

## LIVING FRATERNITY

**Theme: « Learning from Mary to be surprised by God »**

In the month of September, we are proposing a reflection on the text of the homily from Pope Francis, presented on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2013, for the anniversary of Fatima and the Year of Faith. It is an invitation to reflect on three realities: *God surprises us*, *God asks us to be faithful* and *God is our strength*.

**Recall:** A spirit of prayer heralds a good encounter, and a good preparation promotes a communal experience. At the meeting, having a copy of the Holy Scriptures, the Rule and the General Constitutions, will provide clarity and depth for our edification and experience.

*Good preparation – Good reflection*

### SEPTEMBER 2018 MONTHLY MEETING

#### Introduction

Today we consider one of the marvellous things which the Lord has done: Mary! A lowly and weak creature like ourselves, she was chosen to be the Mother of God, the Mother of her Creator. Considering Mary in the light of the readings we have just heard, I would like to reflect with you on three things: first, *God surprises us*, second, *God asks us to be faithful*, and third, *God is our strength*.

#### God surprises us

First: God surprises us. The story of Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, is remarkable. In order to be healed of leprosy, he turns to the prophet of God, Elisha, who does not perform magic or demand anything unusual of him, but asks him simply to trust in God and to wash in the waters of the river. Not, however, in one of the great rivers of Damascus, but in the little stream of the Jordan. Naaman is left surprised, even taken aback. What kind of God is this who asks for something so simple? He wants to turn back, but then he goes ahead, he immerses himself in the Jordan and is immediately healed (cf. 2 Kg 5:1-4). There it is: God surprises us. It is precisely in poverty, in weakness and in humility that he reveals himself and grants us his love, which saves us, heals us and gives us strength. He asks us only to obey his word and to trust in him.

**This was the experience of the Virgin Mary.** At the message of the angel, she does not hide her surprise. It is the astonishment of realizing that God, to become man, had chosen her, a simple maid of Nazareth. Not someone who lived in a palace amid power and riches, or one who had done extraordinary things, but simply someone who was open to God and put her trust in him, even without understanding everything: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with

me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). That was her answer. God constantly surprises us, he bursts our categories, he wreaks havoc with our plans. And he tells us: Trust me, do not be afraid, let yourself be surprised, leave yourself behind and follow me!

Today let us all ask ourselves whether we are afraid of what God might ask, or of what he does ask. Do I let myself be surprised by God, as Mary was, or do I remain caught up in my own safety zone: in forms of material, intellectual or ideological security, taking refuge in my own projects and plans? Do I truly let God into my life? How do I answer him?

### **Reflection and sharing:**

When the reading is finished, take time to review and share your thoughts on the questions presented in the last paragraph above. Then, continue the reading.

### **God asks us to be faithful**

In the passage from Saint Paul which we have heard, the Apostle tells his disciple Timothy: Remember Jesus Christ; if we persevere with him, we will also reign with him (cf. 2 Tim 2:8-13). This is the second thing: to remember Christ always – to be mindful of Jesus Christ – and thus to persevere in faith. God surprises us with his love, but he demands that we be faithful in following him. We can be unfaithful, but he cannot: he is “the faithful one” and he demands of us that same fidelity. Think of all the times when we were excited about something or other, some initiative, some task, but afterwards, at the first sign of difficulty, we threw in the towel. Sadly, this also happens in the case of fundamental decisions, such as marriage. It is the difficulty of remaining steadfast, faithful to decisions we have made and to commitments we have made. Often it is easy enough to say “yes”, but then we fail to repeat this “yes” each and every day. We fail to be faithful.

Mary said her “yes” to God: a “yes” which threw her simple life in Nazareth into turmoil, and not only once. Any number of times she had to utter a heartfelt “yes” at moments of joy and sorrow, culminating in the “yes” she spoke at the foot of the Cross. Here today there are many mothers present; think of the full extent of Mary’s faithfulness to God: seeing her only Son hanging on the Cross. The faithful woman, still standing, utterly heartbroken, yet faithful and strong.

