



GENERAL ARCHIVES
ASSMR

THE PEAKS OF CHARITY
“THE VISION OF THE TWO MOUNTAINS”
of Venerable Mother Frances Streitel

Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother
Rome 2020

With joy and gratitude I present this booklet that accompanies the Icon of the *"The Summit of Charity - Vision of the Two Mountains of Venerable Mother Frances Streit"*, Foundress of our Congregation. For each Sister of the Sorrowful Mother, the vision that Ven. Mother Frances had in the Carmel choir of Himmelsforten, Germany, is familiar and evokes the values within our charism and mission.

The Icon was developed with love and dedication by Sr. M. Teresina Marra with assistance from the Laboratory of Spirituality and Technique of the Icon "La Glikophilousa", in Santa Maria di Crochi, Caulonia, Italy. Every SSM will be able to contemplate the beauty of their vocation, and renew with energy and fresh enthusiasm their commitment to spread the Gospel through apostolic works in the Church, in our communities, and in our world.

To every person who views this Icon, I hope they will be able to contemplate the beauty of God's gift to the Church through the life and works of Ven. Mother Frances. Her holy and humble life, became a gift and mystery, a welcoming home of God's will and an exemplary testimony of gospel fidelity.

This resplendent icon depicts the "benevolent love" and gratitude for all the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother who came before us, are present today, and will come after us. It invites all who contemplate this Icon to nurture a compassionate heart that will care for those in need, especially the poor.

This Icon, commissioned by the General Council, which will be displayed in the chapel of the Casa Generalizia, Rome, is to give, first of all praise to God for his providential love

manifested through the life and works of Mother Frances. At the same time, it is to honor our Foundress for her deep faith, her intense hope, and her prosperous charity, which made her decisive and strong in walking the ways of the Lord.

Sr. Catherine Marie Hanegan

Sister Catherine Marie Hanegan
General Superior, SSM

Rome, February 16, 2020
137th Anniversary of the Foundation

INTRODUCTION

“Tell us about the visions you have”, said a monk to Pachomius. “Let me tell you about a great vision: if you see a holy and humble man, this is a great vision. What could be greater than seeing the invisible God revealed in his temple, as a visible human being?”.

We believe it is necessary to start from here to introduce the reading of the icon “The Vision of the Two Mountains of Mother Frances Streitel”, produced by the Spirituality and Technique Laboratory of the Icon “La Glikophilousa”, at the Little Oaks Hermitage in Santa Maria di Crochi, Caulonia, in the heart of Byzantine Calabria.

The “great vision” that the icon invites us to contemplate is above all the actual life of Mother Frances. “The invisible God revealed himself in her temple”, strong and tenacious. In concealment and silence, she gradually became, through gift and mystery, a welcoming dwelling place for the Spirit, tireless in seeking the Will of God and exemplary in her faithful testimony of the Gospel.

The “great vision”, then, can only be the mature fruit of her spiritual intuitions: the foundation, in 1885, of *Sorores Charitatis in Matre Dolorosa*, the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother.

Let us therefore gaze upon the icon, mindful of being before an offspring of the Spirit and let us nurture a heart that is thankful to God because his transcendent beauty becomes visible in history where Mary's *fiat* and *stabat* are renewed in gratuitousness.

THE VISION OF THE TWO MOUNTAINS

During her novitiate at the Carmel Himmelsporten in Würzburg in June 1882, while praying in the choir of the monastery, Mother Frances had a very singular spiritual vision, preceded and followed by other inner insights, which she called “some supernatural things”¹, “occurrences that plainly bear the mark of the extraordinary”². She confided it with extreme modesty, almost shame, to her spiritual director: “I was summoned in a supernatural way, ...I had an enlightenment,



Carmel Himmelsporten, Würzburg.

...in my soul I saw,
...before my spirit I
saw”³, she writes to
Father Jordan in that
notorious letter
where she relates the
details of the vision
of the two moun-
tains, and then she
concludes: “I told
Our Lady of Mount

Carmel in all seriousness that if she wanted anything special from me, she would have to have recourse to my Superior, to whom I have vowed obedience”⁴. That is: essentially, not my illuminations, my visions, my “supernatural experiences”⁵, but obedience is the way through which, with certainty, God's will is fulfilled in me.

¹ M. FRANCES OF THE CROSS AMALIA STREITEL, *Letters to Father John Francis Jordan 1883-1885*, a work of the General Council Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome. Revision, 2013², p. 129. Here in after: *Letters to F. Jordan*.

² *Ivi*, p. 116.

³ *Ivi*, p. 117-119.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 120.

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 116.

We immediately grasp the inner balance of Mother Frances, which highlights the authenticity of her mystical experiences, so judged even during the cause for the beatification of her Venerability or, at least, “compatible with substantial inner righteousness”⁶.

Having said that, we need to review the whole story of the vision that we will find set in the broader context of the letter:

“A few days later I was praying in the choir in the forenoon and saw something, to me hitherto strange. In spirit I beheld two mountains rise. These two mountains, about the ordinary width of a street, stood in line with each other. The mountain rising on the right was higher than the other and had some sort of gradations. On its summit I believe I saw St. Elijah in rather indistinct form; farther down I also saw St. Teresa. The other mountain was not so high, probably because it was not so old. In the one I recognized Carmel; in the other, Alverno, on which St. Francis was standing with a cross in his hand. Both mountains arched themselves into one, the higher mountain arching and inclining toward the other from about the place where St. Teresa stood. I had the feeling within me that the two saints wished to draw me up to the center of this mountain, to be as it were the keystone of the arch. I resisted, for in such a thing I was seized with so great a fear of being the plaything of hellish delusions that more than once the confessor had difficulty quieting me on this point. The call which I received

⁶ This is the nearly unanimous opinion of the Theological Consultors gathered in Congress to discuss the heroism of Mother Frances' virtues: «The alleged inspirations which so much played a part in her history [of the Servant of God], were judged by father Victor and father Benigar as fundamentally genuine or, at least compatible with substantial inner righteousness. However, the Servant of God's continuous and humble recourse to priests to whom she submitted her inspirations and plans for sound discernment was a sign of prudence. Following inner inspirations, especially if confirmed by spiritual directors, is certainly not imprudent, even if the inspirations lead to unknown ways or - as in the case of the Servant of God - lead to different experiences until they find their place in the Church » (CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, *Beatificationis et canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Franciscae a Cruce. Relatio et vota congressus peculiaris super virtutibus. Die 15 Maii an. 2009 habiti*, Rome 2009, p.46).

before or after this vision, and which came to me because 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." Perhaps this will shed light on that which was seen. Carmel may represent prayer; Alverno, activity. Both prayer and work have received new sprouts in the course of centuries, which have frequently misrepresented the sublimity of the one and the necessity of the other. In the one Order one often fails to understand the prayer of work; in the other, the work of prayer.³¹ Prayer and work must go hand in hand and like twin sisters, strive to remedy the spiritual and social misery of mankind, teaching it again what it means to pray and work".

