

BULLETIN

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OF THE FRIENDS OF
**FATHER
CAFFAREL**



ASSOCIATION OF FRIENDS OF FATHER CAFFAREL
founded on 5 July 2005 to promote the cause for the
canonisation of Father Henri Caffarel

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Contents

- Editorial	3
Mercedes Gómez-Ferrer & Alberto Pérez	
- News from the Friends of Father Caffarel	5
<i>A New Website</i>	
- State of the Cause for Canonisation	6
<i>Venerable Henri Caffarel, a matter of urgency</i> Father Paul-Dominique Marcovits, Roman Vice-Postulator	
- Testimonial of Graces received	8
Francisco Herrera Morillas	
- Archives of Father Caffarel	
<i>Francis, who are you? What do you have to say to us?</i>	
- Prayer the Canonisation of Father Caffarel	24
- Honorary Members	25
- Subscription Renewal Form	27

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In order to renew your subscription for 2026
If you have not already done so*

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registration forms to on the back of your form*



Editorial

**by Mercedes Gómez-Ferrer & Alberto Pérez,
International Responsible Couple for Teams of
Our Lady**

Dear Family of the Association of the Friends of Father Caffarel,

This is our first communication since receiving the news on March 23rd that Father Henri Caffarel has been recognised as Venerable. The Catholic and mainstream international media immediately reported the news, highlighting Father Caffarel's contribution to the Church's reflection on the sacrament of marriage and conjugal spirituality. But what does this mean for us? The recipients of this Bulletin are already convinced of his importance. What we ask of you is to make him known to those for whom he remains unfamiliar, or who might even harbour some reservations.

This led us to think about the figure of Father Henri Caffarel as the founder of a movement, Teams of Our Lady, that unites us all. The fact that he stepped down while still alive—contrary to the usual practice where founders remain at the helm until the end of their lives—prompted us to consider various aspects that help us understand him better.

In 1973, Father Henri Caffarel acknowledged that, at the age of 70 and after 35 years with the Teams—half his life—he needed to step down from its leadership. He insisted that relinquishing his role did not mean abandoning the Movement he held so dear; he withdrew with serenity, following a transition period during which his successors prepared to take over.¹ He left with the firm intention of continuing to pray for the Movement, supporting it much like Moses praying on the mountain with arms outstretched to God, convinced of the irreplaceable importance of prayer.² If the Teams of Our Lady were more than merely a personal

¹ Father Henri Caffarel's talk given to Sector Responsible Couples, 25 march 1973.

² Henri Caffarel, "À Dieu", Editorial in the Teams of Our Lady letter, may-june 1973.

undertaking—if they were truly a work of the Holy Spirit, endowed with a specific charism entrusted to the Church—then they would last. And here we are today, striving to remain faithful to that founding intuition which gifted this charism to the Church—thanks to him and the first couples who gathered around him, eager to deepen and live out the grace of the sacrament of marriage. A charism is a gift from God, inspired by the Spirit in an individual or a group to meet a need and make God’s Love present at a specific moment in history. A gift from God cannot be manipulated. A gift—a present—must be received with gratitude, respected, deepened, and shared. Our Movement has received a charism from the Spirit: to proclaim that conjugal love is a path to God experienced as a couple, and that this path—traversed with God’s grace and alongside other couples—is made easier through mutual support. The growth and expansion of the Teams worldwide stand as powerful proof of the fruitfulness of this charism.

We appreciate the trust Father Henri Caffarel placed in the team he left to lead the movement. We value the wisdom that recognises the need to pass the baton—making way for others to bring renewal, ensuring no one clings indefinitely to a position of responsibility, and understanding that, once our service is complete, we all return to our base Team to continue our life together. This sense of co-responsibility and collegiality lies at the very heart of how our movement operates. He reminded us of the importance of prayer: stepping down from a role of service should not leave one exhausted or weary from having given a part of one’s life to others; rather, it should be done with a commitment to keep praying for one’s successors—asking that the Holy Spirit enlighten their discernment and their service.

Father Henri Caffarel did not act out of his own personal strength, but rather with an awareness of the Presence of God and the Holy Spirit working through him, convinced that all authentic life springs from union with God; that is why he insisted so repeatedly on the power of prayer. Through docility, humility, and openness, Father Henri Caffarel received this gift and successfully passed it on to the Church. If we regard Father Henri Caffarel as a prophet of marriage, it is because he led us into communion with God—never because he sought the limelight for himself. A true prophet turns hearts back to the Father. We wish to give thanks for his founding vision, the authenticity of his message, the trust he

placed in each of us, his constant prayer for everyone, and the lessons these attitudes offer for our own team life. Thank you for your continued intercession on behalf of Teams of Our Lady.

With warm affection and in communion of prayer.

Mercedes Gómez-Ferrer & Alberto Pérez
International Responsible Couple, Teams of Our Lady,
Valencia, June 19, 2026



News from the Association Friends of Father Caffarel *A New Website*

A new version of the website for the Association of the Friends of Father Caffarel is currently being completed.