And I ask myself: Am I a Christian by fits and starts, or am I a Christian full-time? Our culture of the ephemeral, the relative, also takes its toll on the way we live our faith. God asks us to be faithful to him, daily, in our everyday life. He goes on to say that, even if we are sometimes unfaithful to him, he remains faithful. In his mercy, he never tires of stretching out his hand to lift us up, to encourage us to continue our journey, to come back and tell him of our weakness, so that he can grant us his strength. This is the real journey: to walk with the Lord always, even at moments of weakness, even in our sins. Never to prefer a makeshift path of our own. That kills us. Faith is ultimate fidelity, like that of Mary.

## **Reflection and Sharing:**

Take time to share your thoughts on the question presented at the beginning of preceding paragraph. (About 15 minutes), then continue the reading,

## **God is our strength**

The last thing: God is our strength. I think of the ten lepers in the Gospel who were healed by Jesus. They approach him and, keeping their distance, they call out: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (Luke 17:13). They are sick, they need love and strength, and they are looking for someone to heal them. Jesus responds by freeing them from their disease. Strikingly, however, only one of them comes back, praising God and thanking him in a loud voice. Jesus notes this: ten asked to be healed and only one returned to praise God in a loud voice and to acknowledge that he is our strength. Knowing how to give thanks, to give praise for everything that the Lord has done for us.

Take Mary. After the Annunciation, her first act is one of charity towards her elderly kinswoman Elizabeth. Her first words are: “My soul magnifies the Lord”, in other words, a song of praise and thanksgiving to God not only for what he did for her, but for what he had done throughout the history of salvation. Everything is his gift. If we can realize that everything is God’s gift, how happy will our hearts be! Everything is his gift. He is our strength! Saying “thank you” is such an easy thing, and yet so hard!

How often do we say “thank you” to one another in our families? These are essential words for our life in common. “Sorry”, “excuse me”, “thank you”. If families can say these three things, they will be fine. “Sorry”, “excuse me”, “thank you”. How often do we say “thank you” in our families? How often do we say “thank you” to those who help us, those close to us, those at our side throughout life? All too often we take everything for granted! This also happens with God. It is easy to approach the Lord to ask for something, but to go and thank him: “Well, I don’t need to”.

## **Reflection and Sharing:**

Share your thoughts on the last paragraph which presents us with many interesting questions. (About 15 minutes)

## **Biblical Reflection:**

Read the Gospel of Sunday or the Gospel of the day.

Share your thoughts on this gospel, using the following questions:

1. To whom does it speak? What does it teach us?
2. How does it reach us personally?
3. Is it a message of hope? Another kind of message? How and why?

## **Life-Objective**

During the month of September, as we return to our regular meetings, let us thank God and take time to revive our fidelity to our Franciscan vocation ...

## **Events and information from the Church and the Order**

Recall the local and regional meetings and activities.

**End of the meeting:** (song or prayer chosen by the fraternity)

Suggestion: together pray the following prayer.

*A translation of the text spoken by Pope Francis in front of the original statue of Our Lady of Fatima.*

*Blessed Virgin Mary of Fatima, with renewed gratitude for your motherly presence we join in the voice of all generations that call you blessed.*

*We celebrate in you the great works of God, who never tires of lowering himself in mercy over humanity, afflicted by evil and wounded by sin, to heal and to save it.*

*Accept with the benevolence of a Mother this act of entrustment that we make in faith today, before this your image, beloved to us. We are certain that each one of us is precious in your eyes and that nothing in our hearts has estranged you.*

*May that we allow your sweet gaze to reach us and the perpetual warmth of your smile.*

*Guard our life with your embrace: bless and strengthen every desire for good; give new life and nourishment to faith; sustain and enlighten hope; awaken and animate charity; guide us all on the path to holiness.*

*Teach us your own special love for the little and the poor, for the excluded and the suffering, for sinners and the wounded of heart: gather all people under your protection and give us all to your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus.*

*Amen.*