My Reverend Father, if St. Elias on the one height or also St. Teresa, if the latter were sent once more by the Lord to carry out a reform, she would teach her spiritual daughters in the first place the prayer of work, perhaps also how to pray and work, which would be easily reconciled with enclosure and silence. On the other height there would be St. Francis, permeating your work. Would you not have holy, solid ground, a rock of foundation and height of virtue, a lofty bulwark?

So that the image of the two mountains merging might not escape my mind, one of our Sisters, who in no way had knowledge of the vision I had seen, had the following dream about eight weeks ago: A tall, simple, pious man led the Sister to two mountains, which then merged into one at the summit. Grapevines covered with rocks were visible. The man showed the Sister how to remove the stones, which could only hinder the growth of the vine, and to use them in constructing a circular house. After they had worked for a time, the bell in a large church rang for Holy Mass. The Sister had to follow the man until he saw me standing by the wayside, whereupon he committed the Sister to me, and the two of us went into this church.

The Sister told me that the church that she had seen in her dream was standing elevated and free and, what struck her especially,

appeared to have high scaffolding on wheels, in front of as well as inside the church.

Reverend Father, when you permitted us to visit the Church of the Lateran, the Sister, who had never seen this church, said, "You will see, we shall come to the church that I saw." And in fact, the blocks of stone, high scaffolding on wheels, the location and the size of the church let the Sister really see what she had envisioned in another way weeks before. Who the man was who taught this Sister, and with her a whole generation, to pray and work is indeed beyond doubt. I firmly believe that sooner or later significant things will take place in the Lateran in regard to the new Order. May God be glorified!"⁷.

READING THE ICON

During the extensive creation of the drawing, all the details of the vision referred by Mother Frances were carefully recorded. However, we know that iconography goes far beyond and, according to the expression of the English poet William Blake, it is the representation of the "divine human form" and a celebration of the "intervention of Grace in the Saints of Christ", as reaffirmed by the Seventh Ecumenical Council⁸. Thus the icon, inspired by Mother Frances' mystical experience, makes visible and perceptible the plan of God the Creator and Redeemer, of whom she was a docile instrument following the way of Christ. Indeed, this is how she perceived herself in her time as a servant in the Lord's vineyard. She affirms this in a letter to Fr. Jordan: let us consider ourselves "special tools in the hands of God", she says, recalling the need to guard this conviction, living "a life of faith, a life of grace", dedicated to the "God-willed task"⁹.

MOTHER FRANCES STREITEL

⁷ *Letters to F. Jordan*, pp. 116-120.

⁸ Cfr. R. BOZZETTO - R. LEONE, *Icone: arte e spiritualità*, in AA.VV., *Icone. Tradizione bizantina e spiritualità*, Trento 2008, p. 5.

⁹ *Letters to F. Jordan*, pp. 231-232.

The iconographic representation is set on a golden background that symbolically refers to the divine environment. What our eyes contemplate is a visit of salvation from God entering into history: his mercy has found a space in the heart of a woman “mightily drawn to the love of the Cross”¹⁰, ‘wounded’ by this never-ending compassion.

Mother Frances is depicted standing upright in her dignity of being a new creature transfigured in the Light and as she prepares her heart for the reception she seems to whisper in silence “yet I live no longer, but Christ lives in me”¹¹. Her gaze is caught in the contemplation of the mystery that made her a fruitful womb of divine Charity, mother of all weakness and sister to all pain, as she says in a letter filled with holy desires: “He [the Lord] leaves to me, yes, even perfects the solicitude for the needs of others so much so that I suffer greatly when those around me are oppressed with need or sorrow which I cannot relieve”¹².

The face of God’s Servant bears the imprint of a profound spiritual effort and expresses the constant tension of a passionate search: “Oh, how my soul longs for God, for that powerful, living God! With the Apostle my soul would say: ‘I wish to be dissolved,’ [...] For the present and the future I have no other wish nor will but that the Lord may support me so mightily with His grace that I may always be a daughter of holy obedience and of holy poverty”¹³.

In the quiet and subdued radiance of her face marked by energetic strokes of light, Mother Frances reflects the pure and firm decision of the spirit that incessantly repeats the ‘yes’ of faith. With simple following Christ without putting anything before his love, her

¹⁰ M. FRANCES OF THE CROSS AMALIA STREITEL, *Letters to Various Correspondents 1879-1910*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2005, p. 58. Here in after: *Various Correspondents*.

¹¹ Gal 2,20.

¹² *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 84.

¹³ *Ivi*, pp. 128-129.

transfigured humanity shakes our indolence and invites us to pursue Christ's way of Life with a generous soul, without unnecessary delays or dangerous distractions. She seems to remind us again that "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"¹⁴.

The Servant of God holds a scroll in her left hand, clutching it in an act of loving fidelity, seemingly pleased to have collected every highest aspiration in it: "Prayer and work...the sublimity of the one and the necessity of the other"¹⁵. It is the clarity of the vision that, as we'll see later in the sign of the two mountains forming an arch, indicates the need to "unite the active life with the contemplative"¹⁶.

"Prayer and work": As we combine these two imperatives of perennial evangelical freshness, let us think back to the life of Mother Frances and remember her as a young girl already inclined to extensively seek in prayer the meaning of eternal realities as Jesus' words rumbled in her heart: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself"¹⁷.

"The hours spent in prayer and meditation in front of the Blessed Sacrament - notes the biographer Sr. Kiliana Koller - never seemed too long for her"¹⁸, especially when, at the age of 17, she was "called to the religious life in a special manner"¹⁹. And then to Carmel, to "the desired goal"²⁰, in the solitude of the cloister, in recollection and

¹⁴ M. FRANCES OF THE CROSS AMALIA STREITEL, *Various Writings and Documents of the beginning of the Congregation 1883-1911*, General Council of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2007, p. 41. Here in after: *Various Writings*.

¹⁵ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 119.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 95.

¹⁷ Gv 12,32.

¹⁸ K. KOLLER, *History of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother*, Vol I. Milwaukee, 1960, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 56.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 59.

penance, while “God comes into the soul and the soul migrates into God”²¹.

Let us also recall the renowned Vespers of March 18, 1883, when, having professed her religious vows in the hands of Fr. Jordan, she wore the Franciscan habit and sandals depicting poverty as she spent long hours in prayer, weighing with love the new name she received: Mary Frances *of the Cross*.

Yet Mother Frances knows that the sublimity of prayer does not escape the darkness of aridity. Some instances of darkness can shape and purify. In fact, in a crucible of pain, the heart searches for a more certain and lasting hope, confidently turning to the mystery of the cross: “Yes, may the Lord be your light in the darkness of storms – she writes to her sister Hedwig – [...] Let us always seek the countenance of the Lord and this sweet Face will turn to us in mercy”²².