Still available in five languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese, English, and Italian), the site aims to better showcase the work and writings of Father Henri Caffarel.

The writings are organised around seven themes of his thinking: contemplative prayer, the Virgin Mary, the sacrament of marriage, conjugal spirituality, widowhood, the priest and the couple, and the couple's mission.

Once the work is finalised, the site will offer a collection of Father Henri Caffarel's digitalised texts in all five languages, as well as videos via the Friends of Father Caffarel YouTube channel.

At a time when a decisive milestone has been reached with the recognition of Henri Caffarel's heroic virtues and the granting of the title "Venerable," the website remains a tool serving the cause for canonisation and a link between all those involved in the cause—particularly the Association's representatives around the world.

The Friends of Father Caffarel



State of the Cause for Canonisation of Father Henri Caffarel

**by Father Paul-Dominique Marcovits, o.p.
Roman Vice-Postulator**

Venerable Henri Caffarel, a matter of urgency

It all started in 2006, ten years after his death, with the opening of the cause for canonisation by the Archbishop of Paris. Everyone got to work, starting with the diocesan inquiry: collating the archives, listening to the many witnesses to his life. The historical commission wrote a detailed life, year by year, and the theological commission examined his numerous writings to be sure of his faithfulness to the Church's doctrine: all this resulted in five boxes, containing the 5,500 page file, that was taken to Rome. The Dicastery for the Causes of Saints declared the inquiry in conformity with the norms of the Church.

Then we are in 2015. The *Positio*, a 900-page text written based on the diocesan inquiry, laid out Father Caffarel's life, teeming with works in the service of the Lord and his Church, and his heroic practice of virtues. It was deposited in the Dicastery in June 2022. On March 23, 2026, Pope Leo XIV signed the decree declaring the Servant of God Henri Caffarel Venerable. End of the first chapter. The Church has done its work on this earth! It is up to God to approve it!

Today, the second chapter begins, that of God's signature, a miracle. The miracle – a physical, immediate, definitive healing unexplainable by science, through the intercession of Father Caffarel – is the seal of God confirming the desire of the Church to proclaim him blessed.

What goal do we want to achieve? The objective of Teams of Our Lady is to advance, through the sacrament of marriage, on the path to holiness: human love, experienced by each couple, is inhabited by the love of God. The grace of marriage gradually purifies, pacifies, brings to fruition human love and opens each couple

to others, to the children that God gives them, to other couples, to the world. Mutual assistance within Teams stimulates us to achieve this.

As priests and couples, we have received the vocation of love. We are holding a treasure in our hands: we cannot selfishly keep for ourselves Father Caffarel's luminous message on marriage and prayer. The goal of his beatification is therefore this: that as many men and women as possible discover, through him, the love of God and His presence at the heart of human love. Father Henri Caffarel has accomplished his mission on earth, we are now his messengers.

It is a matter of urgency. Pray, pray, pray! Asking God for a miracle is asking God to make His love known through the person of his servant, Father Caffarel. We have no doubt that the miracle will come. Already, many people have received graces through his intercession and with this momentum, God will respond to his children, who never stop insisting!

It is a matter of urgency. Our mission is essential: that those who love each other continue discovering the greatness of the sacrament of marriage, the joy of loving, all born by the eternal love of God.

Father Paul-Dominique Marcovits, o.p.
Roman Vice-Postulator



Through the Intercession of Father Caffarel

Testimonial of Graces received

We continue this new section of the Bulletin with this testimonial sent to us by our friends, Francisco and his wife, from Spain. Please do not hesitate to send us your own accounts of graces received through the intercession of Father Caffarel.

My name is Francisco Herrera Morillas. My wife and I have been members of Teams of Our Lady since 2009, the year we joined the Jerez 47 Team. I would like to share with you my personal testimonial of a grace received through the intercession of Father Henri Caffarel.

In December 2023, I became seriously ill and was diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic colon cancer, which carried a poor short-term prognosis. From the very beginning, the married couples in my Team and in other Teams, as well as the Intercessors group, entrusted me to the intercession of Father Henri Caffarel, praying steadfastly for his canonisation throughout this period.

As I was not a candidate for surgery, my oncologist proposed chemotherapy to observe how the tumor would respond. A very favorable, surprising, and unusual response to the treatment was observed from the start. In December 2024, my doctor informed me that the metastatic tumor had shrunk enough to allow for surgery. After two operations (this past February and June), and around thirty cycles of chemotherapy, as well as the usual medical check-ups, my oncologist announced that I was apparently in complete remission and no longer required treatment.

I am convinced that the intercession of Father Henri Caffarel played a decisive role in my current situation, which encourages me to share my testimonial in the hope that it may prove useful.

I remain at your service and greet you in the peace of the Risen Christ.

Francisco Herrera Morillas



Treasures of the Association

Archives of Father Caffarel

**Brochure of Teams of Our Lady, 1976,
pages 47 to 67.**

Francis, who are you? What do you have to say to us?

