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THE SHRINE OF RENUNCIATION
Pastoral Letter

1. Francis' charism, together with that of Clare, is a privilege of our particular Church, forming a community that the whole world looks at. The many shrines give Assisi a unique appearance. The "*seraphica civitas*" – which is even on the city's banner – is like an open-air shrine.

With the aim of offering a further contribution to this unique calling of Assisi, I thought it appropriate to give greater emphasis to another spiritual center, whose nucleus is at the Bishop's Residence and the nearby church connected to it, Saint Mary Major, the ancient cathedral of Assisi.

It is in this area – wherever the incident actually took place – that eight centuries ago the young Francis, in the trial against his father, Pietro di Bernardone, before Bishop Guido dramatically stripped himself of everything, to be totally for God and his fellow man. We usually remember this gesture as Francis' "renunciation".

2. I was encouraged to focus on this "icon" by the visit of Pope Francis on October 4, 2013, at which time he also visited the Room of Renunciation. It was a historical date for the rediscovery of this unique event in the life of our Saint.

In the traditional visits to the Franciscan places in our city, it has been left more or less on the margins, even though a beautiful fresco in the Giotto cycle in the Upper Basilica of St. Francis is dedicated to it, and in spite of the numerous biographical and film re-enactments. Until a few years ago the room in the Bishop's Residence in which we usually re-live this event was called by an inappropriate, actually misleading name: the Room of Enthronement, referring to a canopy that decorated it. The new naming is part of the discoveries which have taken place in recent years. There is also a painting of the event attributed to Cesare Sermei.

Many pilgrims already come to the Room of Renunciation and many stop at Saint Mary Major. This ancient church – which also appears rather "stripped" – offers a natural place of prayer, going from the re-enactment of what happened eight centuries ago to meditating on what it says to us today, to whomever wants to follow Christ, as Francis did.

I therefore wanted to assign the specific function to it as the Shrine of Renunciation. I entrust the care of this additional "pearl" of the spiritual landscape of Assisi to the care of the Seraphic Province of the Friars Minor Capuchins, who have already been involved in serving the parish.

An inspired gesture

3. To grasp the meaning of Francis' renunciation, let's start with that im-

pressive and dramatic moment recounted by Thomas of Celano: “When he was in front of the bishop, he neither delayed nor hesitated, but immediately took off and threw down all his clothes and returned them to his father. He did not even keep his trousers on, and he returned them to his father. He was completely stripped bare before everyone. The bishop, observing his frame of mind and admiring his fervor and determination, got up and, gathering him in his own arms, covered him with the mantle he was wearing. He clearly understood that this was prompted by God and he knew that the action of the man of God, which he had personally observed, contained a mystery. After this he became his helper. Cherishing and comforting him, he embraced him in the depths of charity”¹.

Leaving the logistic and chronological details for historians to specify as much as is possible, I will try to offer some ideas that may be inspiring for the new shrine in its task of evangelization.

Original Nakedness

4. Francis came to the Bishop’s court driven by the wrath of his father. His journey of faith was already well delineated, both in contemplative prayer, in which he received the mandate from the Crucifix of San Damiano “Francis, go rebuild my house which, as you see, is all being destroyed”², as well as in his acts of mercy towards the lepers: it is precisely the encounter with them that he refers to in his *Testament*, recognizing this as the beginning of his “penance”³.

In his new way of life, which cut short decades of vanity, he was committed to donating his wealth to rebuild churches and to help the poor. An inner impulse led him to do this in a radical way. Give everything! But the objection of his father was not without reason: the goods at his disposal were, in fact, paternal assets. When the bishop asked him to return the money to his father, he spontaneously went beyond: returning not only the money but also his clothes, remaining naked: a nakedness that he would repeat in the last moments of his life. In fact, after spending time at the Bishop’s residence while he was ill, and then going down to the Portiuncula to meet “sister death”, he may have remembered the gesture of his youth, saying to his brothers: “when you see I have come to my end put me out naked on the ground”⁴.