Confident abandonment arouses and gradually strengthens in her a need to bend her knees and intercede for those who suffer, hoping against all hope, as it often occurred, especially at the bedside of sick sisters. Sr. Kiliana reminds us of this, mentioning a painful event that occurred “the ninth month since the foundation of the community”, when Sr. Johanna Ankenbrand fell seriously ill. Mother Frances, “with the power and goodness of God, took refuge in prayer and sacrifice” and “encouraged the sick sister to trust with all her heart ...”²³: an ordinary attitude of extraordinary confidence in the provident love of the compassionate God. And it is no wonder that, to intercede like Moses on the mountain, very often after resting for a few hours on bare boards, she spent most of the night in prayer until she became in the

²¹ S. GIOVANNI DAMASCENO, *De fide orthodoxa*, PG 94, 1089.

²² M. FRANCES OF THE CROSS AMALIA STREITEL, *Letters to her parents and her sister Hedwig 1855-1911*, General Council of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2002, p. 54. Here in after: *Letters to her family*.

²³ K. KOLLER, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

eyes of the sisters a true praying icon who “spoke with God and God spoke with her!”²⁴:

The wise interweaving of “prayer and work” was a very fine spiritual tapestry that strengthened Mother Frances' life with perseverance and self-sacrifice, especially in the hours of trial that lashed the fragile bud of the emerging community time and time again, until the time of the Calvary of the Foundress, when humiliated, discredited and stripped of everything, she was deposed as Superior General. There, in pain and obedience she totally surrendered to God's will, and exemplified an indispensable style for every Sister of the Sorrowful Mother. This was an elevating example, showing how the only possible and never satisfied desire must be the union with God and love for one's neighbor, at all cost and without reserve.

Saint Gregory the Great, commenting on the Gospel passage of Martha and Mary, wrote: “One dedicates herself to active life through the service for the world, the other to contemplative life through the ecstasy of a heart attentive to the Word”²⁵. Now, in her dedication to prayer and service with equal ardor, Mother Frances modeled this attentiveness to the Word. This was after all the great point in the vision: in religious life, the two faces of love, Martha and Mary, must complement each other. What is more, they must merge! A heart that is authentically turned to God needs to recognize and serve God in the face of one's neighbor: “for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen”²⁶. “Any Christian life, and more so religious life, is therefore characterized by both active and contemplative life”²⁷.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 33.

²⁵ SAN GREGORIO, *Homilies on Ezekiel* I, 3, 9.

²⁶ 1Jn 4, 20.

²⁷ J. PROU E LE MONACHE DELLA CONGREGAZIONE DI SOLESMES, *La chiusura delle monache, Prospettive della vita religiosa*, Città del Vaticano 1998, p. 151.

ON MOUNT CARMEL

In the vision, prayer is represented by the incessant ascent to the high mountain of Carmel, where two figures very close to Mother Frances' spirituality stand out: Saint Elijah and Saint Teresa of Avila.

The prophet Elijah

“St. Elias was spiritually close to me. He expressed his joy that I was his daughter and asked me to accept him. I was greatly embarrassed. I did not know how I could bring this about. Then light came to me, and I heard the words: “Of course you can accept him. Your other patrons, indeed, you have also accepted interiorly. I had the feeling then of having accepted St. Elias interiorly, and the words of Scripture came to my mind: “He who receives a prophet will have a prophet's reward”²⁸.

In the icon, Elijah is portrayed alone, seated in a dark cavern which he seems to have reached with difficulty to find the true meaning of his existence in silence and solitude: “Find inner peace and silence – suggests Saint Seraphim of Sarov – and a multitude of men will find salvation in you”²⁹. And Mother Frances said: “The strength of a soul striving after perfection lies in silence”³⁰, which she deems so fundamental that she wrote in the 1883 *Norms*: “every Sister has the duty to admonish talkative and communicative candidates with a determined, “Let us keep silence”³¹. Moreover, when during her spiritual exercises in January 1906 she writes some notes on a small paper stating, a single purpose with exemplary determination: “to begin now with the help of God until the end, a new life of *silence* and self-sacrifice”³².

²⁸ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 118.

²⁹ I. GORAINOFF, *Serafino di Sarov. Vita, colloquio con Motovilov, scritti spirituali*, Torino 1981, p. 57.

³⁰ *Various Writings*, p. 55.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 65.

³² *Ivi*, p. 33.

In this icon, Elijah announces the spiritual effectiveness of a contemplative life consumed in silence and concealment. His monumental, harmonious and hieratic figure is interpreted in an attitude of confident expectation, balanced quietness, free from every tension.

The body of the prophet is wrapped in a fur coat of warm red-orange colors and covered in a blue-green tunic, and among its folds the hope of a renewed encounter with the Lord of Life flowings tenaciously.

His long hair and untidy beard seem as vivid flames that accentuate the extraordinary expression of his face completely stretched towards God. As we scrutinize him, we seem to hear the words of Saint John Climaco, a saintly monk of the seventh century: “Your love has wounded my soul and my heart cannot withstand your flames: I live by singing to you!”³³.

“I live by singing to you”: here is “the work of prayer” Mother Frances speaks of: “on the peak” – she writes – Saint Elijah and Saint Teresa “teach her spiritual daughters first the prayer of work, perhaps also how to pray and work, which would be easily reconciled with enclosure and silence”³⁴.

Even before writing this note, Mother Frances had mentioned “the tow-fold spirit”³⁵ that Elijah granted to Elisha, who is recognized as the principal spiritual heir to his prophetic mission. A quotation she uses to remind Fr. Jordan “of the strict obligation”³⁶ of his commitment as spiritual guide.

Now, in the icon, Elijah is also the character that highlights the beauty of the prophecy. Through the expressive signs that characterize him, the prophet refers us back to the *mystery* of man handed over to God. He is the one who stands in His presence, well fixed on the rock of the call. It is the *ministry* of the man seduced by God who speaks

³³ MIGNE, *Greek Patrology*, 88, 1160 B.

³⁴ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 119.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 225.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

courageously and frankly for the Lord's sake and “brings forth through his words those spoken by God”³⁷.

A mystery which Mother Frances approaches and assimilates seeking light “in holy solitude”³⁸. A ministry she exercises by “frankness in speech”³⁹, even saying unpleasant things and humbly expressing her faults; indeed, turning her public confessions into a precious educational opportunity: “My subjects seeing that I have had the courage to admit my faults, will admit theirs and put forth efforts to improve”⁴⁰.

‘Frankness’ is the keyword at the heart of Mother Frances, as it was for Elijah. In her writings this term appears 24 times, often referred to the need to be frank with superiors and sometimes to demand sincerity and loyalty in speaking and acting from various counterparts.

Her prophetic frankness walks swiftly hand in hand with courage, to which Mother Frances makes 51 appeals in her writings: courage to carry the cross: “Only great confidence in help from above gives me courage to carry my cross to the height determined by God”⁴¹; “courage to stand firm under the Cross, to hope ‘against hope’⁴²; courage “to lead a strict ascetic life and thereby stem the tide of shallowness in religious life”⁴³.