Hereafter is a lecture given in Assisi by Father Henri Caffarel during the Teams of Our Lady pilgrimage there in 1976.

In January 2026, the jubilee year marking the 800th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi—which occurred on October 4, 1226—was inaugurated.

First, I must clear up a possible misunderstanding. One of you wrote to me, "We are surprised by your intention to speak to us about Francis of Assisi; does this not signal a sense of disappointment or disillusionment on your part regarding marriage and the Teams of Our Lady movement?" I wish to state emphatically that this is not the case. My choice of this subject is driven by the deep conviction that Christ, through Francis, gave the dawning thirteenth century a message of vital importance—a message that has lost none of its relevance (far from it) in our own waning twentieth century, and to which rising generations should be particularly attuned.

Moreover, this message concerns Christian couples. We see this in the first married couple Francis welcomed into his Third Order. Before meeting Francis, Lucchesio and Buona Donna engaged in dubious business dealings. Converted by the "Little Poor Man," they subsequently dedicated their wealth and their lives to serving the needy. History tells us this about their final moments: God willed that those who had been one in life should not be parted in death. When Buona Donna fell ill in April 1250, Lucchesio was so deeply affected that his own condition suddenly worsened. He managed to stay on his feet long enough to help his wife receive the last rites; then, taking her hand, he said, "My dear companion, since we have always loved each other in this life, why should we not depart together for our eternal home?"

Please, wait for me a little while." He returned to his bed and sent for his friend, Father Hildebrand, who administered the Sacrament of the Sick. Then, seeing that Buona Donna had breathed her last, he made the sign of the cross, pronounced the names of the Virgin Mary and Saint Francis one last time, and commended his soul to God.

My intention, then, is to present Saint Francis' message to you. But note this clearly: while the message of most other saints is expressed through a doctrine or a spirituality, Francis's message is Francis himself. I shall therefore content myself with sketching a portrait of him as faithfully as possible; any commentary would be superfluous.

[...]

A Man Passionately Devoted to Christ

Thus, step by step and from ordeal to ordeal, the son of the wealthy merchant of Assisi was won over by Christ. He became the man passionately devoted to Christ whom we are about to discover. I am not speaking of a mere feeling of love, but of a true passion—in the sense that passion engages the whole of a person's being. The life of Francis of Assisi can only be understood in the light of this passionate love for the Son of God. Let me be precise: for the eternal Son of God made man. That is why he loved with unspeakable love the One who gave the God of Majesty to mankind as a brother. That is why Christmas was his favorite feast. He once said, "If I were to see the Emperor, I would ask him to invite all his subjects to scatter grain along the roads on Christmas night, to feast our brothers the birds—and especially our dear sisters the larks."

His life would unfold according to a rigorous logic—not that of reason, but that of the heart: the logic of a mad, all-consuming love. We shall see this love driving him irresistibly, by turns, to seek an ever more perfect knowledge of his Master, to imitate Him without compromise, and finally, to make Him known.

From the day the Christ of San Damiano spoke to him, Francis was possessed by an irrepressible need to know the One he loved. One might readily attribute to him the words of Saint Paul to the Philippians, *"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ... but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."*

Where does he seek to know Jesus Christ? Where Jesus Christ reveals himself: the Gospel, the Eucharist, the Church, and prayer.

Francis and the Gospel

As has been written of him, "In the Gospel he seeks the real, living, and present reality of Christ; it is a continuous apparition that rises up before him and reveals itself to him." Assuming he was familiar with it, he surely loved Saint Augustine's saying, "The Gospel is the very mouth of Jesus Christ." Driven by an irresistible need to enter into the mind of the One he loves, he cannot go a single day without listening to Jesus Christ in the Gospel. When he cannot attend Mass, he at least reads the Gospel of the day. And even in his final hour, he has the Gospel of Saint John read to him. Yet—and this is worth noting—unlike so many Christians who look in the Gospel only for what suits their own tastes, Francis makes no selection among God's words; he intends to put them all into practice. He did not listen to Christ's words like a deaf man, writes his first biographer; he had committed to memory everything Our Lord had said.

Francis and the Eucharist

If Francis seeks to know the beloved—driven by love—it is to attain union. Indeed, he hungers for that Eucharist through which the lover and the beloved merge. In the Gospel, Christ reveals Himself; in the Eucharist, He gives Himself. Yet we must refrain from attempting to describe the intensity of Francis's love as he communes with his God; one cannot intrude upon the intimacy shared by two beings who love one another. Let us note, however, a significant aspect of the reverence Francis held for the Blessed Sacrament: as a man who invariably chose the humblest of objects, he made an exception when it came to the Holy Sacrament, declaring, "I desire that the sacred species be kept in precious vessels." It is this same love for the Eucharist that explains his profound regard for the priesthood, regardless of the worthiness or unworthiness of those who hold the office. Once, when a self-styled Church reformer asked how he—Francis—could attend Masses celebrated by priests guilty of simony or unchastity, he replied, "Whether that priest's hands are as you say, I do not know; but even if they were, they cannot diminish the efficacy of the sacraments. Through those very hands, God pours out a multitude of graces upon His people; I kiss them in honour of the blessings they dispense and of Him whose instruments they are." Francis's gaze of faith truly enabled him to discern the invisible—the mystery lying beyond appearances—and the astonishing dignity of the priest. Are we still capable

of grasping this today, at a time when the priesthood has fallen into disrepute, much as it did during the darkest periods of Church history?