The nakedness of Francis reminds us of Eden. It is not just penance and renunciation. It is a longing for original purity. It speaks something of the beauty planted by God in the body of man and woman before innocence was disordered by sin. It is nudity that is projected towards the splendor of the risen body, when the power of Christ will give new life to our mortal bodies. It is in nudity that we find the taste of truth and beauty, simplicity and sobriety, the serene awareness of our own creatureliness. Francis incarnates the wisdom of Job: “Naked I came forth from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I go back again” (Job 1:21).

Christ naked and the breath of the Spirit

5. But there is more. The nakedness that Francis offered has a clear model: Jesus crucified. The events that he had experienced before the trial in the Bishop's house had been a true passion. Hounded by his father, he hid for a month in an underground shelter at San Damiano, and then decided to come out, facing the scorn of the city and his unforgiving father, who did not hesitate to imprison him at home⁵. Stripping before the Bishop was the culmination of this journey of conforming to Christ. A scandalous gesture to human wisdom, but understandable in view of the "sapientia crucis" (cf. 1Cor 2:1-2) revealed on Golgotha, which was in fact already present in the very incarnation of the Word of God. In fact, God himself "stripped", when the eternal Son took on our mortal body: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness (Phil. 2:7). Bonaventure says: "Thus the servant of the Most High King was left naked that he might follow his naked crucified Lord, whom he loved"⁶. He did not keep the encounter with the naked Christ to himself, but moved out to serve those who were most excluded at that time, those afflicted with leprosy. A discourse that challenges us: "Just as the Church is called to be the "tunic of Christ" and to clothe her Lord once more, so She is committed to solidarity with the naked of the world, to help them recover the dignity of which they have been stripped. Jesus' words, "I was naked and you clothed me" (Mt. 25:36)"⁷.

6. In the stripping episode, one word is decisive: "Until now I have called you father here on earth, but now I can say without reservation, Our Father who art in heaven"⁸.

Pietro di Bernardone has the gloomy air of a defeated and angry father. His place is taken by the tenderness of the Heavenly Father. For Francis the Our Father was no longer a "formula", but became the cornerstone of his existence. In the magnificent fresco of Giotto his arms are raised to heaven, drawn by the hand of the Father: a mystical event in the heart of the Trinity. In some way, Francis takes on Christ's features. Abba flows from his lips impelled from the depths of his heart by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). Yes, the Spirit of God, as at Pentecost, acts in the words and gestures of Francis. But this can also be seen in Guido's discernment: "The bishop, recognizing and admiring such intense fervor in the man of God, immediately stood up and in tears drew him into his arms, covering him with the mantle that he was wearing"⁹. A perfect trinitarian background. Exemplary ecclesial relations. Rarely in the history of the Church have institution and charism been brought together so closely, Francis and Guido together are "accomplices of the Spirit"¹⁰.

The fatherhood of the bishop and the Church–mother

7. Was it the first time that the two of them faced one another? I have reason to believe that Francis had already met with Guido. The *Legend of the Three Companions* states that, during the time of his interior struggle, “he did not seek counsel from anyone, except from God alone, and, periodically, from the bishop of Assisi”¹¹. Then, according to the same story, Francis went into a room to take off all his clothes¹². How could he be so at home without prior visits to the Bishop’s house? The same readiness of the bishop to welcome him, despite the embarrassing gesture of stripping naked, is better explained if Guido already knew him and esteemed him. On the other hand, with Pietro di Bernardone’s decision to bring his son to public trial, it was Francis who rejected the magistrate court, preferring the ecclesiastical judge given his status as a consecrated person¹³. Wouldn’t he also have preferred the Bishop because he felt he was on his side? If that is the case – it is the task of historians to verify this – it seems beautiful to me to see that this dramatic gesture, which was, in some way, the official declaration of his new life – almost a religious profession *sui generis* – Francis came to this through an inner process that involved the bishop himself, in his role as guide. In this light, the new sanctuary is emerging as a privileged place to invoke the grace of discernment. It is an ideal environment for young people who are searching for God.

