

A
Book review
By Bro Rob Hardie,
Norwich Fraternity
That was omitted from
the Spring
Ear Regional Magazine
sent out recently
with
Apologies from the Editor!

**Book Review - 'Living the Incarnation'
by Sr Frances Teresa (Downing) OSC.**

I had no idea that a little book sitting for several years on a bookshelf minding its own business had such an internationally acclaimed author until I attended the Franciscan Conference in Durham last November, and an elderly little Poor Clare sister, simply assisted by her iPad, gave a very impressive short talk on St Clare and the Justice of the Kingdom. On return I thought I'd better take it off the shelf and read it!

It is terrific! The book itself looks (like the Poor Clare sisters generally) so very unassuming but it really has to be the very best Franciscan book I have ever read! Those who know me well know I never overenthusiasm (?), but it truthfully is really good.

A brief foreword by Cardinal Vincent Nichols (when a Bishop) sets the tone well, "Readers must be ready for a challenging time, for Francis and Clare lived life to the full, with all the radical implications of the Gospel. The story told here is compelling. If we let it, it will stir us to attempt to follow the same joyful road."

In this challenging time of Coronavirus Pandemic with many of us limited in our social activities, I feel Sr Frances Teresa's book is just the answer to help our souls soar to places where we know we will eventually dwell forever, and at the same time help us to continue to live joy-filled Franciscan lives to the full in the Here and Now, even if the Here and Now feels a bit grim (her book would do this at any time not just in this Here and Now!)

Sr Frances takes us on the same journeys that Saints Francis and Clare took so many years ago. They had to build the road; we are just invited to travel on it. The journeys (and the book) are based on the three types of prayer that they both employed, *Conversion, Contrition and Communion*. This sounds as though the trips will be a little dry, but the

opposite happens. She explains they are *concurrent* as well as *consecutive* and that *conversion* has to happen again and again, even daily just as our Secular Franciscan Rule suggests (Chapter 2:7). This is part of the wonder of redemption and perhaps highlights our human situation that, “Let us now begin to serve God, for up to now we have done nothing.” The wonder too is that for all their greatness, Francis and Clare made the same mistakes as we all make, but through it all God worked for them and in and will always work for us and in us if we let Him.

She describes *Conversion* as a spinning round and round just as Francis told the other brothers to do until he shouted for them to stop, and the direction that they were then facing was the way for them to go off and evangelise. This becomes a total surrender to God to lead and guide (always to be repeated, but more of a repeated surrender than a repeated physical spinning, but the psychological spinning has to continue!). So much of our problem in understanding true conversion is that we don't spin and leave the direction to God; but once we have spun, we have to *act* and go off in that direction. If we are brave enough to spin, God will give us the Grace to act, just like St Peter stepping out on the water from the safety of his boat. And if we then have to be rescued, He is still there. It is always so easy to settle for less and become ensnared by the charms of being “passive” and not allow our true potentials to be fully realised. Francis started his conversion in a pit but as soon as he became flooded with joy, he left the pit “and exposed himself openly to the curses of his persecutor.” (his father, Pietro 1 Celano 10).

What I enjoyed so much in her book was that Sr Frances Theresa uses the events of the lives of both Francis and Clare to mirror *our* own journeys of faith, and we come to see them both to be people just like us, and we become just like them if we allow the Lord to work in us.

Next, we will find He will lead us, like Francis and Clare, into the very depths of prayer “in which we live and move and have our being” rather than prayer of our own volition. Sr Frances says, “The word of the Gospel, which is Christ, is for everyone, always, and the process of our personal conversion is about hearing this Word ourselves and about Christ dwelling as fully in us as He is in the Trinity.” The Rublev icon of the Trinity has an open empty space at the table in front of us for each one of us to take a seat! The journey to this deeper place of prayer leads us to the place where we can say, “My God and my All” as Francis did. We are then ready to imitate Christ with the great simplicity of Brother John the Simple imitating Francis (sneezing when Francis sneezed, turning around when Francis turned etc – 2 Celano 190), keeping nothing of ourselves for ourselves, the true *kenosis*. Jesus never said, “If I love you, you must love me.” But rather, “The Father has loved me, and I love you, and you must love one another.” That is an ongoing cascade of love, and not a closed circuit that can easily seem more appealing. We imitate the Jesus we see in the Gospels and imitate Christ by following His Spirit coming alive within us.