Francis and the Church

Francis knew full well that Christ had entrusted the guardianship and administration of the Gospel and the Eucharist—for which his love hungered—solely to the Roman Church. That is why, throughout his life, he loved the Church with the same passionate love he bore for Christ. There may well have been other men in the Middle Ages equally troubled by the disorder they saw within the Church and equally sensitive to the spiritual yearnings of the common people; yet, while they broke away from the Church to remedy these ills and answer those yearnings—under the specious pretext of fidelity to Christ—Francis undertook nothing outside the Church, remaining humbly submissive to those the Lord had appointed to lead His people. He knew that to embrace his beloved Master, he had to embrace the Church.

One is spoiled for choice when citing examples of his love for the Church. Whenever a conflict arose, his first instinct was to turn to his bishop. Thus, when his father opposed his vocation, he sought the arbitration of Bishop Guido, "because," he said, "he is the father and lord of souls." The judgment was delivered in the public square of Assisi. The bishop told him, "Give your father back the goods you received from him." Francis did not hesitate; he went inside the bishop's palace, stripped off his clothes, and returned naked to hand back the money and garments to his father. Deeply moved—he had not expected such a radical gesture—the bishop wrapped Francis in the folds of his own cloak with a gesture that was both modest and affectionate. It is again to the bishop that he turns when the people of Assisi unjustly reproach him and his first disciples for resorting to begging instead of working with their hands.

A few years later, still in the same spirit of submission to the Church, Francis asks the Pope to appoint a protector for his Order from among his close associates. He is well aware of the risk he is taking: will the protector be understanding? Francis places his trust in God. His docility toward the Church reaches its peak later on, the day he finally consents to having the Rule he composed—and which he is convinced was inspired by Christ himself—revised according to the Holy Father's views, after having defended it tooth and nail for two years—two years of agony.

One shudders at the thought that, faced with the lack of understanding he encountered among the high clergy, Francis could have followed the example of Peter Waldo or so many others and established a church within the Church—one that would very quickly have become a church outside the Church. But such a temptation does not exist for Francis: for him, the Church and Christ are one and the same—and yet, God knows it was not always easy, in the early thirteenth century, to recognise the face of Jesus Christ in the face of the Church.

I have just shown you Francis hungering for Jesus Christ, seeking Him in the Gospel, the Eucharist, and the Church. But like any lover, he needs solitary, one-on-one time with his beloved. Thus, he belongs to the lineage of all those men eager to return to the desert to pray at length—heroically—day and night.

Francis and Prayer

Throughout his life, even when utterly exhausted, he devoted endless hours to prayer—to such an extent that it was said of him: he was not so much a man who prays as prayer itself made flesh. His disciples would use all manner of cunning to follow him unnoticed as he went off by himself to be alone, to gaze upon his face streaming with tears and joy, and to catch a glimpse of the mystery of his prayer. Praise held a prominent place in that prayer. In truth, his entire life was a hymn of praise to the love of the One he called "Most High, All-Powerful, all-good Lord"—the very acclamation that opens his famous "Canticle of Brother Sun," a few stanzas of which I simply must read to you.

All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour and all blessing.

*To you alone, Most High, do they belong, and no mortal lips
are worthy to pronounce Your Name.*

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,

Especially Sir Brother Sun,

Who is the day through whom You give us light.

And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,

Of You Most High, he bears the likeness. (...)

Praised by You my Lord through Sister Water,

So useful, humble, precious and pure.

*Praised by You my Lord through Brother Fire,
Through whom You light the night and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong. (...)
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,
And serve Him with great humility.*

I must now open a new chapter in the life of Francis. Having seen how his love irresistibly drove him to seek knowledge of Christ, I invite you now to observe him—impelled by that same love—as he seeks to imitate Jesus Christ. Yet, is this truly a new chapter? For Francis, indeed, imitating Jesus Christ means—always and ever—seeking to know Him better. He must imitate in order to understand—to understand Jesus Christ with a knowledge that is a vital communion. Francis cries out to us, "You imagine you understand Christ because you have ideas about Him; yet, until you experience what He experienced, just as He experienced it, you remain ignorant of Him!"

Thus, Francis throws himself wholeheartedly into the imitation of Jesus Christ, eager to reproduce His likeness in his own soul and body, and to conform his life to that of his Lord. We shall gradually see in his life the reflection of Christ the poor man, Christ the brother to every creature, Christ the peacemaker, and Christ the Crucified.