³⁷ P. BOVATI, *Così parla il Signore. Studi sul profetismo biblico*, Bologna 2008, p. 57.

³⁸ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 127.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 92.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 103-104.

⁴¹ *Letters to Various Correspondents* p. 145. See also *Letters to F. Jordan*, Letter p.76: «Pray for your spiritual daughter... pray that she accept the Cross courageously all the day of her life” and *Letters to F. Jordan*, 26 (16), 4 «have the courage to raise the cross high”.

⁴² *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 135.

⁴³ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 32.

And again: courage “to follow the example” of Saint Francis and Saint Clare⁴⁴, to rest “in the wounds of our Savior, spring of our Salvation”⁴⁵, “in virtue of holy obedience, to suffer want, to struggle, and to endure”, convinced that “the Lord will give me the grace”⁴⁶; courage which must be “rooted in the promise of the Lord”⁴⁷ and which stems from grace and the principle that “the Lord be glorified and the creature annihilated”⁴⁸; courage to “humble myself more deeply”⁴⁹, “endure lying (in silence)”⁵⁰ any type of sacrifice and to “prepare ways for the Lord”⁵¹.

And then: “courage and perseverance in the miseries of time, Reverend Father, so that we may be preserved from them in eternity”⁵²; courage to show the truth: “As illogical as this may be, God has given His blessing as often as I have had the courage to manifest the truth, that is, to expose my faults; and He increased my patience with the faults of others”⁵³; courage to object to errors: “God grant that such superiors may always be at the head of our Order who do not lack the courage to oppose wrongdoing with determination”⁵⁴; courage to walk on the ways of the Lord⁵⁵ and to guide the sisters: “so that the necessary light, the dauntless courage, charity, and meekness in guiding the Sisters may be given to me from above, and that, while aiding others to perfection, I may not walk the ways of perdition”⁵⁶.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 36.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 58.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 55.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 66.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 95.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 124.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 176.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 129.

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 103.

⁵⁴ *Various Writings*, p. 59.

⁵⁵ Cfr. *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 143.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 150.

And lastly: courage to “overcome the prejudices”⁵⁷, to follow the Lord “in despising the world and in practicing strict renunciation of the world”⁵⁸; courage to overcome “what your self-respect most fears, namely contempt and humiliation, renunciation of your own will”⁵⁹.

Courage, “more of a virtue than humility”⁶⁰, “better proof of a true vocation than an ecstasy reaching to heaven”⁶¹.

Saint Teresa of Avila

Near the summit, almost on the edge of the mountain as it curves, the figure of Saint Teresa of Avila stands austere according to the vision of Mother Frances. The icon represents her dressed in the traditional Carmelite habit: a simple brown robe, tightened at the waist by a belt; the veil, symbolizing God’s hand stretched over His creature to protect her and claim exclusive possession of her; the white wimple that extends to the shoulders. On the habit was the scapular, the characteristic garment of the Carmel, also called the *habit of the Madonna*. The scapular was inspired by the custom of medieval knights to wear the insignia of their beloved maiden in tournaments, as a spur to combat and a singular testimony of love. Then came the ‘*alpargatas*’, namely rope sandals worn by the poor in the time of Saint Teresa. Finally, the white cloak worn for the Eucharistic Celebration and great occasions, to indicate that the event celebrated by the icon requires reverential consideration since it refers to a true and proper solemn liturgy that evokes the great works of God.

“The Holy Mother Teresa”⁶², great mystic and reformer of the Carmelite Order, is the one who formed our Mother Frances from her youth.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 157.

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 193.

⁵⁹ *Various Writings*, p. 40.

⁶⁰ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 87. Quote of an expression of Saint Teresa of Avila.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 204.

⁶² *Ivi*, p.64.

Among the Franciscans of Saint Maria Stern, “scarcely had I put on the religious garb” she says “when the old struggle was upon me once more”: ‘You belong in a strict Order’ echoed in my soul again”⁶³. This need for renewed rigor constantly pricked her and she seemed to find in the Carmel a mirror of “strong sweetness and sweet severity”⁶⁴, the fulfillment of every wish, her answer and her port of landing.

The Carmel of Himmelspforten which she came across randomly, seemed to respond to her “expectation”: “Hardly had I heard the word ‘Himmelspforten’ when light and understanding pervaded my whole being. Everything now became clear to me and I heard a loud interior voice saying: ‘Go and ask to be received there; that is where God wishes to have you!’ I rode to the convent and asked to speak to the confessor of these nuns. To this religious I presented my desire in a simple request; he took me to the prioress, and I was given the assurance that as soon as one of the Carmelite nuns would die, I would be allowed to enter. It was good St. Joseph who evidently led me to my desired goal; it was as if everything had been prepared in advance at the Carmelite convent, and yet I was a stranger to this Order and all its circumstances up to this day. I was happy because all was made clear in regard to what God was asking of me. I saw myself near the goal for which I had been longing for years”⁶⁵.

Truthfully, Mother Frances recognized that the ideals of Carmel were deeply rooted in her heart even before she crossed the threshold in 1882: “Without realizing it, for years I practiced the norms [of the Carmel] to some extent... Upon my entrance into this Order, I was often greatly surprised on seeing that one practiced according to existing norms what I had long ago learned by the light of grace or had at least recognized as pleasing to God. At the beginning of my life in Carmel I could write confidently to my sister: ‘All practices seem easy

⁶³ *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 57.

⁶⁴ A. SICARI, *Nuovi ritratti di santi*, Milano 1991, p. 49.

⁶⁵ *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 59.

and are in accordance with those which I performed in part before my entrance”⁶⁶.

In the icon, the Castilian Saint, her face beaming and almost transfigured, points with her right hand to the glorified Christ almost as if to recall her “second conversion”. In 1554 she began once again to feel the ‘presencia de Dios’⁶⁷, or “presence of God” to then reach the peak of an interior journey that became a marital covenant, a transforming union, assimilating her to the Bridegroom in the contemplative apex of “spiritual marriage”.

“God alone is enough”, reads the scroll she holds in her left hand, reminding our hearts of the poetic verses containing this mystical treasure: “Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you. All things pass, God never changes. Patience attains all. He who has God finds he lacks nothing. God alone suffices! May your desire be to see God, your fear to lose Him, your pain to not own Him, your joy that which may lead you to Him and you shall live in great peace.”⁶⁸.

We could certainly draft a parallel text to these verses of Saint Teresa of Avila, one by one, extracting treasures of equal value from the writings of Mother Frances, to understand how similar her spirit is to that of the great Carmelite reformer. Mother Frances’ deepest longing was in fact “To see God”⁶⁹, walking without fear clinging to Him⁷⁰ and allowing for nothing in nature to somehow distract her from loving God. This desire made her unwavering in asceticism and ardent in charity: “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

⁶⁶ *Letters to F. Jordan*, pp. 44-45.

