

**Homily of Bishop Gregory J. Hartmayer, OFM Conv.**  
(Given on the Solemnity of St. Francis of Assisi, October 4, 2018 – 8:30AM Mass;  
at St. Philip Benizi Catholic Church, Jonesboro, GA)

(Sirach 50: 1, 3-4, 6-7) (Galatians 6: 14-18) (Matthew 11: 25-30)

St. Francis of Assisi has certainly had an effect on the world. Seven hundred ninety two (792) years have passed since the death of St. Francis. It seems that with each passing year, St. Francis has become more and more popular.

Born in the year 1181 in the small town of Assisi in North Central Italy, Francis has become a favorite saint to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Francis of Assisi has inspired men and women for the past 800 years. What is it about St. Francis that is so appealing? Is it his simple life-style, his spirituality, his love of all creation, his enthusiasm for life, his deep devotion of the crucified Christ? I am sure that each of us is attracted to St. Francis because of any one of these and other characteristics of Francis.

We know that Francis was born into a wealthy family. We know that he renounced his family fortune and embraced a life of simplicity and poverty. It was from the Church of San Damiano (St. Damian) that the corpus on the crucifix spoke to Francis and told him to rebuild the church, and, in the harshest of weather, Francis began to lift the stones to rebuild the various churches which were in need of repair. People who knew him and his family must have thought that Francis had lost his mind.

Even under these conditions, Francis attracted other young men to follow him and help rebuild the churches in Assisi, and live a strict understanding of the Gospel. It wasn't long before hundreds of men began to join this community, committed to simplicity and prayerful service to the Church.

It was during that time of growth that Francis began to understand the deeper meaning of what Christ really wanted him to do. Jesus wanted Francis and his followers to rebuild the Church from within. Francis was being called to be a Missionary disciple, imitate the values of the Gospel, and live the evangelical counsels of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.

Francis' first Rule of Life for his followers was a collection of texts from the Gospels. He had no idea what it took to found a Religious Order, but eventually, with the approval of Pope Innocent III, a new Religious Order was formed. Francis was torn between a life devoted entirely to prayer, and a life of active preaching of the Good News. He decided in favor of the latter, but always turned to solitude when he could.

During the last years of his relatively short life, Francis was half blind and seriously ill. Two years before his death, while in deep prayer on Mt. Alverna, Francis received the stigmata – the real and painful wounds of Christ – in his hands, feet and side. At the age of forty-four, in the last hours of his life, he asked the friars to place him naked on the ground so that he would literally leave this world in the same way in which he was born into it.

So much could be said about St. Francis and the many contributions of the Franciscan Order to the traditions of the Church, but perhaps, what most people find both attractive and mysterious about the Franciscan Order is the great spirit of "fraternity". Each Religious Order has a certain charism that sets it apart from other Religious Orders, though, to some extent, all the religious communities share the same Gospel values. Usually, one area is more emphasized than another.

While many associate the spirit of poverty or joy with Franciscans, I believe that the *fraternity* of the Franciscans is perhaps its greatest gift to the Church. Jesus came to found a Church – a community – where people of different backgrounds, education, cultures, and languages would share a common faith. The Franciscan Community reflects the model of the Church. Friars and Sisters, and the Secular Franciscans, are people who are attracted to the Franciscan way of life and the Franciscan spirituality because it is centered around the *sacramental life* of the Church.

Community life and fraternity are fundamental in the life of a Franciscan. We are, first and foremost, Friars (brothers). Our Community is primary. Some of us are Priests and some are Brothers, but we are all Friars to one another. Over the past 27 years, you, at St. Philip Benizi Parish, have met a number of Friars from all over the world. You have seen that we come in all shapes and sizes, speaking different languages, coming from different cultures, but our Gospel-based fraternity is what we share in common. We are welcome in Friaries all over the world. We are loyal to one another and we care for one another as brothers.

More than 800 years ago, Francis of Assisi began to repair the Church with a small band of brothers, and today, the followers of Francis and his Rule of Life, form the largest religious community in the world. St. Francis of Assisi continues to influence people from all walks of life and draws them to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Francis reminds us, as he told his friars at the end of his life: *“I have done what was mine to do; now it is time for you to do what is yours to do.”*

I think the message that was given to St. Francis in the Church of San Damiano is given to all baptized – to rebuild the Church from within. Perhaps that commission is needed to be heard in today’s Church and in today’s world more than ever before. I think that it is more than a coincidence that Jorge Bergoglio took the name “Francis” after his election as Pope. Pope Francis continues to challenge the clergy and the lay-faithful to embrace the Joy of the Gospel by our faithful witness and our commitment to live the Christian life we profess.

There is a moral crisis in the Church and in our world. We need to recall and reflect on the teachings and the life of Francis of Assisi; and, as he told his brothers time and again:

*“While we have time, let us do good.”*