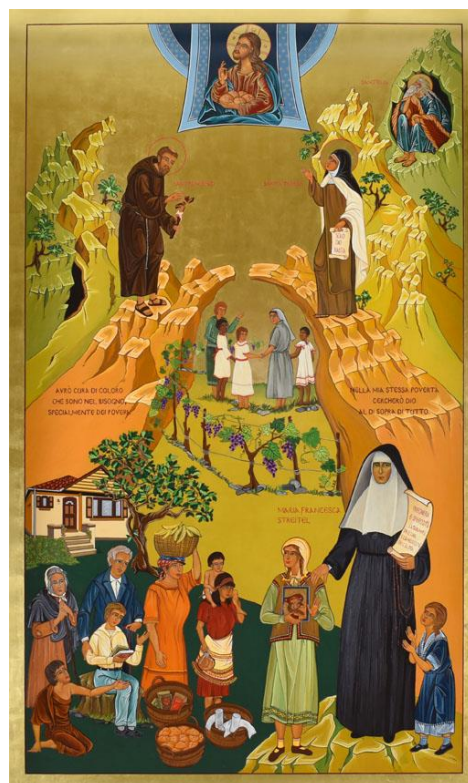
As an example, I quote a speech by Sr M. Wendelina Graml. In 1975, at the opening of the 13<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, she said:

“We have come together to study the will of God as manifested in the particular charism of our foundress, to deepen our love of God through prayer and service, to adopt effective ways and means leading us to eternal salvation, for ‘What does it profit a man to win the whole world and suffer harm to his soul.’ ... Mother Frances once compared all religious with a carpet of flowers. It was her wish that we be violets in this carpet, the hidden flowers, blooming in obscurity and filling the earth with the scent of good works and prayer.”<sup>2</sup>

*From Letter #39 to Fr. Jordan*

**“I was praying in the choir in the forenoon and saw something, to me hitherto strange. In spirit I beheld two mountains rise.**

**In the one I recognized Carmel; in the other, Alverno. ... Both mountains arched themselves into one...**



<sup>1</sup> Cfr. *Letter to Fr. Jordan #37 (27)*.

<sup>2</sup> ASSMR 422.13, fasc. 9, doc. 1.

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

The awareness that we have received this gift and the responsibility before it that we assume as SSMs is strongly affirmed in our Constitutions #53: "One dimension of our charism, Alverno, sends us to work with the poor to alleviate the effects of poverty ... The other dimension of our charism, Carmel, invites us into profound reflection and prayer ... To integrate these two dimensions in our apostolic service is the demanding challenge of our charism." The Church, moreover, addresses this challenge to all religious, as reflected in the various documents of the Magisterium. In expressing the need for a "mutual interpenetration" between action and contemplation, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life says: "What 'action'? For religious, it is not just any action. The Council speaks of 'apostolic and charitable activity' (Perfectae Caritatis #8)."<sup>3</sup>

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* speaks of the same challenge: "their whole lives may be penetrated by an apostolic spirit and their apostolic work with contemplation."<sup>4</sup>

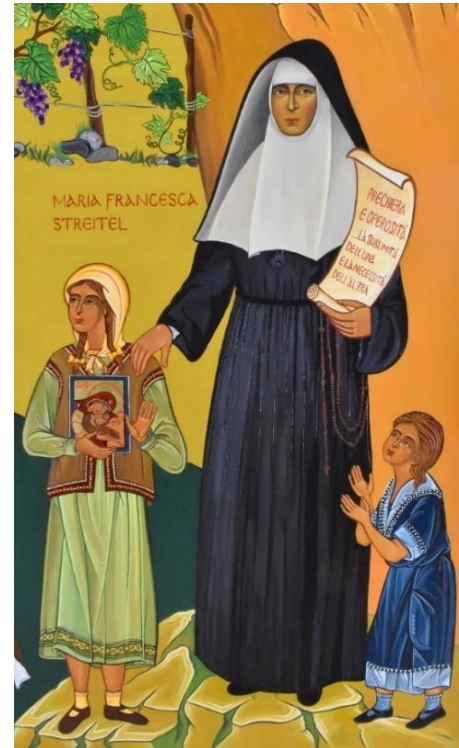
In this regard, it was very nice that Sr. Samuela, in her introduction to the celebration of the 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Foundation of our Congregation, suggested for our meditation an excerpt from the letter and homily that Card. Pironio shared with all the SSMs on the occasion of the first centenary (1983).

Of Mother Frances, Card. Pironio said that the Spirit "empowered her to receive the gift of uniting 'the active life with the contemplative,' integrating the rich Franciscan and Carmelite spiritualities and attracting others to follow in her footsteps."

And again, "Your joy today flows from the charism of Mother Frances, which after 100 years continues to sustain the specific vocation and mission of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother in the Church. Mother Frances would rejoice with you today for this reason: what was true for you from the beginning has been reaffirmed for all religious women and men by the call of the Second Vatican Council, which affirms that: 'the members of every community ... should join contemplation ... with apostolic love' (Perfectae Caritatis #5)."

What is the powerful call of her words for us today? First of all, this: just as Mother Frances was empowered by the Spirit to unite, without distortion, the active life with the

**I would not comprehend why the Lord wished to lead me out of Carmel again, sounded like this: 'To unite the active life with the contemplative.'"**



<sup>3</sup> CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *The contemplative dimension of Religious Life, Plenaria of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes (4-7 March 1980)*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, #9.

contemplative, we too, by vocation, are empowered by the same Spirit to become humble and poor artisans of this spiritual weaving, which daily and with balance interweaves “prayer and work,” recognizing and preserving “the sublimity of the one and the necessity of the other.”<sup>5</sup>

Empowerment, however, is no guarantee of fruitfulness. We become fruitful and credible only when, like Mother Frances, we profess our fidelity to God, temper it with trust, and preserve it with perseverance.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, it is necessary that our prayer, and therefore our life, be a more conscious echo of Mother Frances’ style of prayer as recorded in her Diary: “Resolutions for the new year of 1899 and for my whole lifetime: ... With each breath I want to pray with my suffering Savior: ‘Father, not mine, but your will shall be done!’ And my last breath shall say with my crucified love: ‘Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.’”

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<sup>5</sup> *Letter to Fr. Jordan #39 (86).*

<sup>6</sup> *See Letter to her sister #23 (22).*