⁶⁷ SANTA TERESA D’AVILA, *Libro de la Vida*, 10,1.

⁶⁸ SANTA TERESA DI GESÙ, *Opere*, Roma 1997, p. 1511.

⁶⁹ Cfr. *Letters to her family*, p. 46; *Other Writings*, pp. 31 e 36.

⁷⁰ Cfr. *Letter to Various Correspondents*, p. 96.

sound of the mysterious voice of the One Who has fashioned her and imprints in her His form, the form of the holy Cross”⁷¹.

“Seeing God”, she seems to tell us, means “never fulfilling this desire”⁷², as reiterated by Saint Gregory of Nyssa. Mother Frances’ ascetic effort was totally focused on this, transforming her passions and “leading them to converge towards the silent expectation of the moment in which God clothes the soul with divine form”⁷³.

From the tall mountain of contemplation, knowing that “the heights of Carmel are hard to scale”⁷⁴, the Spirit acts. The icon announces it through the sign of the wind-blown bushes crowning the Carmelite saint. Then, climbing the holy mount of Carmel, persevering in prayer with an undivided heart, guided by the Spirit which makes us reborn continuously from above is the spiritual challenge that Mother Frances accepted and at the same time entrusted to every Sister of the Most Blessed Sorrowful Mother. It is a matter of uniting without distortion “active and contemplative life”, aware that “prayer and work must go hand in hand”⁷⁵, and contribute to the same extent to the removal of the spiritual and social misery of humanity, teaching it the new, true meaning of “praying and working”⁷⁶.

ON THE MOUNTAIN OF ALVERNO

Saint Francis of Assisi

The Seraphic Father Saint Francis stands out in the icon humbly, across from the Carmelite saint, on the mountain recognized by

⁷¹ *Letters to F. Jordan*, pp. 204-205.

⁷² S. GREGORIO DI NISSA, *Vie de Moïse*, II, 165 (a cura di J. Daniélou), Paris 1968, p. 107.

⁷³ P. EVDOKIMOV, *L’amore folle di Dio*, Roma 1983, p. 57.

⁷⁴ *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 59.

⁷⁵ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 95.

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 119.

Mother Frances as the peak of Alverno: “The other mountain was not so high, probably because it was not so old. In the one I recognized Carmel; in the other, Alverno, on which St. Francis was standing with a cross in his hand”⁷⁷.

In the icon, the harmony of the attractive and welcoming vault recalls the wonder perceived by Mother Frances: “I had the feeling within me that the two saints wished to draw me up to the center of this mountain, to be as it were the keystone of the arch”⁷⁸.

Pope Paul VI, in his *Speech* during a visit to the “Seraphicum” in honor of Saint Bonaventure, said about Alverno that “given the singular experience of Saint Francis with Christ, pensive souls still count it among the high places of the Spirit”. Now, in light of her strong calls to silence and contemplation, it is astonishing that Mother Frances perceives the industriousness of active life in this manifestation of her vision, namely, as she says “St. Francis, permeating your work”⁷⁹.

After all, Alverno and Carmel are both invitations to a solitary life and to concealed penance.

We must then dig deeper to understand her inner inspiration.

Roman Martyrology recalls the Holy ‘Poverello’ as follows: “Memory of Saint Francis, who, after a carefree youth, converted to an evangelical life in Assisi, Umbria, to serve Jesus Christ whom he had encountered especially in the poor and disinherited, becoming poor himself. He gathered around him the Friars Minor in community. He preached the love of God to all, all the way to the Holy Land, seeking in his words and actions the perfect following of Christ, and he willed to die on the naked earth”.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p. 119.

Let us consider that the young and restless Francis, while searching for his vocation, heard a mysterious voice after the revelatory dream of Spoleto, inviting him to serve the master instead of the servant⁸⁰; he seeks clarity by undertaking a pilgrimage all the way to Saint Peter in Rome, however without finding answers. And what does he do? Disappointed, he returns to Assisi and engages with increased zeal in works of charity for the poor and the lepers. It is only in 1205 that God speaks to him openly: “Go Francis, and repair my church, which as you can see, is in ruins”⁸¹. Then in 1208, he experiences the actual enlightenment during Mass at the Portiuncula, as he listens to the priest reading the Gospel on the mission of the Apostles: “Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, look for a worthy person in it, and stay there until you leave”⁸².

What does all this mean? That the Saint “amid his work” that Mother Frances refers to is the ‘Poverello’ who, at a particularly difficult moment for the life of the Church, begins to preach the Gospel by example and with words, as did the first apostles. He cures lepers, assists the dispossessed and, as the community grows, draws up a new Rule approved in 1223, in which he reaffirms the love of our Lady of Poverty, the urgency of preaching, but also the need for manual labor and above all, the balance between action and contemplation.

We have come to the core: balance between active life and contemplative life, work and prayer, so dear to Mother Frances. Alverno, after all, is not where the Seraphic Father Francis usually lived, rather it was one of the hermitages where he loved to spend extensive periods of retreat every year.

⁸⁰ Cfr. *Legend of the three companions* 6: FF 1401.

⁸¹ SAINT BONAVENTURE OF BAGNOREGIO, *Leggenda maggiore*, II,1: FF 1038.

⁸² Mt 10, 9-10.

In a letter to Father Jordan, Mother Frances states: “These days ‘my envy’ in seeing our holy Father Francis praying in the mountain clefts of Alverno, and not being able to follow him there, caused me such intense pain that I could not endure it alone... my whole being was suffering, suffering because it could not escape, to solitude, yes, perhaps even to be drawn into the world and enmeshed in its affairs, not to be fashioned after it -- may God’s grace preserve me from this - - no, but to help save the world”⁸³.

The vision of Francis on the mountain is, therefore, in the eyes of our Mother Frances, an everlasting stimulus to live among the people so that they may find salvation through the service of charity and every other apostolic activity, but always keeping their hearts fixed on Alverno, that is, in the profound intimacy of an incessant prayer.

Indeed, this is what “restoring the original type of religious life”⁸⁴, meant to her. She writes: “Both prayer and work have received new sprouts in the course of centuries, which have frequently misrepresented the sublimity of the one and the necessity of the other. In the one Order one often fails to understand the prayer of work: in the other, the work of prayer”⁸⁵.

We now understand better the “industriousness of Alverno”!

Finally, let us consider that the rugged peak of Alverno is the place where Francis, close to God in the humble spoliation of himself, reaches the summit of love in giving life. And the icon reminds us through the sign of the stigmata impressed in the hands of the Saint who, in amazement, is clutching the crucified Christ: “the sight of him confined on the cross pierced his soul with the painful sword of compassion”, wrote Saint Bonaventure from Bagnoreggio in the *Major Legend*⁸⁶.

⁸³ *Letters to F. Jordan*, pp. 100-101.

⁸⁴ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 219.

⁸⁵ *Ivi*, p. 119.

⁸⁶ SAINT BONAVENTURE OF BAGNOREGIO, *op. cit.*, XIII,3: FF 1225.

