

Today's readings begin with Simeon, a priest known for renovating the house of God. This relates to St Francis, on his feast day, to whom God said, "Go and repair my house, which, as you see, is falling completely to ruin." Francis, who lived in the 13th century, began with physical labor, repairing one church at a time, but realized the Lord's call was to repair the SPIRITUAL life of His Church, and so, he responded by living a life of Christ-inspired poverty.

Another tie to St Francis is in our gospel reading, where Jesus turns to his Father, and says, "Although you have hidden these things from the wise, and the learned, you have revealed them to the childlike." St Francis is childlike in his profound openness to God's will, his extreme rejection of material wealth and rejection of sin common to his place in society.

I'm going to share parts of Fr. Conner Donnelly's reflection, an Irish priest serving in Kenya, who says, "St Francis lived when excessive splendor together with political and social power were common among the Church clerics." This was the root of the ruin God was referring to. St Francis was called because he was different. He was not a university-trained theologian or a cleric; he was the son of a wealthy merchant who gave up his wealth to deepen his faith.

Francis learned his faith by modeling the simplicity of Christ's life and accepting the call of the apostles to, "Take no gold or silver or sack for the journey." He gave up his reliance on money and worked or begged to pay for his basic needs. The book, "Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint," says, "In Francis' eyes, the only important thing here below was not to make or remake Christianity, but to propose to men and women MODELS OF ACTION and behavior offered by the life of Christ as it is described in the Gospels."

St Francis teaches us that poverty is a remedy for the excesses of material abundance. Our access to material goods and services is essentially unlimited and unprecedented. Just look at the apps on our smart phones. The convenience to buy, sell, learn, and be entertained at any time of the day, is like the wealth of St Francis, and can be a significant spiritual impediment. How can the lessons of St Francis help us overcome this spiritual roadblock?

40 years ago, the Vatican released "The Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation," written by Cardinal Ratzinger, later elected Pope Benedict XVI. It addresses how technology can become a barrier to spiritual freedom. In Paragraph 66, "Jesus and Poverty," it says that Jesus came for the poor, "But he also wished to be near to those who, though rich in the goods of this world, were excluded from the community (because they were tax collectors and sinners)." Jesus came to call THEM to conversion as he calls US today. Ratzinger goes on to say, "It is this sort of (voluntary) poverty, made up of detachment, trust in God, sobriety and a readiness to share, that Jesus declared BLESSED." Let's look at each of these elements of poverty through the eyes of St Francis and his way of building a close relationship to Christ.

First, "Detachment," from material goods. Father Conner calls this, "Poverty well-lived according to one's state in life." It doesn't require us to sell all our property and become nuns and monks, but it does mean we need to focus on "detachment."

Fr Josemaria Escriva, known for Opus Dei, wrote, "This poverty, should be a sign that the heart is not satisfied with created things, but aspires to the Creator." Detachment recognizes God as the source of all our gifts, while never letting them come between us and God our Father.

Next, we have "Trust in God." In our gospel, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." For Francis, trading his material security for complete trust in God was a painful process. When he gave away his money and abandoned the family home, his brother harshly mocked him, and his father publicly renounced him. When we adopt an attitude of poverty, we may encounter resistance from friends and family, who feel their way of life is being threatened. But this is Christ calling us to lead others to holiness.

Next, we have, "Sobriety." Matthew Kelly's book, "Resisting Happiness" says, "We all have cycles of thought or behavior that need to be broken. Addiction in all its forms, large and small, serious, and less serious, is one of the central themes of our lives. Food, power, talking too much, work, pornography, alcohol, drugs... the list is varied and endless."

Kelly talks about the power of fasting saying, "It goes beyond food, we can fast from anything. It is one of the most powerful tools in the spiritual life. If you want a Coke, have water instead. If you want to take a shortcut, go the LONG way. If you want to cut a conversation short, hear the person out. Use a short prayer to strengthen your will. 'Lord, I will have the water even though I am craving the Coke. I offer this tiny sacrifice as a prayer for my friend who is struggling with cancer. Amen.'" Sobriety is a state of mind that keeps our spirit in check. Think of it as maintaining an assigned parking space in our hearts for God. A state of sobriety keeps our vices from encroaching on it.

Finally, we have, "A readiness to share with others." In our efforts to practice poverty, we can curb the excess in our lives by sharing with others. Father Conner says, "it's really good to go through our homes, our drawers, our cabinets, and our offices, at least once a year, and get rid of superfluous things. If I haven't used this article of clothing or other item in the past year, I probably don't really need it, and there may be someone else in the world who needs it more." Dropping donations at the St James Thrift Store helps our local parish and community. This form of voluntary poverty brings us closer to the Lord in the spirit of St Francis.

Francis was a just a poor man when he brought a dozen of his raggedly dressed followers to Pope Innocent III, the most powerful man on earth at the time. Francis came to renew the Church, not because he was rich and powerful, but because he in his poverty became little enough to imitate Christ. He asked to start a new religious order, and now there are roughly 650,000 Franciscan priests, religious sisters, and lay members in over 110 countries.

So, as we face our reliance on abundance and attempt to move our trust to the Lord, let's encourage each other to adopt the spirit of St Francis today. To pick one thing, one act of detachment, of fasting or purging, to do this week. I ask the Lord to be with us, to give us grace, and to help us know Him better through our small acts of faith.