Poor

Why did Francis love poverty so much? He would likely have been hard-pressed to answer such a question. His heart did not seek reasons first. Was it because Christ recommended it? I believe, rather, that he loved it because Christ loved it—nothing more. Yet, we are not forbidden to explore why both Christ and Francis cherished it. Undoubtedly because poverty implies dependence; and for a loving soul, depending on the beloved—expecting everything from them and owing them everything—is a requirement of love.

But let us not dwell on explanations; let us look instead at Francis the troubadour. Poverty is his Lady. He goes about singing—on the open roads and in town squares—of "she who was," as he puts it, "the inseparable companion of the Most High Son of God, and who for twelve centuries has wandered, forsaken." He speaks of her so eloquently that, within a few years, he gathers thousands of companions to honour, serve, and raise their esteem for her. He indignantly rejects

the compromises to which so many religious men of his time agree. He never wavers. Would you like me to tell you of one of the countless examples of this uncompromising stance? One of his disciples asks for permission to own a psalter. "*Once you have a psalter*," Francis replies, "you will want a breviary; and once you have a breviary, no longer deigning to bestir yourself, you will say in a superior tone to your brother: 'Go fetch my breviary, please!'" Then, taking a handful of ashes, he begins rubbing them onto the man's head, "Here, this is what suits you; this is the kind of breviary you need."

Since his brothers are poor, they must work to earn a living. And if they cannot find work, then—and only then—should they beg, just as he himself begged in the streets of Assisi. Let us consider this stark passage in which he reveals his innermost thoughts, "The brothers," he writes in the Rule of 1221, "must rejoice to find themselves among the lowly and despised, the poor and the infirm, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the roadside. And when necessary, let them go and ask for alms; let them feel no shame in doing so, but rather remember that Our Lord, the Son of the living and almighty God... was poor and a wayfarer...; and if men heap humiliations upon them and refuse them alms, let them give thanks to God, for through these humiliations they shall receive great honours before the judgment seat of Our Lord." In Francis's eyes, begged bread is like blessed bread. One day, upon entering Cardinal Ugolino's palace at lunchtime, he took the scraps of black bread he had just begged from his sleeve and offered them to the guests. One can imagine the prelate's embarrassment: it was a formal banquet attended by strangers who were visiting his home for the first time...

For Francis, poverty is not only a renunciation of material values, it is also a renunciation of intellectual values, of speculative science. Certainly, he does not despise sacred science, but for his people he aspires to a path of salvation more in keeping with their vocation. He believes, in fact, that all knowledge comes second only to the science of the cross. Ruthless, he will destroy the convent of studies that in his absence the brothers built in Bologna. He will subsequently have to consent to his disciples receiving intellectual training. But the warning is strongly given: intellectual values, like material values, can lose souls when they are sought for their own sake.

The same detachment was required of the brothers with regard to this very precious asset: relationships, recommendations. And also renunciation of

distinctions, of dignities, of all high functions in the Church. They must honour the term minor which designates them. Francis, in his uncompromising love of poverty, goes so far as to demand that they rejoice when they lack the esteem of others.

Fraternal

Because Francis is poor, because he has given up everything, all of God's gifts belong to him. Thus, a second aspect of his likeness to Jesus Christ is revealed to us. "No one in the West," it has been written, "experienced or expressed, as he did, this sense of the universal brotherhood of created things." He finds traces of divine tenderness and beauty in all creatures. He approaches and treats them with extreme courtesy—a word and a manner of behavior he cherished. "Courtesy," he says, "is one of God's most beautiful attributes." He gives voice once more to the fraternal voices of creation—voices that had long been silent; this is a key feature of his spirituality. Like every Christian, Francis lives within the communion of saints, but also—and this is less common—within the great cosmic communion. Let there be no mistake, however: this communion is not sensual like that of a writer such as Giono; it differs radically even from the communion—remarkable though it may be—of the true Buddhist: it is Christian. United with Christ, Francis stands—in and through Christ—in a relationship of profound inner connection with all creatures. Animals recognise him; they celebrate his presence by gathering along his path. Then he preaches to them, "My little brothers the birds, many are the bonds that unite us to God. And as for you, your duty is to praise Him everywhere and always, for the freedom you have to fly wherever you please..." Why should animals be hostile toward him? They have nothing to fear from him. One day, the ferocious wolf that terrorised the people of Gubbio lunges at him, its jaws wide open. Francis stops him with the sign of the cross, "Brother Wolf, it pained me to learn of the dreadful crimes you have committed in this region... Yet I wish to reconcile you with the people of Gubbio, so that they may no longer fear you, and you, in turn, need fear neither their dogs nor the people themselves."

Sometimes—though rarely—human beasts do not allow themselves to be so easily tamed by his love. One day, as Francis makes the woods ring with his songs, bandits come rushing up, "Who are you?" they ask. "I am the Great King's herald," Francis answers confidently. The bandits beat him savagely and throw him into the snow at the bottom of a ravine... He manages to climb out only with great effort, and once the brutes have gone, he resumes his journey, singing more joyfully than ever.