Sr Frances is very good on *Contrition*, or ‘Penance’, which as Franciscans we know is so central to our way of life. She moves us from an immature mediaeval way of excessive physical penance to the more mature psychological embrace of Christ as the “spouse”, or in more modern terms the Dearest or Darling Beloved just in the way that St Clare discovered as she matured through her life and as she reported to St Agnes of Prague in her letters to her. I personally have found my Franciscan formation over the last 30+ years has done this well (Pattie Formile’s book, ‘To Live as Francis Lived’ was especially helpful), and made me see Penance, not just as a hair vest (Sr Frances mentions the story of the man in the hair vest proudly thinking to himself that he must be the only man on the railway station in a hair vest and then promptly removing it as soon as he was able!) but as a turning more and more and over and over again towards God/Goodness/Christ. We

then realise how *Conversion* and *Contrition* flow into and around each other. Better still, our union with God, as well as being our goal, is actually where we all started from! We spend our lives *re-learning* who we are! It seems that shortly after early childhood we all forget (“Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven” – Mat 18:2). All self-discipline has to be a means to an end which is re-union with God our Father and never an end in itself. We need balance, moderation (as St Francis taught his brothers), compassion and self-love in its best sense. The back stage exercises so common at the time of Francis and Clare, fasting, sleep denial, self-denial and cultivated discomfort, give way as the two saints grow spiritually along their path to joy, gentleness, patience and tenderness (true Fruits of the Spirit), but they have to be learned ‘on the hoof’ on the *journey as we travel*. Some of our thrust towards penance can be an expression of our own *self-hate* coupled with a *hatred for our humanity!* Beware too our Celtic temperament (especially Catholics in this country with fair, freckled skin and blue or green eyes!) which has a predisposition to extremism and strangely a self-denying form of puritanism: if I enjoy it, it must be bad, or bad for me, or both! A good test is whether we tell our closest friends, and if we are fortunate enough to have one, our spiritual director, of our attempts at penance. “Our flesh is not bronze, nor is our strength that of stone” wrote St Clare to Agnes of Prague. However for us who live in a (normally) plentiful part of the world it is a supreme ‘penitential’ good to act for *solidarity with the poor* who live in other less abundant parts of the world, and for us to *simplify* our lives accordingly (I remind readers once more of the importance of the CAFOD LiveSimply Campaign designed for our parishes when life has returned again to ‘normal’). This is excellent penance and one surely loved by Sister Holy Simplicity, but again the overriding motive must be the growing importance of God in our lives and not just the good that we do (St Francis would say “*the good that God does in us*”, for if we claim this good ourselves we are stealing from Him).

In God nothing is now profane, nothing 'secular' or godless, because all is one in Christ, all is acceptable for Christ became sin so that everything can become holy. We live in a time when God is not judging us, but for us to judge whether we open, or don't open, our hearts to God. Francis started by identifying those areas in his life which encouraged his body—Brother Ass to become a tyrant. He knew from his youth what money was capable of doing, so avoided it altogether. Only later did his penance mature into an over-riding concern for others, to carry their burdens and at the same time to carry his own and still be able to become cheerful again – not an insignificant challenge – and one he found he needed help from God with, he had to be instructed by the Lord to command the mountain of grief and temptation to move elsewhere.

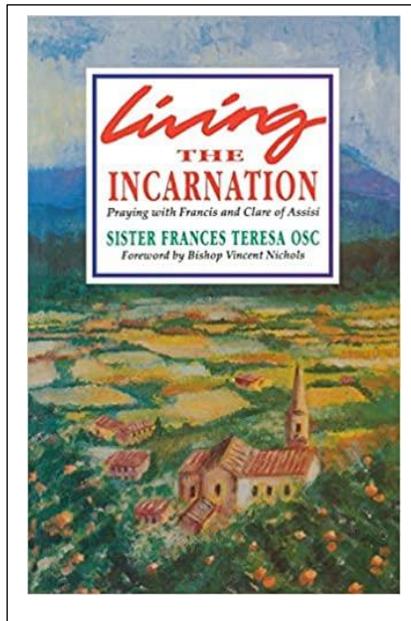
I could go on forever – the book is excellent on the pain and suffering we don't seek, which is so much harder than 'penance' because we have no control over it; on the ultimate assurance that all things work together for good for those who love God, including sin; on the wonder of becoming with Our Lady spiritual Mothers of Christ, demanding nothing and offering everything; on the call to become lights and mirrors for others; on our kinship with the whole of Creation (that first attracted me years ago to explore the life of this fascinating 'Poor Man'); on the lure of attachments and the freedom bestowed by Lady Poverty; and finally on the newness we step into in this new way (forever ancient yet so new) of Franciscan Christian living, with its ultimate goal of taking our part and sharing in God's two-fold work of creation and redemption.

If I did (go on) I would easily write down her entire book before I finished (and totally ruin it for you and ruin the book itself!). This little book is what I have always subconsciously looked for, and typically it was sitting there just waiting for me to read – rather like God Himself

(and yes, Sr Frances also touches on the gender and sexuality of God), waiting for us all to turn to Him. How interesting that the little details in our lives are just like parables in themselves!

I will leave you with perhaps Sr Frances Theresa's most profound message: that holiness (same root in Old English as wholeness and healing) is our greatest ecological contribution to our suffering planet. Holiness in restoring order by exhibiting an unfailing source of respect to others and to all other creatures, where our stewardship becomes sincere and humble service within the narrow parameters of love. Only by high quality human service will this be achieved, in the spirit of readiness to engage and delight in life itself, playing before God as Francis and Clare did, in complete *Communion* with Him and one another.

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