This same piercing of love, between pain and compassion, is experienced by Mother Frances, at least in her heart, as she mystically dwells “in the stigmata of our crucified love”⁸⁷. She says about herself with ardor that she “knows no other wish than to become an image of the Crucified, to be formed anew into Him”⁸⁸. Her desire is after all very similar to that of Francis when on September 14, 1224, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, he turned to the Lord and prayed as follows:

*“O my Lord Jesus Christ, two graces I beseech Thee, before I die: The first one, that in my life I may feel in my soul and in my body, as much as possible, that pain that you, sweet Jesus, sustained in the hour of your acerbic passion, the second that I may feel in my heart, as much as possible, that excessive love for which you, Son of God, were willing to sustain so much passion for us sinners”*⁸⁹.

In this regard, let us not forget that Mother Frances felt such a relationship with this event experienced by the Saint, that she chose September 17, the Feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis, to commemorate her name day.

The echo of his prayer is a “fire of the spirit”⁹⁰ and it focuses in an enlightened way on how we must foresee and foretaste the radiant dawn of Resurrection in the mystery of the Crucified Christ: “I shall fervently and sincerely pray to my Crucified Love to annihilate me and let me arise in the Wound of the Sacred Heart. He should let me die to all that is not of God and to live, suffer, and operate only in Him, the Source of all good”⁹¹.

Nevertheless, aware of her misery, with intimate drive, and burning with the living flame of desires imbued with eternal love, she

⁸⁷ *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 82.

⁸⁸ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 205.

⁸⁹ *I Fioretti san Francesco, Della terza considerazione sulle sacre Stimate*: FF 1919.

⁹⁰ SAINT BONAVENTURE OF BAGNOREGIO, *op. cit.*, XIII,3: FF 1225.

⁹¹ *Letters to Various correspondents*, p. 180.

constantly invokes a total purification of the soul: “In the wounds of the Savior our souls will be cleansed, and nothing shall part us from our crucified Love”⁹². In his wounds, she adds, “may rest, light, and strength be given us to cope with difficulties”⁹³.

In this constant work of the soul, Mother Frances is truly aiming high, not at great things beyond her strength, but at the heights of love and pain attained by grace while turning to Mary, that become a marriage seal with the Crucified One:

*“Take roots in Mary as the Immaculate Virgin, and take shape in her according to God’s intentions. Through her be introduced into the mystery of ‘love and suffering’, that I may truly become the ‘spouse of the crucified’, that never withdraws from his bloody feet, until the crucified love will say: come up higher, take your place in the middle of my heart”*⁹⁴.

A total and continuous conformity, in the gift of perseverance, until her last breath: “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’”⁹⁵.

RECOGNIZING AND LOVING THE WAYS OF THE SORROWFUL MOTHER

“Carmel and Alverno must bring forth new twigs, new blossoms, and produce new fruits”⁹⁶: this is Mother Frances’ clear desire, which the icon proclaims almost on tiptoe, with a discreet gesture: Mother Frances’ right hand gently resting on the shoulder of the girl at her

⁹² *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 189.

⁹³ *Ivi*, p. 230.

⁹⁴ *Various Writings*, p. 26.

⁹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 27.

⁹⁶ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 176.

side, as a sign of blessing. This gesture acquires meaning if we interpret it according to the biblical text. In chapter 33 of Deuteronomy, before his death Moses blesses the tribes of Israel through a series of oracles. As he reaches Benjamin, he says:

“Benjamin is the beloved of the LORD, who shelters him all the day, while he abides securely at his breast” (v. 12).

God’s hand resting between the shoulders of His creature is always a sign of blessing, of protection and transmission of a gift. The icon is reminding us that Mother Frances is gratuitously transmitting to future generations what she herself received by grace. And along with that gift, comes God’s blessing.

Every sister of the Blessed Sorrowful Mother is therefore by grace endowed with this gift and marked by this blessing. They can all identify with the young girl holding the icon of the Sorrowful Mother while her gaze leads her to the poor. After all, Mother Frances perceived herself and was in her heart just like her, a ‘child’: “I am still as candid as a child”⁹⁷, “I kneel in spirit before Your Reverence and in childlike manner beg you to give me your blessing”⁹⁸; “in childlike simplicity ...and came closer to the God of my heart”⁹⁹.

As we said, the young girl uses her hand as a lectern, sustaining the icon of the *Mater Dolorosa*, caught in her mourning; her head is bent down, completely stretched toward the Son laying on the cross, and she becomes one with him, between compassion and co-participation. This is the mystery Mother Frances took in, guarded and transmitted to her daughters: we “belong” to the Sorrowful Mother¹⁰⁰. They, as well as anyone who feels affected by this mystery of tormenting love have the renewed task of “recognizing and loving the ways of the Sorrowful Mother”¹⁰¹.

⁹⁷ *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 45.

⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 119.

⁹⁹ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 94.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 158.

¹⁰¹ *Ivi*, p. 151.

The icon invites the *fiat*, proposes the *stabat* and reiterates the exhortation and the wish of Mother Frances with shapes and colors: “May they all work there as true daughters of the Sorrowful Mother”¹⁰². The young girl whispers it as she stands upright, the icon in her heart and her eyes turned to compassion; she shows us how and she delivers once again the words of Mother Frances: “Let us stand under the Cross with the Sorrowful Mother. Let us look up to the Crucified with trusting faith, and we will experience that in the cross is salvation!”¹⁰³.

We need just to extend the palm of our right hand, as nobly as that young girl precociously attracted by the Absolute and express our agreement by saying: “Amen, I’m in!”.

Therefore, let’s be infected by her inner elegance: the simple beauty of this young face enlightened by faith, her green gown reflecting a light spirit while it exudes hope, so in our heart we may revive the desire to accomplish God’s will and to be counted among the succulent fruits of the “new tree” that the Lord has planted in the Church, for His glory. Thus, the bold and trusting desire of Mother Frances will be fulfilled and her spirit’s intuition will become the daily seed of goodness multiplying into new sprouts and mature fruits: “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”¹⁰⁴.

UNDER THE OAK TREE

As we follow the gaze of the young girl, we shift our attention to the deep green of the plains where a centuries-old oak tree stands majestically; in its magnificence, it appears as the pillar of the adjacent house.

¹⁰² *Ivi*, p. 154.

¹⁰³ *Letters to her family*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁴ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 39.

*“The oak tree, in the Bible, is one of the trees that highlights the sacredness of the place and refers to events that are especially meaningful for the people of Israel. [...] Tents were often planted near the thick and luxuriant foliage of this tree to be sheltered from heat. It seems that the most intimate experience of men must be kept in the shadow of an oak tree: the interweaving of affection, between hardships and joy, God’s desire, the anxiety to be faithful to His rules. It is therefore not surprising that God appears to Abraham near the oak trees of Mamre”*¹⁰⁵.