Francis does not tolerate his brothers mistreating highwaymen. To the fiery guardian of a friary who has driven off some thieves, he says, "You have acted like an ungodly man; you shall scour the countryside until you find them, and the moment you spot them, you must call out, 'Come, Brother Bandits, come and eat the good things that Brother Francis asks you to accept.'" And indeed, they came, and—more remarkable still—they converted and joined the Franciscan family. Among all creatures, his favorites are the lepers—though he only came to love them through an act of heroism. Whenever he has a moment of leisure, he goes to live among them. Yet I am surely wrong to say that lepers are his favorites: above all other beings, he loves the brothers of his own order. They regarded him as an infinitely tender mother—"mater carissima," as Celano, his first biographer, put it. And one cannot fail to mention the wonderful friendship he shared with that daughter of a noble Assisi family—who, under his guidance, would become Saint Clare—as well as his attachment to the women who gathered around her. Yet, he also spoke harsh words regarding women. These stemmed from his love for his brothers, whose vocations he sought to protect jealously. He commanded them to "strictly avoid the sweet poison of women's company..." and added, "Guarding against harm while associating with women is as difficult as walking through fire without burning one's feet." Nevertheless, as he lay dying, he sent word to his close friend—whom he curiously called "Brother Jacoba"—to let her know the end was near; he was waiting for her and asked her to bring one of those delicious almond cakes she made so well.

Peacemaker

Because he felt a sense of kinship with all creatures, Francis was able—following Christ's example—to exercise that ministry unique to fraternal souls: the ministry of reconciliation. This ministry consists precisely of leading all beings to view one another as brothers and to love one another as such. The reconciliation he brought about between the wolf and the inhabitants of Gubbio—as we have seen—was extraordinarily vivid and symbolic. Yet his ministry of reconciliation achieved even more difficult victories: reconciling the Bishop and the Podestà of Assisi, as well as their respective factions, which were locked in violent conflict. Ultimately, they could not resist Francis and publicly made peace. On another occasion—again thanks to Francis—the city's nobles and burghers abandoned their deadly feuds and adopted a "communal charter." Yet let us make no mistake: this ministry of reconciliation was far more than the mere aspiration of a tender heart unable to bear

the sight of a quarrel; for Francis, the very honour of the Father in heaven was at stake when His children tore one another apart.

Love of the Cross

It is undoubtedly in his love for the cross that Francis appears to us so much like his Master. Even had Christ not explicitly declared, "*Whoever wishes to be my disciple must take up his cross daily*," Francis would have understood it: without the cross, he would have found himself separated from Christ, because the cross is inseparable from Christ. He loves it because Christ loved it. And Christ loved it because it was the means of proclaiming His love—a love stronger than suffering and death. The cross represents the sacrificing of that instinct—so lively, so tenacious, and so difficult to root out—of seeking oneself. Francis knows full well that, as long as this instinct is not obliterated, a person remains more or less cut off from the One he claims to love. With what fervour, then, does he embrace the cross—more passionately than any man ever embraced a woman! Love is always the key to understanding him.

Yet it is important to note that, for Francis, this love of the cross is not a quest for achievement; for would that not simply be seeking oneself out even in the act of self-immolation? There was undoubtedly an element of this in the mortifications some of his disciples imposed upon themselves. That is why, during a great gathering, Francis ordered everyone wearing a hairshirt or an iron belt to cast them off immediately—resulting in an impressive pile! Perhaps there is a woman among my listeners who might wish to ask Francis, "But what if my hairshirt is my husband?" That is another matter entirely!

Just like Christ, Francis does not seek suffering for its own sake; yet when it is thrust upon him, he embraces it. He does not live in total destitution, beg amidst the jeers of the children of Assisi, or tend to lepers simply for the sake of suffering. As we have seen, his aim was to resemble his Master. Yet he harboured a secret hope: to die a martyr like Jesus Christ and for Jesus Christ, for he knew—or rather, felt in his heart, just as his Master did—that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for those one loves. That is why he decided to set out for Egypt; and if he did not meet his death there, it was certainly not for lack of trying! The Sultan set a trap for him, one that Francis escaped with both skill and humour. He had a carpet strewn with crosses laid out before Francis's arrival, thinking to himself, "If he walks on them, I shall accuse him of insulting his God. If he refuses to advance toward me, I shall accuse

him of insulting me." Francis stepped forward without hesitation, "*You ought to know*," he told the Sultan, "that there were several crosses on Calvary: Christ's—which is ours—and those of the two thieves; and I have no qualms about trampling on the latter two."

Let us acknowledge, as we conclude this paragraph, that—contrary to what clichéd imagery might suggest—suffering was Francis's constant companion: the illness that dogged him throughout his life and led to his premature death (probably tuberculosis), the fierce temptations that assailed him at crucial moments, his captivity, the blindness that struck him in his final years, and—far more cruel than any of these ordeals—the aggressive opposition he faced from certain friars within his own order.