8. The paternal figure, and we could also say maternal, of the bishop, introduces us to another dimension: the ecclesial perspective. In the history of the evangelical movements of his time, Francis stands out for never having put the love Christ in tension with love for the Church. And this is not because the limitations that marked the life of the Church or her ministers were not known to him. But in the *Rule*, as in the *Testament*, it is unconditional: the utmost respect must be given to the ministers of the Church, even the less exemplary. It makes me suppose that, in this profound conviction, he had not missed the influence of that special relationship with Bishop Guido. Giotto’s fresco focuses on the moment when the bishop covers him with his mantle, while Francis looks up to heaven. In this gesture there is something baptismal. Also in the fresco in the Room of Renunciation, there is a maternal outpouring: the bishop stretches out his arms to the young man who abandons himself to him as a son: a beautiful expression of Mother Church. The icon of renunciation thus displays two inseparable dimensions of the spirituality of Francis: evangelical radicalism and ecclesial passion.

9. His father goes away with a meager haul of goods, which no longer have any value to Francis. A family broken apart. It is sad that Francis’ family leaves so sorely tried from such an event of grace. Let it be clear: the family is a value of the

first order. A precise commandment of God governs the relationship between parents and children: “Honor your father and mother”. Francis did not reject the love relationship with his father, but rather he rejected the idol that ensnared him, the god of money, with its logic of power and glory, which Pietro was bent on having.

At the same time, going beyond earthly affections, Francis shows just how the gospel is able to generate a new type of family. “Who are my mother and my brothers? [...] whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mrk 3:33-35). The son of Pietro di Bernardone is now disowned and abandoned by his natural family. But a spiritual family will soon flourish around him. Bernard, Peter, Sylvester, Giles, – the first companions from Assisi – and then others. God’s response – almost a wedding gift – for his renunciation. The Franciscan fraternity is born, whose ideal will be to live “according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel”¹⁴. It is significant that, in the Room of Renunciation, the gift of the Portiuncula from the Benedictines to Francis is depicted on the wall parallel to that of the fresco of renunciation. An ideal thread connects the Room of Renunciation and the Portiuncula: a place of contemplation and at the same time, a workshop of fraternity. It is not by chance that our diocesan project for renewing parishes with small groupings – the *Mary Communities of Gospel Families* –, rooted in the experience of Jesus and the early Christian community, has the Portiuncula as its own place of inspiration.

Alternative economy

10. Francis’ gesture can also be read from a rather unusual point of view: that of economy. At first glance it seems to be an anti-economic gesture: is it not such a waste of money? Looking closer, it is a prophecy of an alternative economy, the driving force of which is not self-interest, but rather, the ethics of gratuitousness, fraternity, and solidarity. This does not exclude giving attention to oneself, but it keeps one from closing in on oneself. It does not take away the joy of the initiative and what is gained, but exalts the ability to give. The more one is able to strip oneself, the more one is able to invest not only for himself/herself but also for others. The result is greater joy for everyone. This perspective urgently needs to be rediscovered, in a world ruled by an economy that “kills” to the benefit of a few and to the detriment of a huge mass of human beings¹⁵.

Pope Francis insisted on this social aspect of “renunciation” during his visit on October 4, 2013. Before him, in the Room of Renunciation, were poor and unemployed people. «This is a good occasion to invite the Church to strip itself. [...] “Of what must the Church divest herself?” Today she must strip herself of a very grave danger, which threatens every person in the Church, everyone: the danger of worldliness. [...] Many of you have been stripped by this callous world that offers no work, no help. To this world it doesn’t matter if many families have nothing to

eat, do not have the dignity of bringing bread home; it doesn't matter that many people are forced to flee slavery, hunger and flee in search of freedom. How many times and with what pain do we see them meet death, like yesterday in Lampedusa: today is a day of tears! The spirit of the world causes these things. It is unthinkable that a Christian – a true Christian – be it a priest, a sister, a bishop, a cardinal, or a pope would want to go down this path of worldliness, which is a homicidal attitude. Spiritual worldliness kills! It kills the soul! It kills the person! It kills the Church!»¹⁶.

