

**Wednesday 8th novembre 2017**

**Homily**

Fr. Alfred Parambakathu OFM Conv

Dear brothers and sisters,

We are in Subiaco, where the memories of Saints Benedict, Scholastica and Francis of Assisi are deeply imprinted. I would like to reflect on the liturgical readings of today in connection with the lives of Saints Benedict and Francis of Assisi in Subiaco. Benedict, member of a Roman noble family in Norcia, comes to Rome at the age of twenty to proceed his studies. But was deluded by the busy life of the city with all its sinfulness and thus decided to leave everything. Leaving behind all the glories of a noble man, he comes to Subiaco and lives in a cave, the so called Sacro Speco, for three years, sustained only by scraps of food lowered in a basket by a monk called Romanus. He frequently fought temptation, famously casting himself naked into thorn bushes to combat lust. It is from here that the Benedictine monastic life began. The early versions of the Rule of Benedict also were written here. Now we might ask, but what do us, secular Franciscans, have to do with St. Benedict.

The answer is, well, we are in Subiaco, where the tradition tells that Francis had come to visit the Sacro Speco. The tangible sign of his visit can be seen in the Chapel of St. Gregory in the form of a beautiful fresco. Historians say that this image of Francis is his first ever portrait. The painting is labeled *Fr. Franciscus* and the saint is shown without the stigmata or a halo, indicating it was painted during his lifetime, before 1224. Let us come to the life of Francis: an young man who left everything to follow the voice of Christ; who lived in a cave for a while and then at San Damiano, serving the lepers; who fought the temptations of flesh by rolling among the thorny roses.

Why did these two saints do all these things? Were they afraid of human affections? Did they hate the world? The answer for all these questions can be found in the readings of today. In his letter to the Romans St. Paul says that all the commandments are summarized in one commandment, that of love. He categorically affirms that love is the fulfillment of the law. For a disciple of Christ, which is the love that must permeate everything else? It is nothing other than the love for the Master. Jesus places before us three conditions in order to follow him; and after each conditions he categorically says, "he cannot be my disciple". The conditions are: necessity to put aside family affections to follow Jesus (v.26); carry one's own cross and follow him (v.27); renounce earthly goods (v.33). These are the pre-requisites to follow Jesus. It seems that Jesus is very radical and exigent, and yes he really is.

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters..." gives the sense that we have to hate our dear ones in order to follow Jesus! In the biblical language the verb "hate" often has the meaning "love less", "amare meno". The evangelist Mathew sweetens this usage by saying, "Who loves his father or mother more than me". So the meaning is to love our dear ones less than Jesus. It does not mean to renounce our spontaneous affections towards our dear ones, but a conscious and fundamental option for the Kingdom of God.

The normal life of a secular Franciscan offers many challenges and difficulties, which constitutes the daily cross. When one carries it with the same patience and humility of Jesus, makes him a true follower of Christ. Regarding the renunciation of earthly goods, the evangelist uses the present tense; “whoever of you does not forsake all that he has”. Here Jesus refers to the permanent renunciation of all the earthly possessions to follow Him, not just the initial desire. It has to be a life-long commitment.

So Jesus is demanding a radical way of life from his followers; and it becomes clear why saints like Benedict and Francis of Assisi opted for a seemingly rigid and hard life. They took seriously the Word of God. Following Jesus was not one among the options of life; was the only option and they lived it fully. As we are gathered at Subiaco, where the memories of these great saints are alive, it is an invitation for us to imitate them. Let Jesus be our first and only love.