A most joyful Person

Let us hasten to add that the most long-suffering of saints was also the most extraordinarily joyful and this is not despite the suffering, but thanks to it. He ignores distress and anguish. No place for them in his heart. They are usually caused by fear. But what would he be afraid of: fear of God? But he knows he is loved by Him. Afraid of people? They have nothing to take from him since he owns nothing. His reputation? He doesn't care. His life? He is eager to give it up. Afraid of suffering? But he loves it. Afraid of humiliation? But he cannot be humiliated since he humiliates himself. Delivered from fear, François is a liberated being. His flesh, his heart, can be lacerated by suffering, his deep soul remains in celebration - the celebration of a love happy to have the opportunity to prove itself. And the Great King's herald makes the woods and the countryside resound with his songs.

The life of Saint Francis, what a wonderful response to those who, during a recent French television programme, claimed that Christians are inevitably neurotics! "*May my joy be in you and your joy be complete*," this wish of Jesus Christ was fulfilled in Francis. "Spiritual joy," he affirmed, "is as necessary to the soul as blood is to the body." The superior general of the order, who valued Francis' reputation, remarked to him, as he was about to die, "Beloved Father, I for my part rejoice that you are so joyful; but, in this city which regards you as a saint, I fear that people will be shocked to see that you are not preparing yourself for death in another way." "Leave me, brother," replied François, "because despite what I endure, I feel so close to God that I cannot stop singing." Francis lived in joy, and through his death in joy he accessed infinite joy.

Missionnary Impatience

I regret not having the time to elaborate on a crucial chapter in the life of Saint Francis of Assisi: his missionary zeal. His love for Christ compels him to lead others to admire, love, and follow the One he loves—the One who captivated his heart. Indeed, he immediately introduces those he meets to the living person of Christ. Consider that by 1217—just eleven years after his conversion—already five thousand friars belonging to the Order were gathering for what came to be known as the "Chapter of Mats." Yet, gathering large numbers of men into the spiritual family he founded was not enough for him; he also wanted men and women living in marriage and the secular world to embrace the ideal he was called to proclaim. Thus, he founded the Third Order, which would come to include everyone from illiterate peasants to kings (Saint Louis of France, Saint Ferdinand of Castile), princesses (Saint Elizabeth), and popes, as well as famous figures such as Dante, Petrarch, Michelangelo, Christopher Columbus, and many others. It was this same love for Christ within him—eager to share itself—that drove him to send the first Franciscans out into the world. He dispatched them to France, Spain, Hungary, England, and across the Holy Roman Empire, and very quickly to lands considered to be "infidel" (Morocco, Egypt, Syria...), where some would suffer martyrdom—an outcome that stirred a holy envy in the heart of their father, Francis.

Towards the end of his life, his missionary zeal intensified even further. After composing the "Canticle of Brother Sun," he wished for Brother Pacificus to go and sing it to people all over the world. He stops at nothing: he dictates a letter to the "leaders of peoples, consuls, judges, and governors of all lands," asking them "to appoint a town crier who, each evening, would be charged with inviting the people to praise and thank the Lord"—he had undoubtedly been impressed by the muezzin's call to prayer in Islamic lands.

I must limit myself—so much more could be said about this ever-expanding love!

Some of our contemporaries, in a cantankerous spirit, accuse Francis of forgetting earthly realities, reproaching such spirituality for encouraging escapism. This is a criticism faced today by all those for whom evangelisation is the primary concern. Yet, did Christ not say, "*But seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*"? Well, these very things to be added are precisely what 13th-century society gained thanks to Francis of Assisi.

And here is how. The Rule of the Third Order included, notably, a ban on bearing arms and swearing any kind of solemn oath without the Pope's approval. Yet the entire political structure of the Middle Ages rested upon the oath. One swore allegiance to one's overlord or to the commune, and was thereby bound to take up arms and espouse their quarrels, however unjust or arbitrary they might be. Thus, by controlling the oath, the Papacy wielded considerable power, enabling it to break the resistance of the communes, withstand civil authority, and keep even the Emperor in check. It is easy to see that the social consequences of this ban on oaths were immense, once the Third Order spread throughout the land and abroad. A political and social revolution—yes, in the full sense of the term. And whose author was the most angelic of saints!

St. Francis and the Stigmata

Finally, let us consider the supreme stage of Francis's life: the miracle of the stigmata. Francis had just endured two years of excruciating agony—the very years during which the Rule of the Friars Minor was being drafted. Yet, as soon as Rome approved this pivotal document, his suffering ceased. He felt an overwhelming need for solitude and withdrew with a few of his first companions to La Verna, a majestic setting of mountains and wild valleys. He prayed—prayed fervently, day and night. Then, one day shortly before sunrise, he implored Christ with burning tears, "Lord, I ask You for two graces before I die: to experience within myself, as far as possible, the pains of Your cruel Passion, and to feel for You the same love that drove You to sacrifice Yourself for us." Suddenly, a seraph (a six-winged angel) bearing the image of the Crucified One appeared to him. The seraph fixed his gaze upon Francis, and upon departing, left the stigmata of the Crucifixion miraculously imprinted in Francis's flesh. These marks never vanished; during the final two years of his life, many people saw them and bore witness to them, swearing upon the Gospels.