Freedom for mission

11. After the renunciation, Francis left the Bishop's Residence heading to the city of Gubbio, where, "he moved to the lepers and stayed with them. For God's sake he served all of them with great love"¹⁷. A work of the sculptor Fiorenzo Bacci portrays him with poor clothes, wrinkled by the wind on his almost naked body, while he departs showing the way and leaving footprints that we are invited to follow. Isn't it time to accept the invitation? The Church is missionary. But how heavy are the steps of the mission, if we carry the weight of possessions and power on our shoulders! We need to discover – as Francis did – the teachings of Jesus: "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" (Mt. 10:9-10). Will we finally be able to regain the momentum of the first evangelization? The simplicity of bare hands, joyous hearts, of words spoken with our lives?

Prelude to the Canticle

12. The renunciation is a premise – almost a distant prelude – to the *Canticle of Brother Sun*. A paschal canticle that welled up in the splendid nature of San Damiano, nourished by the love and prayer of Clare: almost a balance sheet – all in credit – of a life of dispossession. Renouncing everything, Francis receives everything. Everything becomes his family, from brother sun to sister moon, from brother fire to sister water. A world in harmony, everything received as a gift from God. And where harmony gets stuck, due to freedom poorly used, the canticle speaks of reconciliation. "*Laudato si', mi Signore, per quelli ke perdonano per lo tuo amore...*" (Praised be to thee, my Lord, for those who pardon out of love...). Francis added these words to the song and sung them in the cloister of the Bishop's Residence to reconcile the Bishop and the Mayor of Assisi - and he succeeded! The Shrine of Renunciation can also be seen as a shrine of reconciliation: a place to abandon pride and obstinacy that undermine peace, which can never be built if each person does not learn to "strip" himself/herself.

A Mother's gaze

13. The church at the shrine will maintain the original dedication to the Mother of God: St. Mary Major. The Marian connotation, far from interfering with the message of the Shrine, deepens it. Before Francis, in fact, the spirituality of renunciation refers to the mystery of Jesus, and Mary participates in it with all the strength of her “fiat”: the “yes” of the Annunciation and of Calvary. She lived completely stripped of herself, a woman of silence and listening, transparency of Christ. This Marian feature of dispossession did not elude Francis, as his biographer notes that he “read the Son of our Poor Lady in every poor person.

As she held Him naked in her hands so he carried Him naked in his heart”¹⁸. I entrust this new sanctuary to the “Virgin made Church”¹⁹, to her maternal care, and I invoke on everyone - especially for those who visit it and for those who will carry out their ministry - the greatest blessings.

Domenico, *Bishop*

Assisi, 25 December 2016, *Christmas*

¹ Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, VI, n.15.

² Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, VI, n.10.

³ *The Testament*, n. 1.

⁴ *Remembrance of Desire of a Soul*, Second Book, CLXIII, 217.

⁵ Cf. *First Life*, V.

⁶ St. Bonaventure, *The Major Legend*, ch.2, n. 4.

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et misera*, 19.

⁸ *Major Legend*, ch. 2, n. 4.

⁹ *Ivi*.

¹⁰ Cf. Sorrentino, *Accomplices of the Spirit. The Room of Renunciation. Francis and Bishop Guido*. 2013 (1st ed 2009).

¹¹ *Legend of the Three Companions*, ch.3, n. 10.

¹² *Legend of the Three Companions*, ch.6, n. 20.

¹³ *Legend of the Three Companions*, ch.6, n. 19

¹⁴ *Testament*, n. 14.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) 52-60.

¹⁶ Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano* 5 October 2013.

¹⁷ *First Life*, VII, n. 17.

¹⁸ *Remembrance of Desire of a Soul*, Second Book, LI, n.83.

¹⁹ *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Book I, n.1

