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Monthly Spiritual Message

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LENT

During the heat of February, as our Australian sun burns our vast land, we begin our annual preparation to celebrate Holy Week and Easter with the season of Lent. How quickly it returns! It is time to repent and receive the Good News, to be reconciled with God and neighbour, to rekindle the spirit of penance and self denial in our lives, to grow closer to Christ.

Of course, St. Francis stands before us as the Man of Penance. We are called to imitate his virtues, not necessarily his actions. Yet often we forget the importance of fasting and self discipline in our lives. Here I remind myself as one who enjoys the fruits and goodness of God's creation. We don't have to go over the top, but especially on Fridays, the day of Our Lord's Passion, we can give up meat, sweets, maybe wine, sugar, whatever, as a little act of reparation for our sins and those of others. We can also fast from television, going to the movies, a game of golf, etc. We give up something we normally enjoy to offer our little sacrifice as a gift of love to Jesus Crucified.

Lent is also a time of almsgiving and prayer. Penance, prayer and alms are not just for Lent, but rather for a whole Christian life. They are integral aspects of our living the Holy Gospel as Franciscans. The Church's journey through Lent reminds us that we need an annual 'wake-up call', a retreat of sorts to improve how we live the Faith. Does the Word of God truly govern our lives, or do we live by bread alone? Satan can often tempt us with the spirit of self-satisfaction – in other words, pride. We think we don't need to make an effort with God's grace to improve our lives. Is the Living God truly the centre of our lives or are the unholy trinity of power, lust and wealth?

Many are ensnared by the anti-Word, the anti-Gospel. We as followers of the little man of Assisi are called by our profession as Franciscans to say to the world, "Look beyond these things!" Let us acclaim the Creator, Lord and Father, who has called us into existence to know His love here on earth and to know of His embrace forever in Heaven! How do we as Franciscans bring the love and compassion of the Crucified Christ to others? How do we serve our Suffering Lord in the poor and suffering, the lonely and forgotten? Have we allowed materialism to overtake our lives? Do we seek to live according to our state of life in simplicity and moderation? St. Francis would cry, "Love is not loved!" Let us turn to our Crucified Lord and behold the Love who calls us to Himself!

During Lent, there are some valuable spiritual exercises we can undertake to grow in union with Our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may truly know of the Victory of His Passion, Death and Resurrection. The reading of Our Lord's Sacred Passion, the Stations

of the Cross, and the Sorrows of Our Lady, should lead us to a deeper participation in the sacred liturgy in which we experience more fully the mysteries of Our Lord's Redemption. St. Francis taught us that beautiful prayer: "We adore You, O Christ, and we praise You, here and in all Your churches, because by Your Holy Cross You have redeemed the world.'

Lent can also be the time for us to rediscover the importance of the Blessed Eucharist. St. Francis reminds us of the importance of the Holy Eucharist – how the humility of the Passion is extended in the Eucharistic Sacrifice where the self emptying of Christ in His atonement for the sins of the world is made present upon our altars. Through the Sacred Liturgy we are called to offer ourselves in union with Christ in His Paschal sacrifice to the Father. Francis understood the role of the Holy Eucharist. As Franciscans, may we cherish our Eucharistic heritage and understand that the Eucharistic Jesus calls us to make Him the centre of our hearts!

"Romero", the film about Archbishop Oscar Romero, depicts a powerful scene in which Romero arrives at a church desecrated by soldiers who stand outside to prevent the people from entering. The courageous archbishop, threatened at gunpoint, enters in and gathers the Blessed Sacrament scattered over the floor. Following the archbishop into the Church to pray is a toothless old lady, one of the simple yet noble peasants of the village. Archbishop Romero was killed while offering the Holy Mass. A martyr of the poor, he preached like St. Anthony of old, denounced piratical abuse of the poor and the shocking abuse and killing of people. Love of the Blessed Sacrament helps us to see Christ in the poor, suffering and the downtrodden. The love of St. Francis for the Eucharistic Saviour strengthened his care for lepers and the forgotten, and to see Christ in them!

Let us make an effort to attend the Stations of the Cross and to share in this beautiful Franciscan tradition given to the whole Church, so that we may meditate upon Our Lord's love for us as He carried His Cross to Calvary. The *Via Dolorosa* should be dear to us all. Let us not forget that the Friars in the Holy Land continue each year to guide thousands along this way of meditation of the price of our Salvation! St. Francis was blessed to visit these holy sites of our salvation. Let us ask him to help us grow in a deeper love for the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may show Christ's compassion to others.

May Our Sorrowful Mother, who followed Her Son to Calvary, walk with us in our own sorrows and help us to know the joy and triumph of Her Son's Resurrection. Alleluia! For Christ has defeated the powers of darkness, sin and death. Let us be instruments of that Joy in our world.

God love you.

Br Louis Mary OFM Conv.
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**Regional Assistants are requested to distribute this Monthly Message
to all local Assistants of our Order in the Regional Fraternity.**