How are we to understand this event, which transformed Francis into a living icon of the Crucified One? The extraordinary nature of the event is not what matters most; it is deeply regrettable that hagiographers and the Christian faithful alike place greater emphasis on the miracle than on the profound reality beneath it. The gift of the stigmata was a culmination: eighteen years earlier, the crucified Christ had appeared to the young Francis; deeply moved, Francis realised that it was Love—not the executioners—that had crucified Jesus Christ, and he began to love Love with a passionate intensity. But one does not play with Fire with impunity: love will burn him,

and crucify him too, day after day. And on this 14th of September, 1224, in the austere solitude of La Verna, after the seraph had departed, Francis—were he not so humble—might well have echoed Saint Paul's words to the Galatians (2:19), "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*" That is what it means to be a disciple of Christ; this is Christian holiness. And Jesus Christ wishes to proclaim this to the dawning thirteenth century, a time when material goods and intellectual pursuits threaten to captivate the masses—and, above all, the elites of Christendom. He wishes to proclaim it in a powerful, indisputable language capable of convincing hearts even more than minds. That is why He causes Francis's interior crucifixion to manifest in his flesh—an undeniable reality. Let there be no mistake: the stigmata are not decorations intended to draw the crowds' homage to a man. Rather, in Francis—who has become a vessel of pure transparency—it is the crucified Christ revealing Himself to the world. — I love to reflect on the deeply felt gratitude of Jesus Christ toward His friend Francis, who yielded his entire self to Him.

And we—men and women of this twentieth century drawing to a close, at a time when a civilisation is foundering—must, like the people of Assisi in 1224, gaze long and deeply upon Francis, that living icon of Jesus Christ. We must take his message to heart: a Christian must be another Christ; if they are not that, they are nothing.

But beware...

But beware: a subtle temptation lies in wait for us. It may even have already crept into our hearts, suggesting that Francis is more to be admired than imitated—that his ideal and the imitation of his life are impossible to achieve. Did the Friars Minor not have to—according to him—refrain from owning any property and live in huts made of branches and mud? Yet this was unrealistic; it had to be given up, and this happened as early as the second generation of disciples, during Francis's own lifetime. Were the Friars Minor not supposed to disregard intellectual pursuits? Yet Francis had to backtrack: it was essential for his brothers to have houses of study. Therefore, one is not displeased to acknowledge what are termed Francis's "excesses." After experiencing a profound shock—being struck full force by Francis's message, to the point of having one's breath taken away—one begins to breathe freely again. And one leaves Assisi pleased with oneself for having yielded for a moment to the thrill of the Gospel, yet firmly resolved not to surrender to "common sense." Please—let us not make a pact with this temptation. It is no more honest to

pick and choose from the saint with the stigmata's message than it is to pick and choose from the Crucified One's message. That very thing which is not feasible—living in huts, renouncing study—teaches us an undeniable lesson: material wealth, the esteem of others, honours, power, and the speculations of reason are all insurmountable obstacles to a union with Christ if one yields in the slightest to the temptation to take pleasure in them or become attached to them, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" For the disciple of Christ—whether religious or married—total interior detachment is essential. Love is uncompromising: no one can serve two masters, no one can cherish two beings. Yet the one who is united to the one Master can and must, in His name, serve and cherish all beings.

Henri Caffarel



Prayer for the Canonisation of the Venerable Servant of God Henri Caffarel

God, our Father,
You planted deep in the heart of your servant, Henri Caffarel,
A fountain of love, which bound him totally to your Son
And inspired him with a wonderful capacity to speak of Him.
A prophet for our time,
He revealed the dignity and beauty of the vocation of every person
In the words Jesus addresses to each of us: "Come follow me."
He made couples enthusiastic about the greatness of the sacrament of marriage,
The sign of Christ's fruitful love for the Church and of His union with her.
He showed that priests and couples
Are called to live a vocation of love.
He was a guide to widows: love is stronger than death.
Prompted by the Holy Spirit,
He accompanied many Christians on the path of prayer.
Seized by a devouring fire, he was a dwelling place for you, Lord.
God, our Father,
Through the intercession of Our Lady,
We ask you to hasten the day
When the Church will proclaim the holiness of his life,
So that people everywhere will discover the joy of following your Son
In accordance with their particular vocations in the Holy Spirit.
God our Father, we invoke the intercession of Father Caffarel for.....
(Indicate the particular favour being sought)

Prayer approved by Monsignor Andre Vingt-Trois – Archbishop of Paris.

"Nihil obstat": 4th January 2006 – "Imprimatur": 5th January 2006.

In the case of a particular favour obtained through the intercession of Father Caffarel,

Contact: The Postulator,

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