This geographic location becomes a ‘theological place’ and a “metaphor of the fertile womb of a woman giving birth, ready to generate the people of the alliance”¹⁰⁶.

On the fascinating backdrop of these biblical evocations, the oak tree in the icon guides us towards the contemplation of the different *ministries* that emerged from the fruitfulness of the charism of Mother Frances and the first Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother. The red thread that links the many apostolic services of the new Congregation, “holy work”¹⁰⁷, as Mother Frances calls it, is a heart well available for hospitable reception that becomes a womb ready to guard and generate life.

The majesty of the oak tree does not, however, deny the humility of its roots. The “work of God”¹⁰⁸ which by grace has grown luxuriant, maintains a humble style and a casual simplicity. It must be jealously guarded, declaring ‘war’ on self-affirmation and on the need for visibility and success.

¹⁰⁵ R. LEONE, “L’ospitalità di Abramo alle querce di Mamre” in *Semi di pensiero. Scritti in memoria di don Santo Gullace*, Locri 2010, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ *Ivi*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁷ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁸ *Ivi* 96

“It is“, write Mother Frances, „the most humble work and must always appear as such”¹⁰⁹. Even a large oak tree is born from a small seed and this “minority”¹¹⁰ experienced with joy and modesty by “unprofitable servants”¹¹¹, leads to self-truth, with no frills or appearances, though aware of doing great things for the Kingdom: “It is well known that when the Lord wants to do great things,” Mother Frances again points out, “He always makes use of the small and of nothingness”¹¹².

Near the oak tree, almost hidden by the foliage, sits a neat and tidy house, the symbol of every community of Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, as Sr. Catharina Eck had ‘dreamed it’: “After table” writes Mother Frances, “Sr Catharina told me, [“]Last night I had to build a house out of red stones and white beams, one story high; hence, love of God and of neighbor, purity of intention, and holy poverty are represented in this edifice”¹¹³.

Like the tent in the generous shade of the oak trees of Mamre, every house of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother is destined by grace and mission to be a welcoming place where it is “continually asked not to fail against charity”¹¹⁴, where everything “will be served in charity”¹¹⁵, in fact, as clearly spelled out in the 1883 *Norms*, “all speech opposed to charity and truth, all quarrels and rash judgment of the neighbor, especially of fellow Sisters, are strictly forbidden”¹¹⁶. Instead, every one of them must constantly strive to “have an all-merciful and compassionate heart toward them”¹¹⁷. “The Sisters are continually asked not to fail against charity among themselves, but if it happens, they are at once to beg pardon humbly and contritely of the Sister

¹⁰⁹ *Ivi*, p. 47.

¹¹⁰ TOMMASO DA CELANO, *Vita Prima*, XV,38: FF 386.

¹¹¹ Lk 17, 10.

¹¹² *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 151.

¹¹³ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 151.

¹¹⁴ *Various Writings*, p. 52.

¹¹⁵ *Various Writings*, p. 52.

¹¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 55.

¹¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 52.

whom they have offended”¹¹⁸: an exhortation that expands the heart. How good is to recall and strive to live this out, especially when the joy of living together sometimes becomes tiring ascetism and bitter penance!

“BENEVOLENT LOVE”

Certainly, the shady oak tree revealed the beauty of fraternal life in the common desire to live a charity dressed in servant’s clothes with wide sleeves of mercy; however, the entrance door that is closed to keep out all forms of worldliness, must not be locked: “let us strive to become ‘all things to all men’ without ceasing, however, to be true children of the rule”¹¹⁹. Windows, as shown in the icon, must remain open to see the needs of others, to keep our hearts within the wounds of the poor and our eyes fixed on their demands: “In order to heal wounds one must see them”¹²⁰, says Mother Frances and she reiterates: “Toward the poor, one should always show an open heart and honor in them Christ who became poor”¹²¹.

For her, the path to charity is clear: “benevolent love”¹²² which is drawn from the tabernacle, where every day we offer to “God and our All, all our adoration and homage”¹²³. From the tabernacle, it quickly moves to fraternity: “the love of the fellow Sisters does one much good”¹²⁴, she says; and from fraternity it flows like an oil of consolation to the neighbor, privileging the poor and the sick:

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁹ *Ivi* p. 53.

¹²⁰ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 239.

¹²¹ *Various Writings*, p. 53.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

¹²³ *Letters to her family*, p. 44.

¹²⁴ *Letters to Various Correspondents*, p. 43.

*“Humanity conceals two jewels in its midst and so seldom appreciates their value. They are the poor and the sick, through whom we can enrich ourselves with the most precious treasures for time and eternity if we mercifully assist them and strive to alleviate their hard and painful lot by love and kindness, in imitation of our divine Savior, who conceals Himself in the one as in the other”*¹²⁵.

After reaching the neighbor love has certainly not exhausted its course. Without hesitating, it returns among the hidden silences of the “Sacramental God”¹²⁶. It becomes an intercession, “leaven in the heart of Trinity”¹²⁷, delivering to the Lord every tear collected in the goat-skin of compassion at the poor’s bedside: “God also shows that He is pleased when we intercede”¹²⁸.

THREE BASKETS “TO BRING FULL LIFE TO OTHERS”

From the house to the plains, “the Reign of Christ be extended on Earth. For this it is necessary that our hearts first expand in active love of others”¹²⁹, writes Mother Frances. And that is what the icon proclaims, by gathering on a green meadow the multicolored range of a humanity that is visited, healed, educated, fed and reached by the “benevolent love” of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother.

The heart of every one of Mother Frances’ daughters has room for any one’s pain, a space for any need, acceptance of any expectation. “Where duty and love call”¹³⁰, there will be “works of active love of neighbor”¹³¹.

¹²⁵ *Various Writings*, p. 61.

¹²⁶ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 164.

¹²⁷ POPE FRANCIS, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 283.

¹²⁸ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 92.

¹²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 205.

¹³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 229.

¹³¹ *Ivi*, p. 225.

The imperative dictated by compassion and drawn from the charisma of the Congregation is to “bring fuller life to others”, a mission statement that reveals the most authentic fidelity to the intuitions of Mother Frances: “The Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother participate in Jesus’ mission to bring full life to others revealing God’s love for all, especially the poor”¹³². “Mercifully care for the flock”¹³³, Mother Frances would say. And the icon translates it by placing at the center three baskets that contain the missionary zeal and the apostolic audacity of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother. These baskets hold bandages to heal, bread to feed and books to educate. Among these volumes, one is painted with the red of a cross which is in the Bible expressing the need to educate the good life of Christ in the Gospel.

If we dwell on the faces and traits of this cluster of humanity, we see in their features the variety of the peoples represented, the diversity of cultures, the multiplicity of social conditions and the different seasons of life, each with its own history and needs: it is the people of God “incarnate in the peoples of the Earth”¹³⁴. There is an elderly woman holding on to a stick, seeking someone to accompany her along the last stretch of life that awaits her. There is a restless young man carrying books searching for answers. There is a poor man, torn and half-naked, confidently extending his hand; near him, there is a nicely-dressed mature man who seems to lack nothing, but who has lost his dimension of existence in his race for possession, neglecting relationships and prayer. In his elegance he asks to be ‘freed from his stick’ and untied from the tangle of his false security to be free to love. Then comes a woman, moving proudly while carrying a basket of freshly picked fruit on her head along with the anxieties and hopes of every woman seeking redemption and dignity. Finally, there is a mother who carries her baby on her shoulders, asking for life to be defended, respected and supported in every need, from the moment of conception.

¹³² SR. T. MARRA, *Congregational Report of the General Superior. 2012-2017*, Roma 2017, p. 5.

¹³³ *Various Correspondents*, p. 65.

¹³⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium* 115.

Every care is devoted to this humanity in continuing the mission of Mother Frances: “we are called to evangelize the people of our time and different cultures”¹³⁵, “reaching a common understanding of evangelization and implementing it in different cultures”¹³⁶ will assist us in continuing our mission.

Thus, the icon represents them at work in the Lord’s vineyard, under the arch of the two joined mountains.

From the vision of goodness in Mother Frances’ heart, here is the vision of a goodness well-designed by the Congregation that has travelled with joy and not without effort on the path to fidelity to the original charism. The words of the prophet Jeremiah seem to be fulfilled (31,13):

“Then the virgins shall make merry and dance, and young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will console and gladden them after their sorrows”.

Under the arch of this renewed alliance, two sisters take three children dressed in white by the hand.

“Taking by the hand” means to take charge of the fragility of the other, to take care, to relieve from pain, to reach out with tenderness offering the precious gift of friendship through the language of proximity: “May the poor always enjoy the friendship of our Sisters; and if they cannot always be helped as their situation requires, oh, then, may a friendly glance, a sympathetic expression on the part of the Sisters help them to forget their hard lot for a few moments”¹³⁷.

The white garments of the children testify to the missionary fertility of the Sisters: through their proclamation, they have become new creatures clothed with Christ.

¹³⁵ SR. T. MARRA, *Congregational Report*, op. cit., p. 5.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁷ *Various Writings*, p. 61.

One of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother is wearing a green dress, a reflection of the land where all poverty finds refuge, and she indicates the way with her right hand. She is the one mandated to guide the way, humbly listening to the Spirit, absorbed in discernment and vigilant in her accompaniment: from the deposition of Mother Frances to this date. We recognize in her every General Superior and through her service of authority, the adherence of every Sister to the Rule and Life of the Brothers and of the Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis of Assisi and to the Constitutions.

In prolonging this dance of nuptial joy, each daughter of the Sorrowful Mother renews her profession and moves, as Sr. Catherine Marie Hanegan, SSM General Superior writes, “with renewed energy and fresh enthusiasm to spread the Gospel and continue our work within the Church, our communities and the world”¹³⁸.

Through the icon, which mirrors the vocation of each one, all can contemplate the beauty of their consecration, repeating in their hearts the solemn words of the formula imprinted between the steps of the two mountains:

“Called by the Spirit to follow Jesus by living the gospel in a radical way, and with a firm resolution to be consecrated to the Triune God, [...] I will seek perfect charity, placing myself in the service of God and of the Church. Within this community, dedicated to apostolic service animated by a contemplative spirit, I will care for those in need, especially the poor; and in my own poverty seek the Lord above all”¹³⁹.

At the top, within a diamond and a triple semicircle as symbols of the glory of God, stands the Christ, Lord and Master, who is “the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history”¹⁴⁰. He is clothed in *chiton*, a purple-red robe lined with pure gold, and the

¹³⁸ SR. C. M. HANEGAN, *Reflection for Pentecost 2019*.

¹³⁹ CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF THE SORROWFUL MOTHER, *Constitutions. The way of our life*, 1992, n° 74.

¹⁴⁰ ECUMENICAL COUNCIL VATICAN II, Past. Cost. *Gaudium et Spes*, 10.

imation, a blue mantle that enhances His transcendence. The golden nimbus, symbol of the divine light, is marked by a patent cross, adorned with the trigram of the name of God «O ΩN» (I am the Existing).

The left hand of the glorious Christ nearly forms a basket that gathers an abundance of fragrant bread. It is the same bread that the Sisters gathered in the baskets and lovingly broke for the poor, pouring into that gesture which they repeat as needed the delicacy of the “provident mothers”¹⁴¹ as Mother Frances asked.

These loaves now consecrated by Christ the eternal Priest are “the Body of the Lord”¹⁴² whom Mother Frances adored to the point of consuming herself, exhorting with words and example to do the same: “to be consumed in glowing love for the sacramental God”¹⁴³. With certainty, between faith and intuition, it is through our life that “Christ will speak to the world again and give himself as nourishment to men”¹⁴⁴.

With a right hand blessing and His eyes turned to the Father, Christ renews His prayer exulting in the Holy Spirit: “I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike” (Lc 10,21).

While He offers in the bread the fruits of “this undertaking destined to form a new leaven for the Church of God”¹⁴⁵, He blesses what has been, what is and what will be: God’s “designs in my regard go farther”¹⁴⁶, says the icon, extending His blessing hand to Mother Frances who, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, founded the

¹⁴¹ *Various Writings*, p. 59.

¹⁴² *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 118.

¹⁴³ *Various Writings*, p.67.

¹⁴⁴ P. EVDOKÌMOV, *op. cit.*, p.173.

¹⁴⁵ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 231. 56

¹⁴⁶ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p. 217.

Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother who followed her with creative fidelity. The blessing extends on those who will feel attracted by her ideal of life in the future: new vocations for renewed hope! Yes, they too are in the icon, represented by the little girl who shyly stretches her hands towards Mother Frances, standing beside her silently and attentively. Her childlike face expresses the joy of the Gospel, renewed and communicated each time the desire to follow Christ and walk along his ways grows and matures in the heart, with intimate certainty: “God led me”¹⁴⁷ and He “asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us”¹⁴⁸.

This sign of blessing amid the loaves being offered also includes the *SSM Movement*, following Christ by remaining in the world as leaven hidden among the people. Committed to living and spreading the message of the Gospel, sharing the values, charism and ministries of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, they acknowledge to be “branded by this mission”¹⁴⁹.

“For this – Mother Frances reminds us – we need free souls who are glad to find others whose sole ambition is that the Lord may be worthily served”¹⁵⁰. May this freedom trustingly guarded in the heart encourage holy desires and firm good intentions, walking on the noble paths of sacrifice and gratuity.

“Each Sister – Mother Frances wrote one day – had first to be born in my heart”¹⁵¹. And she added: “amid sorrow and renunciation”. May the Lord allow us to bring yet more fertility to His pain that generates life.

¹⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 246.

¹⁴⁸ POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium* 283.

¹⁴⁹ *Ivi*, 273

¹⁵⁰ *Letters to F. Jordan*, p 232.

¹⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 242.

APPENDIX

